

Quaranteam: Phil's Tale

by Devin McTaggart (<http://www.patreon.com/CorruptingPower>)

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Chapter 1

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“God, I barely had anything to drink, and I still feel like I'm fucking hung over two days later,” Phil thought to himself as his Tesla slowly crept up towards the military gate outside of the research compound where he worked. “Still, new year, new start. Now to see how badly everyone fucked up during the holidays.”

The sign outside of the gate said Boeing, but the checkpoint was all Air Force. The research facility had done its best to straddle the line between subtle and secure – the work they were doing was very important, and security was of the utmost, but if it *looked* important at a quick glance, the compound would draw attention to itself, and that was the last thing anyone here wanted, so the installation veered towards the external security looking like they were just any other research outpost that had a military contract.

Phil brought his electric blue Tesla to a stop at the gate as a new airman walked out to meet him. The gate staff tended to change every six months or so, and was generally manned by people so wet behind the ears they were still dripping. The airman walking up to him bore the name Jones on his camo'd chest, looked disdainfully into the Tesla as Phil held out his ID to the guy.

The airman walked back to the booth, swiped the ID, then walked back to the Tesla, holding it out to him. As Phil took it, the guy practically shot himself in the face with what he said next. “Have a good day, Mr. Chin,” he said to him, starting to turn back to walk towards the booth.

“Airman Jones!” Phil shouted. “Come here a minute.”

The airman turned back, annoyance on his face, before walking a few steps back. “What?”

“Take a *good* fucking look at that badge again, and why don't you try a second time?”

“Sorry,” the airman said, no apology in his voice, “have a good day, Mr. Marcos.”

“First, it's *Doctor* Marcos,” Phil said, his eyes trying to bore a hole in the soldier. “Second, right below that it says 'Section Chief.' Maybe you didn't do any of your basic reading about where you're currently stationed, but this is a Boeing/Air Force joint research station with over three hundred civilians working on it. There is one project chief, two division chiefs and five section chiefs. That means I am one of the ten most important civilians on the *goddamn* base. Third, and perhaps most importantly, you decided to try out your 'razy lacism' to someone driving a goddamn Tesla, which has external cameras *and* microphones, who just caught and recorded that little slur of yours and could have your ass in a sling if you don't learn to get your shit together. And finally, I'm fucking Filipino, not Chinese, you moron. So unless you want me to tell Major Peters that she's got a racist fuckup manning her checkpoint, I suggest you stow that shit as far down as you possibly can and never let it see the light of fucking day on this outpost ever, *ever* again. You understand?”

“Yes sir,” the man said, anger and embarrassment mixing behind his eyes. “Sorry sir.” The apology felt like Phil had twisted it out of him by force, but he'd still gotten it. Phil had gone through enough shit over the years that he was not going to let some bumfuck redneck hillbilly try and push him around at his own research center.

“Good,” Phil said. “This had better be the last fucking time I or anyone else working here gets shit like that from you, otherwise Major Peters is going to get this little recording and you are going to get yourself a dishonorable discharge.”

As Phil pulled the Tesla forward, he had to laugh a little bit at the hillbilly's gullibility. While he could tell Major Peters about the incident, and the guy would probably take a decent amount of flak for it, he wasn't going to get thrown out of the Air Force for just that. Beyond that, though, while the Tesla did have external cameras on it, it certainly didn't have external microphones, so the recording wouldn't

actually show anything incriminating, but the moron didn't know that, and all the better for it.

Most of the people the Air Force had working on site were good people, but it seemed like the dipshits who were stuck working gate duty often had IQs lower than anyone should be comfortable with for people holding loaded machine guns.

Phil drove his car over to the row of chargers, put his car in park and then opened the charging port, hooking the Tesla up and letting it start to charge. He'd move it to a regular spot after coming back for lunch, but the vehicle needed juice. The charging station at the base was complimentary, so better to get it powered up here than at home.

After he hooked up the charger, he opened up his cellphone and set it to redirect calls to the hardline in his office at the base, then shut the phone down. That had taken some getting used to, not being able to walk around the office with a cell phone, but it was part of the security protocols, and the Air Force felt it was important enough to mandate it, so that's what everyone on the base did. He headed inside of the tiny little building that gave the appearance of being a tiny little standard office, capable of holding maybe a couple of hundred people in cubicles.

The guys in the lobby were Sergeants, Browne and O'Malley, and they'd been working the second checkpoint about as long as the office had been open. Both of them were nice guys and would never pull the kind of shit that the hillbilly at the gate had. "Hey Phil," Browne said to him, grabbing Phil's lockbox from behind the counter, opening it up as Phil waved his ID card over the checkpoint reader to log himself into the building itself.

Phil dropped his house keys, his Leatherman and his cellphone into the lockbox, then took his authenticator out from it, as per usual, before Browne locked the box up and put it into the storage with the rest. When he left for the day, he'd get all of it back. After that, he walked through the metal detector, without so much as a pip, and gave the two men a wave as he headed towards the elevator.

Once inside the elevator, Phil waved his ID badge in front of the little RF reader, and the steel box started moving downwards. There weren't a lot of basements in California, so the idea of a subsurface research station was an unusual one, but the area had been carved out carefully, and reinforced thoroughly so that everyone would be fine even if a relatively major earthquake hit.

A little bit later, the elevator came to a stop and opened into a small chamber. Phil stepped in and the elevator door closed behind him, the steel box starting to work its way back upward. This was The Cage, as it was affectionately known. A small panel opened to the right of the door on the other side of it, and Phil waved his ID once more, then placed his hand against the palm scanner and pressed his eye up to the optical retina scanner. If any of those three things came back at all fishy, the room would be flooded with knock out gas and nice folks with guns and gas masks would be in within seconds to take the intruder into custody. It had only happened the once, and it had been in error, because the researcher in question had come in with a cold, so the palm reader had put the man's body temperature outside of acceptable deviations.

Since then, people had always made quite the point to stay home if they were sick.

As always, Phil passed the third check, and the doors opened up for him with a friendly *ping!* sound that filled the air, a polite signal to go ahead, you're authorized.

Working beneath ground meant there was a complete lack of natural daylight in the research center, much to Phil's annoyance, but he also had to admit the level of security and privacy was necessary. The last thing anyone wanted was their work falling into the wrong hands, be they a foreign government or the less scrupulous members of the private sector.

What had originally started as a way to improve drone pilot response had evolved into a potential neural net interface, a connection between a human brain and a machine, where the brain could direct a drone without the added lag time of physical dexterity. They were still a decent way from getting a fully functioning prototype, but they'd had some early levels of success, enough that the Air Force had doubled down on the research last year, as well as testing to see if individual aspects of their work could be applied to other things.

Phil was just starting to walk down the hallway to head to his office when he ran into the project chief, Adam McCallister, walking towards him, a soft smile on his face. Of course McCallister was wearing a Stanford t-shirt, which just made Phil hate him even more, as a UC Berkeley grad.

The rivalry between Berkeley and Stanford ran deep and wide, and with enough drinks in him, Phil could occasionally be called upon to tell the tale of the time that Berkeley beat Stanford at a home game, and they had torn down the goalpost and marched it through the streets of Berkeley, bending streetlights as they went.

Sometime great victories required sacrifices through minor acts of vandalism.

“So Phil,” McCallister started in, “what's the hold up? I ran into Hunter earlier this morning, and he said your team was putting his team behind schedule. The last thing I need from you and your team is more delays, if you know what I mean.”

McCallister was, and had always been, a grade-A dick, and there was no excusing it, but unfortunately, he was also the project lead, a decision that Phil had questioned Boeing about multiple times, only to be told, repeatedly, that McCallister was 'their man for the job.'

Of course, it didn't hurt that McCallister was white, straight and came from an affluent family. As a Filipino, Phil had been forced to work four times as hard to get half as far in his career, and some days it was utterly sickening. So one thing Phil had gotten incredibly good at was documentation, and making sure that nobody could put him and his team in a corner.

“Actually, Adam,” Phil said, “my crew's ahead of schedule. The delays aren't on our end.”

“Hunter says you don't have anything his crew can use for initial testing with their interface yet, and that's the reason they aren't set to go into phase two yet.”

“They haven't provided their specs yet for what level of bioelectric currents they need for their interface to work, and we're waiting on them to provide those specs to us. Once they do get them to us, we can have something ready for them basically in a day or two.”

McCallister sighed, as if he was above this kind of petty micromanaging, and that he wasn't entirely convinced by Phil's explanation. “Well, you probably just haven't asked him for those specs yet, so you should definitely just go and ask him for them.”

Here's where Phil's paranoia about documentation came in handy. He'd gotten used to these kinds of bullshit excuses around the office, trying to shuffle blame onto him and his team. “There's an email chain, which you're CC'd on, that shows I've been asking him once a week for two months now, telling him we can't provide anything functional to him until we have the specifics about what level of bioelectric current they need generated, so I don't know how much more I can do, beyond the large amount of emails I've already sent.”

“Well, go ask him again, in person this time,” McCallister said, as if he still didn't believe Phil, despite the fact that evidence was sitting in the man's email box. “He's busy doing the real work around here, and sometimes things slip through the cracks. Be more of a team player, would you, Phil?” Without even giving him a chance to answer, McCallister walked past him, patting him condescendingly on the shoulder, before heading back towards his own office. It took everything in Phil's willpower not to deck the smarmy asshole.

McCallister pulled this shit regularly, and each time Phil got a little less tolerant of it, but there really wasn't much in the way he could do about it right now, as McCallister was the project chief, even though he didn't full grasp all of the science being done, something Phil still didn't quite understand. But he had friends in high places at Boeing, and that was all that mattered. Boeing had stressed that Phil was a project manager, not a researcher.

What was most annoying about all of it was that it was generally quite predictable who McCallister believed and who he didn't. White dudes? Always right. Anybody else? Probably wrong. But proving that McCallister was a racist jackass had been ridiculously hard to do.

Instead of continuing straight to his office, Phil pivoted and headed over to Hunter Wilson's office down the hall, so if it came up again, he could say he went straight to Hunter's office and told

him in person, not that it would make much of a difference.

Naturally, Phil found Hunter at his desk, not working, but watching BMX trick videos on YouTube of all things. Hunter was the section chief for the electric-to-electronic interface, the stuff that would translate the bioelectric energy into usable signals. It was the most complicated part of the project, which of course meant that it had *never* worked reliably, and Phil had his doubts they were ever going to get it hammered into something usable.

While Boeing had been optimistic that the finer controls would be easy enough to work out, Phil had stressed time and time again that the level of precision they would need would be exceptional, and while the electric currents from their serum could offer some degree of that, he highly doubted they would be able to generate the kind of precision that the Air Force wanted, or that someone would be able to decipher those bioelectric signals into something usable.

Once again, his concerns had been noted and dismissed, and Phil had been told, as he often was, to just make sure his part worked fine and leave the rest to the 'big boys.' It was annoying. "One of these days," Phil thought to himself, "this is all going to bite them in the ass."

"Hunter," Phil said, after watching the engineer engrossed in the videos for at least a minute or so. The guy didn't even have the self-preservation instincts to have his desk facing the door, as if he was so convinced in his invulnerability that he was daring people to say something about his lack of working. "I'm here to check on how soon you're going to send us the specs of what level of bioelectric current you need, so I can have a prototype in your hands."

Hunter had paused the video, but was shameless about leaving it up on the screen as he turned to look at Phil. "It's like I was telling Adam," he said, rolling his eyes, "I sent you the specs weeks ago, and you haven't delivered *shit*."

"You haven't sent them, Hunter, otherwise you'd have had it already."

"I'm telling you I sent them, Phil. Are you calling me a liar?"

"Check again while I'm here, would you?" Phil moved in close, so he had a prime view of the man's screen. "If you sent them, they should be in the sent folder."

After a few seconds of clicking around, Adam found the email and gestured at the screen. "There, you see? I told you I sent it."

"That's your drafts folder, Hunter," Phil sighed. He leaned forward, took the mouse from Hunter's hand and clicked on 'Send.' "If you don't send the email, nobody gets it. You can't just leave it in your drafts forever and expect us to work from that."

"Oh," Hunter said, as if he still somehow thought it was Phil's fault. "I guess that's my bad then. Was it urgent?"

"It's only been holding you up on getting to the next phase, so I guess that's a matter of perspective," Phil said. "But you're the one who's going to have to explain why you forgetting to click a button meant your team was in a holding pattern for a few weeks. Anyway, now that we have your specs, we'll have a chemical prototype ready and balanced for you by the end of the day."

Phil headed out of Hunter's office and back to his own, so he could finally get a proper start to this day that had been filled to the brim with other people's fuckups until now. As a section chief, his office was of a decent size, and he'd slowly brought in piece after piece of customization into it, to make it feel less sterile, from the Ryu statue on his desk to the Gran Blue Fantasy wallscroll that hung off to the side. People tended to notice them more quickly than they did the carved wooden Jesus on the cross that hung on the wall high above his desk, looking over him protectively.

He reached forward and turned the Ryu statue to one side with a sigh. There were days when Phil missed the simplicity of the fighting game tournament scene. It was one of the few places where he felt he could totally be himself, where he fit in with a bunch of like minded souls. In school, he'd hung around mostly other Asian kids, but being Filipino put him in a minority even among them, as they were predominantly Chinese, with both Japanese and Vietnamese being more common than Filipino. But when he'd been at the stick of a Street Fighter cabinet, he'd been able to just be another

competitor, and there he felt like he absolutely fit right in.

Evo 2020 wasn't for several more months, but just knowing it was coming was like a balm for his nervousness, as he turned on his computer, fishing out the authenticator from his pocket, entering his password and then the 12 digit authentication number that was currently on the little digital keyfob he had to carry with him everywhere around the base. The number changed every thirty seconds, and was designed so that Boeing knew exactly who was using any computer terminal at any time.

The first thing he did was check the Discord where he and his friends chatted, and saw there was a message from Andy, reminding him that it was his turn to buy pizza for next week's poker game, so he'd better not show up empty handed. That reminded Phil to update his calendar.

On the wall behind his desk, he kept a paper calendar with all his non-work related stuff. He pulled down the December 2019 page and looked at the January 2020 page, making a note for next week's poker night that he was up for pizza, before sending a message to the Discord, at'ing Andy that he'd written it down so he wouldn't forget.

Most of his January was pretty empty, although he did have to make a point and visit his mom's grave to put flowers on it near the end of the month, on the anniversary of her death. She'd died four years prior, complications from ovarian cancer, and her passing had left a hole in his heart big enough to park a battleship in, even this far on. His dad had moved down to San Diego a year or so after she'd passed, wanting to be closer to his brothers, and Phil figured his uncles would do everything they could to keep his father from going too crazy. His dad had even sold him the house in Fremont for a song, saying it was more Phil's now than his, because the memories of mom were too plentiful to bear.

That made more than enough sense, so as sad as Phil was to see his dad pack up and go, he understood that his father needed to find his own sense of peace in the world.

After spending a few minutes getting settled in again after the vacation for Christmas and New Year's, Phil opened his email, looked at the specs Hunter had sent over. Of course, Hunter had only sent them directly to Phil, so when he replied, Phil made sure to CC not only his team, but McCallister as well, so the paper documentation continued.

He kept his reply short and sweet, saying they would have a chemical compound for them to begin testing with before the end of day tomorrow, Friday, January 3rd 2020.

Not more than fifteen minutes after he'd sent the email, his phone rang, and he saw it was McCallister, so he sighed and picked up the phone. "What's up, Adam?"

"Major Peters wants to see all the chiefs in the conference room in five minutes."

"All of us? At once? What the hell for?"

"Dunno, but she seemed spooked, so get your ass over there and I'll see you in there."

Major Monica Peters was head of operations for the Air Force at the research station, and had mostly struck Phil as a sensible, take-no-shit officer who was much more concerned with results than people's feelings getting hurt. She hadn't struck him as the kind of woman who spooked easily, so the fact that McCallister had described her as such put him on edge.

Three minutes later, Phil sat down in the conference room and saw all the heads of state were there or just arriving: McCallister, the project chief; Wes Bridges, the division chief for the bio half; Matt Cunningham, the division chief for the electrics half; Hunter Wilson, section chief for the electronics interface; Martin Grant, section chief for weapons engineering; Nate Campbell, section chief for aeronautics engineering; and Charles Daniels, the section chief for biofeedback engineering.

Standing at the front of the conference table was Major Peters, talking in quiet animated conversation with a man at least six inches taller than she was, and with a lot more impressive things on his uniform.

As soon as everyone got seated, Major Peters moved to pull the doors shut, locking them, before returning to the front of the table. "Good morning, gentlemen. I feel like we've made a lot of progress on the project over the last several months, but as of today, we're going to be putting Project Impulse on hold for the foreseeable future." Everyone was looking around, mostly looking at

McCallister, but he looked just as confused as the rest of them.

"I don't understand," McCallister started, before the Major raised her hand to silence everyone.

"I know, Dr. McCallister, but Major General Fielder here is going to be assuming operational command of this facility for the time being, and redirecting our efforts into something new, something incredibly urgent. Now if you'll give him a few minutes of your time, he'll walk you through what we're going to be working on moving forward."

"Thank you, Major," Fielder said, picking up a clicker from the table, pushing the button on it as a screen came to life behind him, displaying a map of Asia. He was a lean man in his early fifties, silver hair and a thick bushy mustache, golden rimmed glasses on over his eyes. He seemed equal parts calming and intimidating, like his very presence implied a level of seriousness that no one had previously expected. "Late last fall, we intercepted communiques about a couple of biological contagions that we suspected might become problems, despite best efforts to keep them contained. The first is this Coronavirus, out of China, which we think will be a problem, but we're anticipating having it handled relatively quickly. The bigger concern is the second pathogen, which we're currently calling the DuoHalo virus. We don't have any confirmed point of origin for the DuoHalo virus, but the working theory is that it was extracted from the ice in northern Russia by a research team taking core samples from deep in the tundra, which makes it perhaps millions of years old."

He pushed a button and advanced the slide, this time showing a dead man, blood leaking from his eyes, nostrils, ears and mouth. The image was extremely grisly and Phil suddenly found himself glad he hadn't made the time for breakfast.

"The DuoHalo virus is, as of yet, undetectable during its incubation period, but has a very high level of contagion, and we're fairly certain is spread in an airborne manner. During the incubation period, every carrier is spreading and redistributing the pathogen at an incredibly dangerous rate," the Major General said. "We believe that the Coronavirus will offer us a good smokescreen cover for this, as it's likely we're going to be seeing people quarantining within a month or so, and we have yet to have any cases of the DuoHalo virus here in the U.S. as of yet. The quarantine for Corona will help us keep this more deadly virus, the DuoHalo virus, quiet and off the radar while we're trying to figure out how we can manage and solve it."

"We're not really familiar with the ins and outs of infectious diseases, Major General," McCallister said, in the first thing that Phil had agreed with him on in a while. "This isn't really our area of expertise, so why are you coopting us for this project?"

"We're coopting several teams for this project, Dr. McCallister," the Major General said, "so you aren't the only one. We weighed the pros and cons of having the various teams collaborate, but as of right now, nobody has a good handle on this pathogen, so we want everyone coming at it with no preconceived notions, no expectations in advance that color their thoughts on how to fight it. So yes, we understand that this isn't what this group was formed for, but for right now, it's all this team needs to be working on. We're also going to bring a couple of specialists in to help with some aspects of it, and they should be arriving in a few weeks. Doctor Dev Varma and his wife Doctor Charlotte Varma. He's an expert in weaponized pathogens, and she's an infectious disease researcher specializing in helping people survive exposure to them. They will be assuming the project lead positions from Doctor McCallister, who will be retasked with helping develop some kind of treatment that will enable us to endure and survive this as a country."

"That's pretty strong language there, General," Phil said. "How high is the mortality rate on this DuoHalo virus anyway?"

"We aren't entirely sure, but if the Russian chatter we intercepted is to be believed, somewhere between 50-75%."

That put the entire room into silence. Phil was already doing back of the envelope math in his head, but with a mortality rate like that, it was the kind of death toll that would put the Spanish Flu epidemic to shame without breaking a sweat. Over three billion dead people in a year or two was

basically a crisis the like of which the world had never seen.

“That... that *can't* be right,” Bridges said. “That would be the deadliest virus this planet's ever seen, if it's true. How contained is it?”

“We're not sure,” the Major General said, “but even if we could convince the Commander-in-Chief to force everyone to quarantine at home immediately, to shut down the borders to any and all entrances or exits, we still anticipate we're going to start seeing cases of it here within a few months time, and once we do, our window to get this thing under control shortens exponentially.”

“The guy stared into a fucking *eclipse*,” Daniels muttered beneath his breath, quiet enough that most of the room couldn't hear him, but Phil was sitting right next to the man. “He doesn't give a *shit* about what the science says. Fucking Cheeto, he's gonna get us all fucking killed.”

“Now all of this information is highly classified, so you cannot go discussing this with anyone off base, and even the amount of information you distribute to your teams should be kept as need-to-know as possible,” the Major General continued. “The mechanical engineering members of the project will be working to build detection and testing systems, and Doctor Dev Varma will be that project's chief when he arrives. Doctor Charlotte Varma will be directing the rest of you, who are tasked with developing either a vaccine or a suppression system that can keep the virus in check and under control. The work that Doctor Marcos's team has been doing shows a lot of promise in piggybacking that into some kind of treatment to help us keep this plague from wiping out our country as we know it, so until she shows up, I'd like you to take point for the team, Dr. Marcos.”

“Yes sir,” Phil sighed, knowing that as nice as it would be to not really answer to anyone for a while, they were also targeting him to be their scapegoat in case anything went horribly wrong. It was a very double-edged sword they were handing him. “How do you want us to spin it to our teams?”

“Give them as much information as they need, but try not to get into the lethality of it unless it turns out to be necessary,” the Major General said. “We'll be meeting with each of you over the next couple of days as we work to re-calibrate this team towards its new purpose. You should have a meeting invite on each of your calendars, and we'll meet again in a few days to put together a battle plan. Until then, dismissed.”

The Major General still wasn't used to working with civilians, Phil thought to himself, but that was fine. Judging by the sound of things, they were all up shit creek without paddles anyway, so the best thing to do was simply to get to work.

Phil headed out of the office, bypassing the rest of the team leads, who were all chatting among themselves. He suspected there was going to be a certain level of bitchiness about the upending of the project, the complete change in leadership and at least a few pot shots about they thought Phil was likely just to fuck it all up anyway. Let'em sit and stew, Phil thought.

By the time he got back to his office, there was, in fact, a meeting request in his calendar, for tomorrow afternoon, meaning they were meeting with everyone else before him, which meant he was either the most important opinion or the least. Considering he was being put in charge of the team until the two Doctors Varma arrived, he hoped it was the latter.

Also in his email was the data dump the Major General had promised them, and Phil immediately started reading all of it on his iPad, taking notes in a separate window while he did, making sure to keep track of every crucial bit of information they had about this DuoHalo virus. There was a bunch of information about the Corona virus as well, which also seemed bad, but nothing like the DuoHalo virus, which seemed absolutely insidious.

The DuoHalo virus was such an insidiously effective threat, Phil's first suspicion was that it had been engineered, crafted and designed by human hands, but in looking at the data, there were too many wild and loose threads, too many unusual and unpredictable variables for it to likely have been built by people, and instead was likely just some random freak mutation from some existing virus that hadn't previously been dangerous to humans at all. The idea that maybe it had been sitting frozen in the ice several hundred feet beneath the surface for tens of thousands of years seemed as plausible as any.

One hour turned into two which turned into four, and before he knew it, there was a knocking at his door. He looked up to see Doctor Bill McKenna standing in his doorway, a quizzical look on his face. Bill was generally a good guy, with a beer gut that could hold a couple of kegs, and a bird's nest of silver hair with a giant bald spot in the center of it. "So what's this about us getting retasked?" Bill asked him.

"Yeah, I guess rumor mill travels fast," Phil said to him. "Project's been put on indefinite hold, and we're being retasked onto a new thing. We'll have a meeting about it about it on Monday, after the reshuffling happens. They're probably gonna have the exec team in over the weekend, drafting up a new battle plan."

"Well, I think I need you to take a break from that and come see a bit of video from one of our human test cases earlier today," Bill said, that odd look on his face having only gotten odder.

"We weren't supposed to be *doing* human test cases yet, Bill," Phil sighed. "Who the hell authorized that?"

"Dr. Bridges started us on initial low dosage testing this morning, so I assumed you'd heard about it," Bill said, "and even if you hadn't, he's your boss, so I figured we'd better go along with what he said to do until you said otherwise."

"Well, as of," Phil said, glancing at his Apple Watch, "four hours ago, I'm *his* boss, so we're definitely going to put a stop to human testing, at least in the short term. We'll be doing a *lot* more human testing in the very near future, though, what with the retasking."

"Okay, sure, but you'd still better come and see this," Bill said, his voice getting a little more insistent. "Before anyone else does."

"Bill, whatever it is, I'm sure—"

"*PHIL,*" Bill hissed. "For once in your goddamn life, trust me on this and come take a fucking look at it, will you?"

That *definitely* caught Phil's attention. Bill was the kind of man who *never* swore. In fact, Phil had known the researcher for four years, and just using the word 'goddamn' was enough to get his attention, but then he'd taken it a step further and added an f-bomb for good measure.

"Okay!" Phil said, closing the case on his iPad, letting the magnetic pencil cling to the side, as he tucked it under his arm. "If it's that important, let's go take a look at the damn thing."

The two men walked down the hallway, then down a couple of flights of stairs, heading into an area they used as a sort of staging grounds, but off to the side, there were a handful of rooms where they could do clinical trials and keep people under observation while the biological and chemical elements were in their system.

"What sort of amperage were you testing the serum at?" Phil said, trying to get a handle on what exactly Bridges had been testing for.

"None at all," Bill said, "just doing some basic grafting of our baseline serum onto a couple of common steroid and opioids, seeing how the serum worked when paired with another drug designed to do something else. Bridges wanted to see if the serum had any other uses outside of the bioelectrical feedback system we designed it for."

"Well, of course it fucking does, Bill," Phil groaned. "That's the whole purpose of our serum, to be a piggyback deployment measure that we can use to introduce elements rapidly into the human system. Shit, you could've just told him that when he asked. Before we got folded into the drone control program, the idea was that we were going to use the serum to direct nanobots to identify and repair wounds in the field, which is why we knew we could use it to send bioelectrical signals out. That's why they brought us in here in the first place, because the nanobots team couldn't figure out how to get basic fucking diagnostics working for the nanobots to act on. You know all that."

"I *told* him all that, but he said since we'd made so many adjustments to the serum in the last five months, trying to get it to work in tandem with Dr. Cunningham's system, he wanted to be sure nobody had screwed anything up along the line."

“Well, if the serum's sending out minor bioelectric signals through the body, it shouldn't cause any adverse effects, unless it's reacting to something in one of the elements it's been grafted onto.”

“That's what I'm telling you, Phil!” Bill whispered, angrily. “We got one hell of an adverse effect out of one of the grafts! One *hell* of an adverse effect!”

“What was it grafted onto?” Phil said, knowing immediately what it was going to be, based purely on how his day had been going so far.

“Just a simple flu shot!” Bill said, leading Phil into an observation room, with the subject, a woman in her late twenties, asleep beneath a blanket. They had a steady flow of volunteers, people eager to put their bodies on the line to make some quick cash, as long as the experiments weren't too dangerous. “She's fine now. Mostly. We think. We hope, anyway, but you should've seen her just after the shot was administered.”

The two men sat down in front of the television, as Phil rubbed his eyes. “Well, let's see it,” he said. “Show me the tape and let's see how fucked up today's really been.”

Bill picked up the remote and turned the television on, before tapping on the keyboard, logging in using his own authenticator before loading up a video file from five hours prior. “Here she is when the shot's administered.” The file started playing and the woman was injected in the arm with a cocktail of flu vaccine and the serum that the scientists had affectionately nicknamed 'Zap Juice,' based on its derivation from the physiology of electric eels. The name on the video file said the woman's name was Caselli, K. Kate, Phil guessed. She looked like a Kate.

“Everything looks fine and normal, Bill,” Phil said, watching the woman get the injection, no adverse effects of any kind, before she sat down on the cot with her book, some Sue Grafton novel, starting to read.

“Sure, now here's an hour later,” Bill said, tapping to advance the time code.

The image suddenly shifted dramatically, as the woman had crawled beneath the sheet on the cot, and there was a frantic rustling going on beneath it.

“Is... is she?”

“She absolutely is definitely masturbating, yes,” Bill said. “And when one of the researchers went in to talk to her, this happened.”

Bill skipped ahead a few minutes, and one of the junior members of the team – Doug? Mike? Shit, Phil couldn't remember his name – went over towards her, and the woman leaped up from the cot and started kissing the man intensely, before he pushed her back and fled from the room, closing her inside, even as she hammered at the door with her fists, yelling and demanding that he get back in there and fuck her properly. The meek little woman who had gotten the shot had been replaced by this furiously worked up warrior.

“Holy balls,” Phil said. “After that?”

“After that...” Bill said, skipping forward again. The woman moved back to lay on the bed, stripped off all her clothes, and masturbated right in front of the camera, rubbing her pussy slowly, thrusting her hips upwards, almost like she was trying to invite a man into the room, and eventually, after what felt like a very long time, even with the video playing at 4x speed, she finally seemed impatient, sped up until she hit some kind of orgasm and then passed out atop of the blanket. The orgasm looked particularly intense, and Phil noted that Bill had turned the volume down sizable, as the woman had let out a rather primal moan, somewhere between release and frustration.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat the fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck...” Phil said.

“About twenty minutes later, Damon felt confident enough to go back in there, and pulled the blanket over her. Said she was completely out like a light, would not wake up. At all. He checked her basic vitals and everything seemed generally within acceptable ranges – breathing, heart rate, eye motion...”

“Eye motion? She's in REM sleep?”

“Yep,” Bill said, stopping the video. “And she still hasn't woken up yet. She passed out almost

two hours ago. After he'd checked her vitals, he tried to wake her up and said she was *out* out. Didn't seem comatose, but not being able to be woken up was pretty weird."

"No, what's pretty weird, Bill," Phil said, leaning forward to take the mouse from his colleague's hand, scrolling the time back, showing the woman's face right before she grabbed poor Damon and kissed him, pausing at that exact moment. "*That* right there is pretty fucking weird. Look at that expression. That's not a woman who's in her right mind. That's not a woman who's thinking clearly. That is a woman in some kind of delirium state, almost like an altered consciousness state. And you've documented all of this, including the fact that this request came from Bridges?"

"Yeah yeah, it's all in the notes, Phil," Bill said. "I know how adamant you are about us documenting everything so we've got it all written up. This isn't our fucking fault and nobody can say that it is."

"And nobody else had a reaction like this?"

"Well, we only did five tests, but yeah, I think if any of the others had turned someone into a hormonal sex maniac, don't you think I would've mentioned it?"

"What were the five combos you ran it with?"

"One with a small dose of insulin, one with a minor steroid, one with a trace amount of morphine, one with a placebo and this last one with a flu vaccine. I mean, it's weird, but it just means it's something we don't go back to, right?"

"Bill," Phil sighed. "The reason they're shutting down the drone project is to pivot us into working on a vaccine for some kind of super flu they're just finding out about now. This is literally *exactly* what we're going back to, come Monday."

"Shit," Bill said. "Okay, let me get started on her bloodwork then, see what exactly the serum and the vaccine did to cause such a reaction, and we'll see if we can get ahead of it. Who do you want me to rope in on this?"

"No one, Bill," Phil said, scratching his head. "Start looking into it on your own, on the down low, but don't fucking tell anyone what you're doing yet. The last thing I need is this whole office knowing we accidentally found something that turns a rational woman into a raving sex beast. Maybe we'll get lucky, and it was something unusual about the suspension the vaccine was in."

"Look at it this way, boss," Bill said with a soft laugh. "Worst case scenario, you just invented Spanish Fly, and became the most popular man alive."

"That's exactly what I'm fucking afraid of."

"Spanish Fly to fight Spanish Flu 2," Phil thought to himself. "Just fucking *wonderful*."

Chapter 2

January 17th, 2020

It had been over two weeks since the division had been retasked, and Phil had been dealing with nonstop shit the entire fucking time. Being in charge had eased some of the pressure of it, but the problem had been the serum.

They'd had both good news and bad news regarding their work with it so far. The good news was that the serum basically did what it was supposed to, in regard to making whatever they grafted onto it incredibly effective. They'd had great luck with most things they'd been combining it with, and it had increased the efficacy of whatever they'd grafted it with. That was even true for the flu vaccination they'd done two weeks earlier.

That was the good news.

The bad news was that there were side effects. Not light side effects either, but the kind of side effects they absolutely, positively could not ignore. The kind of side effects that, Phil had to admit, were more of effects than side effects. Hell, in other circumstances, they could be the entire point of the serum, but these were not those circumstances, and this was not that time.

The worst of the side effects was that it had a high level of toxicity in male subjects. They

weren't entirely sure why, but something about the Y chromosome was interfering with the serum. The working theory was that it was a mix of the suspension, the serum and the fundamentals of the Y chromosome, but whatever it was, it was making men even more sick than the baseline flu they were using in testing. And that was just a regular old flu vaccine. What they were going to have to use to combat the DuoHalo was going to have to be far stronger, which meant that the side effects were going to be far stronger.

And while that was the worst part of it, the other thing was what making the most rounds in the gossip around the office. The side effect, no, the effect it was having on women, those without a Y chromosome. It was accelerating their libidos like nothing anyone had ever seen, and nobody had any idea why. Phil, Charles, Wes and their whole teams had been doing everything they possibly could to try and decipher what the hell was happening, but nobody had any clue what the fuck was going on or why the fuck it was happening.

Phil and Bill had been doing what they could to isolate and identify the problem, but so far they hadn't had any luck. What was even weirder was the other thing. They'd found a way to convey the effects of the serum to men, but indirectly, and none of that had been intentional.

They'd been doing what they could to understand how anything was working, but they'd turned from science to blind faith and guesswork. What they did know was this – the treatment was transmissible.

Sexually.

The test subject had gone home to her husband, basically immune to the flu and horny as all hell, and had immediately fucked her husband until his legs wouldn't work, and in the morning, he'd said he'd felt better, having been a little sick the night before. So, as per the agreement the test subject had signed, she'd called the base and let them know, and both her and her husband had come in the following day, only for them to find that the woman's husband had some sort of amplified modified form of the anti-flu vaccine running through his veins.

Not only that, there were dead flu cells in his body, the modified formula having done its job exceptionally well. But the formula was unique, custom tailored to the man personally. It wasn't anything they could replicate; it wasn't anything they could use. It was almost like the man's body had generated the antibodies itself, and the secondhand vaccine had only just enabled his body to do that.

Nobody had told the serum to do that.

It just went ahead and *did* it.

“So what the hell do we do with this?” Phil said to the gathered room of scientists. “Whatever we're going to do look at in terms of combating this DuoHalo virus, I don't know that we can give it to men directly. I hate this, but we've got a working solution, even if it only works indirectly. So I suppose the question becomes how important our timeframe is here?”

It was Major General Fielder's turn to take over the presentation. “Extremely,” he said with a sigh. “We've had our first couple of cases here Stateside as of this morning, and while we're hoping that we've got them contained, we are almost certain that we don't.” He pushed the button on the remote to shift the screen over to his computer, showing a map of the US with red spots in Boston, DC, NYC and Los Angeles.

“That's not good,” Phil said, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh wait, it gets worse,” Fielder sighed. “The reports about the lethality of the virus? They may have been underplayed, at least partially.”

“I don't know that I like the word 'partially,’” McCallister said. For the last two weeks, the former project chief had been nothing but doom and gloom, convinced that they were looking at an end of the world scenario, and more than a couple of times, Phil had needed to ask the man to store his bad attitude away so it didn't affect team morale.

“On one hand, the lethality of the virus seems to be between the 60-80% rate, but that seems like that is *only* for men. The lethality of the virus in women seems like it's only 20-30%,” Fielder said.

“We don't have any answers on why, but we're hoping that the Doctors Varma will be able to work with this team to give us a better understanding into that particular wrinkle in the virus.”

“So basically, we've got the start of a solution that only works in women, and a virus that's more lethal to men,” Phil said. “This is not where I wanted my day to be headed.”

“The solution would probably work,” McCallister said with a chuckle. “We'd just have to give it to women and convince them to fuck all the men, something I'm sure the government wouldn't exactly be onboard with.”

“Gentlemen,” Fielder said, “at this point having a workable solution is better than not having one, so while we're going to look into other possible solutions, if there's any chance this is a viable treatment, we're going to need to start looking into it.”

“You've got to be kidding me,” Phil said. “We've got a serum that makes women horny, and you want us to take advantage of that, just to cure a virus?”

“No, not to just cure a virus,” Major Peters, the only woman in the room, said. “To keep the United States from losing 150 million men within the span of a year. I can't say I like it any more than you do, but if it's a workable solution, we can't rule it right out.”

“Great. Swell. Just fantastic,” Phil said. “Okay, well, the Doctors Varma are showing up in a few hours, and I'll meet up with them first, talk them through what we know and what we don't, and get them up to speed, so when we meet again on Monday, they'll be ready to assume command of the project, assuming that's what you still want, Major General.”

Fielder nodded again. “I do, but if they need more time getting spun up, you can remain in command of all the teams until they're ready to take control.”

“Sure, okay. Anybody got anything else?” Phil waited and nobody said anything. “Okay then, get back to work everyone, and we'll see you on Monday when I'll introduce the new Doctors.”

The members of the team filed out, the Major General first naturally, leaving Phil alone in the room, with Major Monica Peters standing in the door, looking back at him. “If it's all we've got, Phil,” she said, her face looking frustrated, “then it's all we've got.”

“Yeah, that's what I'm very much afraid of.”

An hour or so later, when Phil was back in his office reviewing the data for what felt like the fiftieth time, there was a knock on his door. “C'mon in,” he said, just before the door started to open.

In walked a member of the Air Force, a good looking Native woman in her mid twenties with a nameplate that said Redwolf on her chest. She was new on base, having been part of the group that came in a few days ago to double down on security and protection for the base itself. Two weeks ago, the Air Force presence had been twenty people, tops, but now, they were over fifty strong, and Phil had barely had the chance to meet most of them. Security was Major Peters domain, and he trusted the woman to make sure that all of his people were being kept totally safe. Standing just behind 2nd Lieutenant Redwolf were a mismatched couple that Phil could only assume were the Doctors Varma. “Mr. Marcos, the Varmas are here, and Major General Fielder said I was supposed to bring them straight here,” she said, glancing over his office a bit. “Cool Ryu statue. Should I just leave them with you, sir?”

He chuckled, appreciating the fact that the airman recognized the large fighting game icon, then nodded to her. She seemed nice and friendly enough that he didn't feel the compulsive need to correct her that it was Doctor Marcos, not Mister. Some people he was happy enough to let it slide. “Yeah, just go ahead and show them in.”

“Yes sir,” she said before turning back to the door, gesturing for the two to enter his office before stepping out, closing the door behind her.

The two Doctors Varma presented quite the contrast from one another. The man, Doctor Dev Varma, was a tall man of Indian descent, a thick black beard over his long, slender face. He had jet black hair cut short, and a heavy black rimmed glasses over his eyes. If Phil hadn't been told that the man was a doctor, he might not have known, as he was dressed in a rather expensive looking Armani

suit that the man didn't look entirely comfortable in.

The woman, Doctor Charlotte Varma, was clearly of European descent, with light blonde wavy hair that hung down past her shoulder blades and light blue eyes behind golden wire framed circular glasses. While Dev wasn't a bad looking man, Phil thought to himself that the good Doctor must have had mad chat up skills to land a woman as lovely as Charlotte, who, despite being in her early forties, could've easily been a model.

“So Doctor Marcos,” Charlotte said to him, her voice dripping with a French accent, “I understand you've been managing the team here prior to our arrival? The Major General said you'd had some success, although that success has come with some surprising things along with it?”

“Doctor. Doctor. Why don't you take a seat and I can start going over the data with you?”

For the next few hours, Phil went over the serum with them, as well as the information they had regarding the DuoHalo virus. The more they talked, the more horrified the two Varmas seemed, as if they hadn't been told almost any of it in advance of showing up, and finally, Phil just asked.

“Sorry, didn't they tell you what you were going to be working on before they brought you here?” he asked them. “You all seem quite taken aback by this.”

“I thought we were coming to work on something for the Coronavirus, not this... DuoHalo virus,” Charlotte said. “This thing sounds extremely deadly. I feel as though we should have been given far more warning about this prior to our arrival.”

“I'm sorry about that, but there's nothing I can do other than tell you what we're up against,” Phil said. “And then tell you about the other thing.”

“What is 'the other thing,' if I dare ask?” Dev asked, his voice still layered in some of his native Indian accent, although it had a strong whiff of British blended into it.

Phil chuckled, shaking his head. “They *really* didn't tell you?”

“Why would they tell us?” Charlotte. “You almost seem amused by all of this dire news.”

“I mean,” Phil said, smiling wide, throwing up his hands. “If you can't laugh about this, then I don't know what you can laugh about. The serum we've developed is incredibly effective at delivering whatever it's grafted onto, almost supernaturally so. We can splice all kinds of things onto it and it amps that up a great deal, but it has a very strange side effect when combined with a vaccination suspension.”

“You're very much dancing about whatever the side effect is,” Charlotte said.

“I'd better just show you.”

A few minutes later, after watching the video of the first test subject from a few weeks ago, both of the new doctors were absolutely speechless, to Phil's amusement. He kept waiting for them to say something, but neither of them said anything, even as he looked on with a curious smile. Before saying anything, Charlotte picked up the remote and set the video to play again.

They watched the entirety of the video, mostly on 4x-32x speed, but both doctors stopped the video several times and wrote down some notes on their iPads, both with handwriting so cryptic that Phil couldn't make out any of the words. After a few minutes, though, he realized it was hopeless anyway. Dev was writing in Hindi and Charlotte was writing in French.

After they'd finished the video the second time, Charlotte removed her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose with a smile. “Utterly remarkable,” she said. “In attempting to build a high speed delivery base serum, you seem to have invented a kind of aphrodesiac.”

“What sort of lingering effects have the subjects seen?” Dev asked.

“We've only seen this sort of thing when it's mixed with vaccine suspensions, but it doesn't seem to matter what kind of suspension we use – it's always doing this, with women anyway. We're hesitant to try it with men, after the initial attempts have resulted in the subjects being incredibly ill because of it. On top of that, the serum has seemed to have the opposite of the intended effect.”

For the next several minutes, Phil walked them through all they'd learned since then, including going on a long tangent about how the serum had given antibodies to the man who'd been sleeping with

the woman they'd injected with the serum. That one detail fascinated both doctors, and the barrage of questions they hammered Phil with seemed endless.

What started as a brief conversation turned into dinner catered in, while the two Doctors reviewed all of the data Phil and his team had built over the last two weeks. By the time midnight rolled around, Charlotte had a theory, and while it wasn't one anyone was thrilled about, it offered at least the barest glimmer of hope.

If they developed some kind of vaccine for the DuoHalo virus, they could counteract the problems men were having resisting the virus by implanting the vaccine in women and then encouraging them to have sex with men.

The properties of transference with the flu vaccine had amplified the efficacy of the vaccine so much, it might, just might, do enough to counteract how the DuoHalo virus seemed to target the Y chromosome.

Then things started to get a little wild, even for Phil's personal tastes, because Doctor Varma, er, Doctor Charlotte Varma, had a theory on how to amplify the strength even further, although it certainly wasn't a scaleable solution.

Charlotte posited that that if a single man had unprotected sex with two or even three women who'd been treated with a serum designed to counteract the DuoHalo virus, it would amplify his resistance to make him nearly impervious to the virus, if they could develop something to counteract the DuoVirus in any way. They couldn't imagine how any practical application could come of it, but it was somewhere to start, anyway.

Around 1 a.m. they all left the office, then came back the next day. Nobody liked working on Saturday, but Phil needed to make sure the doctors were getting spun up as much as they could as quickly as they could, and as much as he expected the office to be empty, Major Peters was also in the office, giving a tour to another handful of new people to the base.

The Major had hired a staff psychologist, Dr. Audrey Percy, a tiny curvy Hispanic woman who seemed to have a perpetual smile on her face, and she would be working independently on the base to make sure that nobody was feeling undue pressure from the amount of stress they were under to solve this thing. She was cute, Phil thought to himself, but he needed to learn all three of the new people's names, so that he would know who was working on the base.

The second was a man named Miguel Cunningham, who was going to be the liaison between the base and whoever they were going to use to mass produce whatever they came up with. He was tall, lanky, ratlike, with a pencil mustache that made Phil hate him immediately.

The last was a new member of the military team, Captain Linda Hayes. She reminded him more of a model or an actress than someone in the Air Force. She was gorgeous, blonde, with light blue eyes the shade of a bright blue sky. She had an easy going way about her, a wide and open smile, but her eyes were constantly moving around the room, and Major Peters seemed to want to make sure that she and Phil got along.

After introducing them, Major Peters told the new hires to wait in the break room for a few minutes while she talked with Dr. Marcos, and Phil saw nervousness in Major Peters eyes. It was something he'd been seeing a lot of lately. "So what do you think of Linda?" Peters asked him, shifting a little bit back and forth.

"I don't know," Phil said. "What should I think of Linda?" He chuckled a little bit. "You trying to set me up on a date with her or something?"

"Even worse," Peters sighed. "She's going to be your shadow from now on."

"My... my shadow? What the hell are you talking about, Monica?"

"She's your new bodyguard," Peters said. "Wherever you go, she goes. Whatever you do, she's going to be there with you. You got a spare bed at your place?"

"Jesus, Monica, you're kidding, right?" Phil exhaled heavily, running his fingertips through his jet black hair. "What the fuck do I need a bodyguard for?"

“Phil, right now you the biggest brain trust we have on combating this thing, and the people above all of us want to make sure you do not lose that in an accident or something going wrong,” Major Peters said. “So, for the time being, you need to get used to the idea of Linda being a few steps behind you at all times. Once we're on the other side of this...”

“Other side of this? Other *side* of this?!” Phil shook his head. “This is scary shit, Monica! I don't know how soon we're going to be on the other side of this, but it's sure as shit not going to be any time soon! And I'm gonna be saddled with a bodyguard for months? Years?”

“Phil, look, I don't expect you to be any happier about this than I am, but right now, this is the way the world's going to work for the time being.”

“Jesus, okay. Okay. Okay okay, I get it,” Phil said, putting a hand up in surrender. “I have a bodyguard now. At least she's a good looking one, I guess.”

“Don't hit on her, Phil,” Peters said with a soft laugh.

“I won't, but hey, all I'm saying is that with my incredible good looks, she's gonna hit on me eventually,” he said with a grin.

“She's a trained professional, Phil,” Peters chuckled. “She's *not* gonna hit on you, I promise.”

“You say that now, but...”

Half an hour later, Captain Linda Hayes was following him everywhere he went, even as the Varmas started doing deeper dives with him into the data, and Charlotte was already starting to think about how she could make the serum they'd developed even stronger.

It was exactly the kind of thing Phil was afraid of.

Within a week or so of working with the Varmas, Dev was making headway onto a rapid detection test, but so far they hadn't been able to get one that worked without drawing blood, and even then, it wasn't anywhere near as accurate as they'd like, partially because they were having difficulty testing their test.

The idea of bringing people infected with the disease into their lab scared the living crap out of everyone, and even if they followed the strictest of protocols, they were still increasing their chances of contracting the virus exponentially.

But at this point, Phil knew they were going to have to do it sooner rather than later.

The Varmas had assumed control of the project, as was expected, but Phil had still found himself doing more than the lion's share of coordination. The Varmas were brilliant researchers, but they certainly hadn't been working collaboratively for some time, and the level of insidiousness of this virus was beyond anything they'd ever seen before.

It hadn't surprised Phil to see Dev fall into believing the virus from beneath the ice theory, but Charlotte had dismissed that early on, claiming that the DuoHalo virus looked like two different viruses had somehow combined together and then mutated, forming something entirely new from the building blocks of the old.

Two weeks after Varmas had shown up, the government began deploying the early stages of the smokescreen about the lesser virus, Covid, and the more deadly virus, DuoHalo, had managed to slip under the radar, despite a couple dozen fatalities. They'd gotten lucky that those contaminated with DuoHalo in the US seemed to have missed the windows in which they were contagious, and at the moment, it was looking like they had it under control.

Phil refused to be optimistic about it. He knew the danger optimism was going to get him in.

He mostly kept his head down and worked, but he'd also made sure to let himself have the basic human contact he needed to not go crazy. He still went down to the Golfland arcade every Friday night to bash out a few matches with the local fighting game crew. He still went to poker nights on Tuesdays with Andy, Eric and the rest of the guys. But other than the basic touchstones he needed, he ended up finding himself spending more and more time at the base.

“Can I ask you something, Dr. Marcos?” Captain Hayes, no, Linda, asked him late on Thursday evening, as Phil tapped away at his keyboard, having set her copy of James Clavell's “Shogun” down

on the couch in his office where she found herself spending more and more time. She'd asked him to call her Linda, since they were spending so much time together, and he'd agreed, as long as she called him Phil, but she was having a lot more trouble with that than he was.

“Linda, if you don't start calling me Phil, I'm going to start calling you Captain again.”

She smirked a bit. He liked when she smirked. “Right. Right. But lemme ask you this, Phil – if the Varmas come up with something to counteract the DuoHalo virus, and you can't solve the problems with the serum, do you think the team's just going to use it anyway?”

Phil sighed, leaning back in his chair, folding his elbow over his eyes. “Probably, those that can, anyway. I mean, it's not like everyone's got a partner here in the office, but those who do could at least start getting inoculated from the damn thing, giving them a bit of protection.”

“I mean, that's true, but it's just sex, right? Forgive me for saying this, but I think people around here could stand to have a couple of fuck buddies if it meant it would save their lives,” she said, folding one of her legs beneath her.

It was one of the things he liked most about Linda. She always spoke her mind, straight to the point, with no filter, no subtle undertones or subtext. She was all text, direct and to the point, like a bullet. It wasn't that she was always putting her foot in her mouth, either. She knew when to voice her opinion and when not to, but when it came to the two of them, they'd agreed no secrets and no doubletalk, an arrangement that had been working out for both of them.

“Sure,” Phil laughed, “but how the hell do you mandate that? 'Attention everyone. From 4-5 every day is now designated Fucking Hour, so pick a partner and get to it! That's an order!'”

Linda laughed, holding her hand over her mouth.

“Besides, there's more than a handful of folks on this base that identify as gay, and I'm certainly not about to go around telling lesbians they just need to accept a little dick in their lives.”

“Oh god,” Linda said, looking ashen, “I hadn't even thought about how this whole thing wasn't going to protect gay men and women. That's horrible.”

He nodded. “Like I've been saying for a month now, we're approaching a workable solution that will help protect a large part of the most at-risk portion of the population, but it doesn't cover everyone and it doesn't protect nearly as many people as I want it to.”

“Do you think the stay-at-home order's going to do enough to keep people safe?” she asked him. “I heard the Major General and the Major talking about how that it was likely to happen within the next six to eight weeks, based on projections.”

“It'll do a lot,” he said with a nod. “DuoHalo's airborne and doesn't last too long outside of the human body, so if we can reduce the amount of human contact for a while, that'll keep us from seeing too many casualties, but you've seen what the attitude's been like in this country for the last few years. I'm only half a decade from forty, and this is the most anti-science I've ever seen this goddamn country, and it's making me sick. People talking about 'the elites' like that's a bad thing. Talking about how they think science is trying to control them. And this utterly insane set of claims that vaccines cause autism, when that's been actively disproven time and time again. In that environment, we're going to come out and tell people to trust the science.”

“Jesus,” she groaned. “We are *so* fucked.”

“Well,” he chuckled, “*we* as individuals aren't, but *we* as a country certainly are.”

“What about you, Phil?” she said, grabbing her cup of coffee to take another sip from it. “You think maybe you can convince Audrey to be your pair partner, if it comes to it? I've seen the way she looks at you.”

Phil tilted his head to one side. “Wait, what? How does she look at me?”

“Oh come *on*,” she groaned. “Don't tell me you haven't noticed. Don't tell me the reason you haven't asked her out is because you haven't noticed, because if that's true, that's just sad, and I mean sad with a capital S-A-D.”

The Filipino man chuckled, gesturing at his computer terminal. “Little busy trying to save the

species here, maybe you've noticed?"

"It's Thursday, and she's asked you to join her for lunch three times this week already, Phil," she laughed. "Jesus, make the effort, would you?"

"What about you, Linda?"

"What *about* me, Phil?"

"You got somebody lined up to be your designated fuck buddy, if it comes to that?"

"Oh I'm sure I could probably throw a football down the hall and hit half a dozen people who'd volunteer in this office alone," she sighed. "Not that many of them would be anything more than a sympathy fuck."

"No interest in me, huh?" he said with a grin, meaning it to be a joke.

"Well, tell you what, Phil," Linda shot back. "You, me and Audrey sounds like a nice little threesome, so if you can make that happen, then I guess I'm in."

"I'm going to hold you to that," he teased, knowing they were both kidding.

"Oh don't you worry," she answered. "I'll remind you in case you forget."

The second week in February was when literally everything went to shit, just when everything in Phil's world had felt like it was starting to get better. He was having lunch with both Audrey and Linda in the mess hall when his iPad flashed the emergency alert at him, instructing him to get down to the main portion of the lab designated for detection tests.

Linda and Audrey had insisted on coming with him, and by the time he'd reached the lab, he was already panicked. The red contagion klaxons were lit up, and when he got to the lab, he could see that part of it had already been sealed off, officers standing outside, Charlotte screaming at them at the top of her lungs to let her by.

Dev stood on the other side of the glass.

Along with twelve other men, including McCallister, Bridges, and Wilson.

Major General Fielder moved to intercept Phil before he could get too close to the lab. "Easy there, Dr. Marcos. There's nothing we can do for them now except to buckle down and continue work on our vaccine treatment," the older man said, pressing a hand to his chest, keeping him from moving forward.

"What the fuck happened?"

"One of the sample transport cases apparently wasn't secured, so when they went to open it, the vials came tumbling out, and everyone..." He stopped and sighed, then forced himself to continue. "Everyone in that room is now definitely infected with DuoHalo. We'll need to quarantine them until they're through it or..."

The Major General didn't need to fill that in. Everyone knew what he meant.

The intensity that everyone was working on the project amplified after that, even though that hadn't seemed possible. More than a couple of times, Phil would wander by the quarantine area and see wives, brothers, daughters and sons standing outside of it, talking to their fathers on the other side of the glass. As much as Phil wanted to counsel them, to tell them everything was going to be alright, he couldn't, because he knew he'd be lying to them. Audrey did her best to keep spirits up, the visitors *and* Phil's, but the minute they had their first casualty on the base – Hunter Wilson – it became much harder for everyone to stay optimistic.

Because the day of the first casualty, they lost two more, including Doctor Dev Varma.

Phil spent much of the evening sitting crying on his couch, both Audrey and Linda holding onto him, assuring him that he'd done everything he could do, and that all he could do now was to keep moving forward, keep trying to keep things on task, trying to find a way out of this for all of them. Phil had told Audrey to go and make sure that Charlotte, and the Varma's daughter Asha, were doing okay, but Audrey insisted she'd already delegated that to her assistant, and that since Dev had passed away, Phil was back in charge of the project again, and they needed him at his best.

The weight of the world felt like a million tons, and Phil just wanted the whole thing to go

away, but there wasn't time, there was never any time, not any more.

Within a couple weeks, nearly all the men that had been in quarantine had died, and only one person who'd been in the room had survived and come through the other side of it – Adam McCallister, the former project chief.

All of that meant they had a starting point now, because McCallister's body had developed antibodies, and from there they could begin working on the building blocks of something that would help those uninfected develop those antibodies before ever encountering the virus.

But it also meant that everyone on the base had seen first hand what the DuoVirus could do to a man, to leave him bleeding from the eyes, ears and nose, gasping for his final breath before his lungs collapsed in on themselves. And the survival rate in their sample had been a paltry 8%.

Phil tried convincing Doctor Charlotte Varma to take some time off, to grieve, to mourn, to process the passing of her husband, but the woman was adamant that she wasn't going to let anyone else die on her watch.

The US went into quarantine the last week in February, as there were starting to be reports of both Covid and DuoHalo outbreaks in major metropolitan areas across the country, although Covid was getting most of the headlines at first, simply because everyone had been instructed not to talk about DuoHalo.

But there were confirmed cases of DuoHalo in New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, Seattle and Houston, and nobody was taking it seriously enough.

The second week in March, they felt like they were ready to test the serum and Nate Campbell's wife Sharon had volunteered to be one of the test subjects.

“You're sure about this, Nate?” Phil asked Nate, as both he and his wife sat in the testing area. “I know you want to get immunity from this like nobody's business, but this serum's still basically experimental, and I don't know how strange the side effects might get. You and your wife are signing up for a hell of a risk with this.”

Nate was a pragmatist, and while Phil would've been hard pressed to describe the man as a friend, he was certainly the friendliest member of the original task force. He was a large bulbous man with a history of asthma, which meant he was in the highest risk group. “Phil, I get it, but we're going to need first hand experience of how this is all going to work, and if it stands a chance of getting me immunity to this damn thing, then I need it now, not later.” He shook Phil's hand with a smile. “I don't know that I've ever said this, but I'm glad you're in charge these days. You've done a hell of a lot better job managing the team than McCallister ever did, so... thanks for that.”

Nate's wife Sharon was an African American woman who also loved to eat a bit more than was good for her, but with the body count starting to skyrocket in the US, they just couldn't afford to wait, so they isolated Nate and Sharon in a room together, injected Sharon with the treatment, and waited.

The idea was that Sharon would wait a day or so and see how the serum affected her, and if it seemed like she was feeling fine at the end of it, she could try and have sex with her husband, and see if it transferred the immunity to him.

That had been the plan, anyway.

Six hours after injection, Sharon had described how she was feeling to the team as “the horniest I've ever been in my fucking life,” and it was clear that she was quite worked up, unable to sit still, fidgeting constantly.

The team had instructed her to try and be strong, to try and hold out as long as she possibly could, because they needed to make sure she came through it okay before they wanted to risk her introducing it to Nate.

It had been a great plan, but no plan survives contact with the enemy.

At hour eight, Sharon had basically ripped her clothes off, and the clothes of her husband, shoved him into a chair, climbed atop his lap, and shoved his cock inside of her, giving the man no choice in the matter, as she bounced and bucked.

Phil felt odd, watching the whole thing from the other side of a one-way mirror, but he and the rest of the key members of the team couldn't look away, watching the woman have one of the most intense orgasms they'd ever seen just climbing onto Nate's cock.

Sharon had, at least, had the decency to position Nate's back to the mirror, so they didn't watch the actual penetration, but even with their restricted view, it was some of the most vigorous and carnal sex Phil had ever seen in his life, and he'd watched more than his fair share of porn and hentai.

Nate was clearly at least a little reticent to have sex in front of his colleagues, but Sharon had been merciless, and seemed hellbent on getting her husband to cum. Eventually, Nate didn't have any more resistance and clearly had an orgasm, because it had set off a chain reaction inside Sharon, and the woman had the most intense orgasm Phil had ever witnessed.

As she slumped forward against her husband, she looked completely unconscious, her body limped draped over Nate's body, her head resting on his shoulder, her arms hanging slack down at her sides, as Nate did his best to try and get her to settle in atop of him.

"Is... is she talking in her sleep?" Charlotte said, noting the woman's mouth was moving ever so slightly. "Can you turn up the audio levels?"

That was the first time Phil Marcos heard it, but it certainly wouldn't be the last.

Over and over again, Sharon Campbell was muttering a single word over and over again.

Imprinting...

Chapter 3

April 7th, 2020

Quarantine had been rough on everyone, and the first few weeks, it felt like living in a graveyard. People were instructed to stay at home if at all possible, not to go anywhere, not even to work, and the panic was starting to set in whenever he turned on the television. By April 1st, everyone wanted it to just be a bad dream they could all wake up from and get away from, but no such relief was coming.

Phil found himself waking up in the middle of the night from dreams about his time spent playing fighting games, and each time he did, he wanted desperately to phone up a couple of his friends and gather them for a small tourney at his place, but he knew he couldn't. It wasn't safe.

April 7th was the first day anyone on the news used the words "DuoHalo" and the minute it happened, there were a dozen calls being made to Phil's office, asking if the serum could be deployed, if it would be ready for even a small number of tests.

He didn't have answers.

Just one day later, his whole world would change. April 8th, 2020 was a Wednesday, and Phil usually met up with his friends for poker night, but that had been put on hold with the quarantine, and so Phil had decided to stop by Target on his way home. Toilet paper wasn't going to be on shelves, but he needed some basics like toothpaste and razor blades.

The advisement was that if you had to go inside, you had to wear a facemask, and so Phil had the best available. The store was a ghost town, with only the barest minimum of employees walking through the aisles, and even they were masked up, keeping as much distance between the customers and themselves as possible. Those few customers he did see, they were wearing not only masks, but gloves, scarves, hats, goggles, anything to minimize their exposure as much as possible.

The Air Force had asked him to let them take care of getting supplies, but Phil had insisted that from time to time, he was going to go out into the world, just to make sure it was all standing. They didn't like having him out in the open, worried that he could pick up the virus, but Phil told them they had to allow him at least a little mobility, otherwise he would be likely to make mistakes at his work, something none of them could afford right now.

He hoped that he and Linda just sort of blending in to the small numbers of customers that the store had, but she kept extremely aware of what was going on at all times. He pushed the cart and she

walked off to one side. He'd gotten used to her mostly being around, but disappearing for a few minutes at a time, off checking one thing or another, ensuring that he was fine and safe. It all seemed rather silly to him, but he'd learned not to question her, as it only seemed to make her grumpy.

The parking lot had been a near ghost town when they'd arrived, only a dozen or so cars, almost all belonging to employees. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the aisles of a Target looking so utterly empty. It felt like something out of a post apocalyptic film.

He was in the shaving cream and deodorant aisle when he saw Linda start to head towards the end of the aisle, stopping to look back at him. "Wait right here until I get back, okay?"

"Sure," he said, "I need a couple of minutes anyway." She didn't wait beyond his first word before turning and vanishing around the corner. Normally when she left him alone, it was just for a minute or two, but she was gone for nearly five minutes before she came back to him, walking briskly.

"Leave the cart, we're leaving," she told him.

"Are you—"

"Now Phil."

"Yes ma'am."

He didn't like leaving without making his purchases, but he'd not heard Linda be so short with him before, and decided that meant things were serious, and he didn't want to be on the receiving end of that attitude. As they approached his blue Tesla, she made her way to the driver's side instead of the passenger side, something that caught Phil off guard.

"Linda, what are—"

"Get in the *fuckin*g car, Phil," she growled at him, sliding into the driver's seat. "*NOW!*"

Phil hopped into the passenger's side of the vehicle, pulling the door shut quickly. The car was beeping at her, as they both struggled to get their seatbelts on quickly, and as soon as they did, she was backing the car up with a quick zip.

That was when Phil noticed the black van in the parking lot for the first time.

One thing Phil truly loved about his Tesla was that the vehicle had an immense amount of zip, and as the car whipped out onto the street, the vehicle began to play "London Can Take It" from Public Service Broadcasting, a nice electronic number with old new reel audio from the bombing of London during World War II spliced into it. "That's the spirit," she muttered to herself. "Phil, you remember that emergency number I had you put into your phone last month? Go ahead and call that for me, would you?" She snaked the vehicle around a corner, not even slowing down at the red, as Phil glanced behind them to see the black van in pursuit. "Now, if you please?"

"Uh, right, right," he said, fishing his phone from his pocket. She'd given him a number to call in case she was injured or other emergencies when she couldn't call someone herself. He'd put it into his phone as "All Hell Breaks Loose." It was on his Favorites screen.

The phone rang only once through the handsfree on the Tesla before a familiar voice popped up on the other end of the line. "Doctor Marcos," Lieutenant Redwolf said to him on the other end, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"Niko, it's Linda," his bodyguard said, not letting him get a word in edgewise. "I need you to issue a Crimson Alert to all protectorate services we have in the field right now, and get everyone back to the base as quickly as possible."

"I'm sorry Captain, did you—"

"Yes, I repeat, issue Crimson Alert *immediately*."

"Copy that."

"I also need you to issue an alert to Walnut Creek PD, as well as the Feds, and let them know there's a body of a foreign national in the women's restroom of the Walnut Creek Target. I was defending myself, and I will cooperate with their investigation, but it's a national security matter, and we need to button that shit up quickly."

"Are you wounded, ma'am?" Niko asked.

“Negative, but we are currently being pursued by a van full of hostiles,” she said, her voice terse and to the point, although there was something relaxed about her tone, as if this was something she did every day. It was serenity that worried him the most. “I suspect they're going to break off soon, but I want you to get Walnut Creek PD to try and head them off if they can. We're on Ygnacio Valley Road, eastbound, just passing San Carlos Drive. If they can apprehend the van, that would be lovely, but tell them to consider the target as extremely aggressive.”

“Copy that, ma'am. Do you want me to remain on the line with you until you're back on base?”

“Negative, Lieutenant,” Linda said. “I need to focus. I'll see you soon.”

“Good hunting, Captain.”

He wanted to ask a million questions, but also didn't want to distract Linda from her driving. While Phil had thought he'd really put the vehicle through its paces, he was astonished how he hadn't even been in the same league as Linda, who was doing her best Steve McQueen, the electric car snaking across the lanes.

After a couple of minutes, he glanced back just in time to see a couple of police klaxons light up behind the van, who turned off onto Walnut Ave. As soon as they did, Linda swerved the car suddenly, making a U-turn right in the middle of the mostly empty street, moving in to slide in behind the police cars as they blazed around the van, swarming around it like angry bees. One of the police cruisers tried a PITT maneuver, ramming into the back corner of the van, sending it into a spin before it smacked up into a tree.

Linda pulled the Tesla in behind the police cars, glancing over at Phil. “Stay here, keep your head down, do not get out of the fucking car, okay?”

He didn't even have time to answer before she was out of the car, closing the door behind her with one hand, drawing her sidearm from its concealed place under her outfit. Phil saw the side of the van open and four men dressed in all black, including ski masks, hopped out, AK-47s at the ready.

Before the first one could even raise his rifle to point at the police, Linda had fired off a round at the man from her 9mm, slamming into his left shoulder, spinning him back. Her second shot went through the head of the man to his left. She slid down behind one of the cop cars, where officers had taken cover.

She said something to them, as the two remaining men sprayed a wave of bullets over at the car Linda was behind. That gave the cops behind the other vehicle the chance to pop out and fire a handful of rounds into the men, who collapsed back against the van. The van's driver slowly tried to exit the vehicle, his hands raised high into the air. The officers moved in together, approaching with caution, their weapons still at the ready, as one of them moved to cuff the driver, and the others closed in on the downed men, removing their weapons, checking to see which of them were still alive and which weren't, because the second one Linda had shot was clearly never going to get up again.

The driver's side door opened suddenly while Phil's attention was on the fight, as a big, burly man in attire matching those who had just jumped out of the van, slid into his Tesla. The man had clearly intended to just drive off with Phil in the car, but was unfamiliar with how to operate a Tesla, and couldn't get the car out of park, so Phil reached into his pocket, grabbed his stun gun and tased the man for a long moment. The man's body spasmed at the high current electrical shock then slumped forward, and Phil burst out of the car, running towards Linda, shouting “Help! Linda!”

Her head whipped around and she drew her weapon back up, firing in his direction while walking towards him, as he dropped to the ground in panic. She fired exactly twice then stopped, sprinting over to help Phil back up from the ground. “You okay? I told you to stay in the car.”

“Somebody hopped *into* the fucking car!”

“Okay, that's fair then.” She walked with him back towards his car, amusement in the tone of her voice behind the mask. “You juiced him?”

“Hit him with the stun gun, just like you told me to. Now can we get him out of my fucking car already?”

“Sure, just gimme a minute,” she said, her voice as calm and cool as ever. It was almost disconcerting how relaxed she seemed about all of this. “Walk with me.”

There had been a second man just to the right of his car that Phil hadn't seen, and it looked like Linda had put a couple of bullets into the man. She wanted to check and make sure he was downed, although it looked like the man was wearing bullet proof armor that had absorbed one of the two rounds. The other had gone clean through his shoulder. She flipped the man over onto his belly, reached into one of her pockets and grabbed some plastic ziptie cuffs, binding the man's arms behind his back by the wrists.

“Weapon down, ma'am!” an officer said in her direction.

She sighed, placing her gun on the ground. “Alright, I'm reaching for my badge with my left hand, alright? I will do so slowly.” With her left hand, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a leather gatefold wallet, tossing it over towards the officer behind her. “Captain Linda Hayes, Air Force Security Services. Check your dispatch. *I called you.*”

The officer crouched down to grab the wallet while her partner kept his gun drawn and pointed at Linda and Phil. After a minute, the crouched officer stood up, nodding to her partner. “It's okay, they're friendlies,” she said, as Linda moved to pick up her weapon once more. “Sorry Captain, you know how it gets when everything gets chaotic,” the officer, who Phil could now see was named Winters, said, tossing Linda back her wallet. “What the hell happened?”

“Not at liberty to offer up all the details, Officer Winters, but I'm part of a protectorate detail, and someone decided to take a run at kidnapping my client, and they seemed completely willing to dust up anyone who got in their way. Speaking of which, I'd like to get him to safety as soon as possible, if you don't mind. While we might have prevented this one attempt, I suspect there'll be others, and on other members of our client list.”

“What about these clowns?”

“Get them medical attention, but do not let them out of your sights until someone from either the Air Force or the Feds shows up to take them into custody. Keep all details of who they are off the radios and computers, otherwise you may have people from an embassy trying to come and spirit them away before we get a chance to talk to them, and that's the last thing I want.”

“Who the hell are they?” Winters asked her.

“Probably cutouts, but they just might have Russian diplomatic papers, so I'd rather not take that chance. Better silent than slippery.”

“The Russians?” Winters said. “We back in the Cold War, Captain?”

“We never left it,” Linda said, yanking the unconscious guy out of the front of Phil's car. She cuffed his limp body and then shoved him into the back seat of the Model 3. “I'll take this guy to the base myself, so I can start in on getting a handle on what the hell's happening.” She looked back at Phil, gesturing back to the passenger's side. “C'mon, let's go.”

As soon as the vehicle was back on the road, Linda asked him to call the number again. “Captain?” Niko's voice said on the end after half a ring.

“You got it, Lieutenant. I have Challenger secure and we are no longer in pursuit. Inform the General that I have a prisoner in tow, and that we have a handful more in police custody. Has everyone reported back in safely?”

Niko sighed a little on the other end. “Negative, Captain. Most teams are either back on base or are en route, but we have one detail that is dark and hasn't responded to hails.”

“Which detail?”

“Beekeeper's. Captain Harris checked in half an hour ago, but hasn't responded to hails, and her transponder hasn't moved.”

She sighed a little, perhaps the only inflection of emotion he'd heard from her since they'd left the department store. “Shit, that means they're already compromised. Patch me through to the General.”

“One moment, Captain.”

There was a brief click before a new voice popped onto the line, Major General Fielder, the head of the base. "Tell me Challenger is safe and sound, Captain."

"Yes sir, and we're just two minutes from the base, but Lieutenant Redwolf informs me that Beekeeper's detail hasn't reported in, so at this point, I would assume that he's been abducted."

"Any ID on the bandits, Captain?"

"Everything about them screams Russian to me, sir, but I cannot authenticate that guess at this time, although I have a bandit in tow so we can do some interrogation when he's conscious."

"Took one alive, did you?"

"This one Challenger tased himself, sir."

The General chuckled a little. "Shocked the bogey yourself, did you Doctor Marcos?" he said, addressing Phil through the speakerphone.

"He was trying to steal my fucking *car*, General," Phil said, his whole body suddenly feeling extremely exhausted. "I may kick him around a bit getting his ass out of my back seat."

"I don't think anyone would object to that, Doctor. Anyway, you two stay safe and get back here as quickly as possible."

"Pulling up to the gate now sir," Linda said.

"Good. I'll check in on Beekeeper." The line went dead, just as the Tesla pulled up to the checkpoint, and Linda glared at the guard, who lifted the rail and waved them through.

"Who's Beekeeper?" Phil asked her.

"McCallister," she told him. "How much of the project do you think he could recreate from memory if he had to?"

"Fifty, maybe sixty percent, but he'd have a bitch of a time recreating the serum without notes, and all those notes are kept on base, because he wasn't part of the initial team that built the damn thing. Why, do you think that's the intent?"

"They put a full abduction team on you," she said. "Could *you* have recreated it without notes?"

Phil nodded soberly. "Yeah, I think me and Bill McKenna are the only two who could, and if I'm off base, Bill has to be *on* base. You guys mandated that when you came on, and I remember thinking it was silly at the time."

"Not so silly now, is it?" she said to him, bringing the Tesla to park in a spot close to the door, as two soldiers headed towards the car. She hopped out and jerked a thumb towards the back seat. "Bag him and tag him, then get him set up in one of the test subject rooms. We don't have an interrogation room on site, so it'll have to do."

As the two of them walked into the base, Phil turned to ask her "So, why is my code name Challenger?"

"It's on that character select screen of the game you're always playing. 'A new challenger appears!' I guess it just stuck." Her posture was enough to surprise Phil, as she leaned her back against the elevator like it was just any other day.

"I don't understand how you can be so calm during all of that," he said to her.

"It doesn't help me any to get worked up, so I just dial in on the work that needs to be done and do everything I can to make sure you're safe and that we have an exit that keeps you on American soil."

When the elevator hit the bottom floor, another question sprung to mind. "Were you expecting someone to try and kidnap us?"

"We didn't just put the details in place for no reason what so ever, Phil," she said, the slightest flicker of amusement in her voice. "The Chinese, the Russians, hell, a bunch of people we call allies are probably looking to get their hands on your research right now, as the bodies keep piling up. Speaking of which, we need to both get tested quick here, make sure we didn't pick anything up from those assholes. I wouldn't put it past them to try and send infected soldiers after us."

The two of them walked immediately down the hallway and into the isolation room, sealing the door behind them.

“What are we going to do if we are infected?” Phil said.

“Let's just pray we aren't,” Linda said. “You're a good Catholic, right?”

“Yeah, although I haven't been able to go to church for months now.”

“I think God'll understand, given the circumstances.”

“I hope so,” he said, drawing a bit of his blood before drawing a bit of hers, putting the two vials into the centrifuge, so that it could be tested. “We'll know in a couple of—”

The doors opened and suddenly shut again, as Audrey rushed into the room, hugging him before he could tell her not to come in. The diminutive Hispanic woman clutched onto him tightly, her arms forming a hard lock around his midsection. “Jesus, Phil, don't fucking scare me like that!” she yelled at him. “I heard that someone had been kidnapped and all I could think of was that you weren't on base, and I got so fucking scared!”

He and Audrey had gone on a couple of 'dates,' if they could be called that, over the last few weeks. They'd done the classic 'dinner and a movie' but the dinner had been a meal at the commissary and the movie had been streamed on his computer.

“Audrey!” he said. “We're in quarantine in here! We were attacked and we could've been infected, so you should've waited outside! Now I'm going to have to test you too.”

Linda shook her head. “No need, Phil,” she sighed. “We're all infected.” She held up the vial, the telltale green flecks in their blood having appeared immediately after she'd introduced the testing solution. “Well, fuck.”

A few hours later, Doctor Charlotte Varma had agreed with Phil's assessment – they were going to have to be the first human guinea pigs for the new modified serum. Dr. Varma had come up with something she was relatively certain would splice onto the serum, and that it would be safe to inject into women, and then to pass on to men through sexual contact, but it hadn't been fully tested yet, so they were going to be the first people to put themselves on the line.

Dr. Varma agreed that she alone would monitor them, and an hour later, just as Phil could feel himself starting to cough, Dr. Varma slid two injection guns through the pass through chamber to them, as Phil chuckled a little bit.

“This is not how I wanted our first time to be, Audrey,” Phil said as she injected herself in the arm with the serum. “I really like you, and the last thing I wanted is for you to feel like that feeling wasn't genuine.”

“Oh, I know Phil,” she said to him with a warm smile. “But if I have to choose between our first time being a little awkward and not having our first time at all, well, it's not really much of a choice now, is it?”

Linda was already injecting herself in the arm with the other shot before Phil even had a chance to say something. “Linda, what the hell are you doing?”

She smirked a little. “You know, Phil, you may think I'm just a bad ass bodyguard, and while that's true, it's not the *only* thing I am. I've been paying attention to you and the rest of the nerd patrol when you're talking about this serum of yours, and I'm smart enough to know what things like efficacy rates are. With you and Audrey knocking boots, you have about a sixty-five percent chance of survival without any side effects, but if you add me into that mix, that brings your odds up to the low eighties, and I did tell you I gave a fuck whether you lived or died. I just didn't expect that to be so literal.” She shrugged a little, starting to unbutton her shirt. “Not that I mind. You okay with that Audrey, having to share him with me?”

Audrey blushed, looking demurely at her feet for a moment before looking up at her, nodding. “Yeah, I suppose that's okay, if it's going to help us make sure he lives,” she said, reaching down to grab her t-shirt, pulling it up and over her head, exposing that heavy duty bra she wore beneath to keep her massive tits from jiggling too much. It was lacy and frilly and beautiful, Phil thought to himself.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Phil said. “You need to let the serum get at least an hour's worth of time in you before you're going to be able to transmit any kind of antibodies to me.”

“So we can spend an hour or so making out,” Linda said, her voice a little huskier than it had been before maybe. “I like making out. Don't you like making out, Audrey?” Linda leaned in to kiss Phil for a moment, and he was surprised at how soft she felt, her lips against his, how tender and inviting the kiss was, far more romantic than he'd expected based on her cavalier attitude. “And besides,” she said, “I did tell you last month that you, me and Audrey would make a nice little threesome, so now you're gonna get that.”

“And you're sure you're—” he started to say before Audrey placed both of her hands on the back of his neck and pulled him into a heated kiss of her own, far more intense than what Linda had given him, as he slid his hands onto her hips.

Trying to keep them from going too far too fast was a strong challenge for the next hour, as the three of them peeled off their clothes and began to get seriously frisky with one another. The two women provided such a stark contrast from one another.

Audrey was Rubenesque, curvy and plump, with immense breasts the size of his head and an ass that Sir Mix-A-Lot would've certainly approved of, her skin dark for a Latina, a deep shade of earthy brown, with even darker nipples, her black hair in a bob cut down just past her chin. While it was clear she trimmed her pubic hair, it looked as though she might not have shaved her legs for a week or so.

Linda, on the other hand, looked more like a model or an athlete, although maybe she was a bit too short to be strutting down a catwalk any time soon, at least half a foot shorter than he was. She was lean and muscular, although he almost thought he could see a bit of embarrassment on her face as she removed her sports bra to reveal a small pair of breasts, certainly tame in comparison to Audrey's engulfing mounds. Her skin was pale, but there were tanlines on her arms, a pair of rings that marked where her skin was exposed to the sun when she was out on her run. Her nipples were a bright pink, almost the shade of old time bubblegum. Her blonde hair had been pinned up, but when she stripped down, she removed the bobby pins to let it fall down past her shoulders in golden waves. She also had a small thatch of golden curls above her pussy.

The tension had been rising while they'd been stripping, and the girls had worked together to strip Phil naked. He'd been a little bothered growing up that he didn't have any hair on his chest, but the girls didn't seem to mind, kissing and licking at his exposed flesh as they peeled his pants and boxers off of him, the three of them now fully naked in the quarantine room, at least ten minutes ahead of schedule. There were a couple of cots in the room, but Phil was fairly certain they'd been designed exclusively for sleeping, and not the kind of sexual activity they might be subjected to momentarily.

Audrey smoothed one of her hands on her own belly before looking up at Dr. Varma with concern. “Uh, doc? There might... uh... there might be something wrong with the formula,” she groaned. “Didn't you say it was going to be like six to ten hours before we'd start to feel any form of sexual alterations?”

Dr. Varma clicked on the button to turn on the speaker. “Because of Dr. Marcos's infection, I had to give you both significantly higher dosages than I imagine will we use when we start rolling it out on a larger scale, so you may feel the sexual need much earlier than expected. But we needed to make sure we could get as much of the serum into Phil's bloodstream before the DuoHalo has a chance to do any serious damage to him. How are you feeling, Phil?”

“Like I'm exhausted. Like I've been stuck in a smoky room for a couple of hours. Breathing hurts a little bit.”

“Hang in there, Phil,” Charlotte said to him. “Help is coming soon. It's been nearly an hour, so if you want—”

Before that sentence was finished, Audrey had grabbed Phil's head again and kissed him hard once more as her hand had been stroking his cock. Linda's fingers closed around his balls, jostling them between her strong fingertips as she nuzzled in against the two of them. “Look at her, Phil,” she whispered into his ear. “I think she's ready to fuck, and I don't blame her, 'cause so am I. God, I don't

know that I've ever been so ready to fuck in my entire life. Here, feel how wet you make me.”

She took one of his hands and pulled it down to rub his fingertips across her snatch, and true to her word, she was soaked, slippery far beyond any partner he'd ever had before, and while Phil wouldn't call himself a lothario, he did okay, even if it had been a couple of years since he'd had a partner. Linda's fingertips on his wrist forced him to push a couple of fingers up and inside of her pussy, which made her groan, trying to get his hand even deeper inside of her.

“How about you, Audrey? How are you feeling? You wanna fuck Phil?”

Audrey pulled back from the kiss and nodded, her forehead bumping against his a little. “I should be a good girl like my momma taught me to be, Phil, but I can't, I won't, I can't, I can't even think straight, my little pussy's so itchy and wet, and it's so fucking empty, and I know how that's how sluts talk, but that's how I feel right now, and you need to fucking help me, okay? You need to fucking fill that emptiness. Dios mio, you gotta fill me up, you gotta stuff me full before I go outta my fucking mind, okay?”

The two women were basically pushing him down to the floor, and as strong as he was, the two of them easily overpowered him, until he was on his back atop of their pile of clothes, as Audrey moved to straddle over him, her bright red fingernails lightly pressed against his shoulders. “Here, let's get you on top of that thing, Audrey,” Linda said, grabbing her hip with one hand and his cock with the other, shifting him and her to get them lined up. “Here you go.”

As soon as Linda pushed Audrey down onto his shaft, the Latina's body began a tremble so intense that Phil thought for half a second they were in an earthquake. “There's a good girl,” Linda cooed at her. “Did that feel good?”

“F-f-f-fuck Phil... is... is that supposed to happen?” Audrey whimpered. “I just came harder than I've ever cum when you pushed inside of me. That's the hardest I've ever fucking cum in my life, and I'm still thirsty, I still want more, I still feel needy. Gimme more.”

She had the widest hips of any girl he'd ever been with, but she certainly knew how to use them, lifting and dropping her booty into his lap with a rhythmic tempo that just bopped up and down along his shaft, impaling herself again and again.

Normally, Phil liked to think of himself as being able to last a decent time, but the whole situation was so unexpected that it was only a couple of minutes before he found himself on the precipice of orgasm, trying desperately to hold out, only to feel Linda give his nuts a soft squeeze with one hand, her other hand stroking his face, nodding at him lazily.

With that, his resistance crumbled and he dug his heels into the cool floor, arching his back to push up, making sure his cock was stuffed as much inside of her as he could when that release punched his gut and forced a heavy blast of sticky sperm up into her. The sensations must have been even more intense for her, as she began to whimper and whine, while her body quivered all over again, aching tremors until she slumped forward onto his chest, her body completely given out, whispering the word “imprinting” into his ear.

It was strange, but he felt a little bit better, even if he still felt slightly short of breath. Linda helped roll Audrey off of him and over to one side, using a handful of clothes to form a pillow beneath her head, her entire body deathly still except for her lips, still whispering.

Linda laughed a little, husky and wanton. “Fuck, that looked like it blew her mind when you blew your load,” Linda said.

Phil nodded a little, lifting one forearm to wipe sweat from his head. “I feel a little bit better too,” he said to her.

“Well that's good, because I don't,” she grinned. “But I will, once I've gotten you inside of me.” She crawled over and pushed her head down onto his cock, suckling a bit of his lingering cum from his shaft, which had started to soften but immediately hardened again as he watched the blue eyes of the Captain roll back in their sockets as she moaned whorishly around his dick, her tongue slithering frantically along his shaft before she popped her mouth off his uncircumcised tip, looking up at him

with adoring blue eyes. “If I get orgasms like that all the fucking time, then all of this will have been worth it,” she groaned to him, forcing herself up onto her knees before standing up, bending over the table in the center of the room. “Come and get me.”

It took Phil a few seconds to get his balance to be able to stand up, but once he did, he moved over towards her, realizing his cock was completely ready for another round. He slowly shifted to get into place behind her, reaching down to hold his dick, working to get it lined up against her twat, and once he did, she practically shoved back onto him, her head falling forward, her forearms resting on the top of the table. “That's it, I saved your ass, now I want you to rail mine.”

Whereas Audrey had taken the driver's seat, Linda seemed to want him to take control, so both of his hands grabbed onto her hips and yanked her back onto his cock with a fierce tug, punching out another deep sultry moan from her lips.

“Yes, you bastard, I've been sexually frustrated for months now, so fuck me! Fuck me like you wanna knock me up, like you wanna mark your territory, like you wanna carve my cunt into the shape of your fucking dick, you motherfucker, fucking do it!”

The pace he and Linda set was as far from gentle as they could get, his hips slamming back into her ass hard enough to bang the front of her thighs against the edge of the table. Eventually, he decided to get daring and reached forward to grab a fistful of her hair, which only seemed to excite her further.

With the edge having been taken off by his first orgasm, he lasted significantly longer with Linda, and he was fairly certain she went through a couple of orgasms before he finally reached his second climax, his cock tunneled as deep as he could get it inside of Linda's snatch as he could when he finally felt that inescapable pressure rushing from his balls to escape his body, drowning the inside of her pussy with his thick cream, sending her body into a ripple of howling orgasm.

A moment or so later, she slumped forward onto the table, faceplanting on the metal surface, but her arms having slowed the fall a bit, as she muttered the word “imprinting” endlessly once more.

And goddamn it, Phil thought to himself, I feel *fine*.

As tired as he was, he laid Linda down on the floor next to Audrey, then went and drew a bit of his own blood, running the test again, as he glanced over at Charlotte through the glass, it a bit fogged up, and her looking a little disheveled on the other side of it.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the test came back *clean*.

Despite its crazy side effects, despite all the hoops involved, they'd invented a way to survive DuoHalo. He couldn't help but laugh.

Chapter 4

April 9th, 2020

The next day, Phil woke up with two beautiful women next to him, the three of them still on the floor of the lab. He wasn't dead. He wasn't even sick. He'd half expected Linda to be awake before he was, but both her and Audrey were still completely unconscious, although he supposed that was what he *should* have expected. The standard time for this particular mix of the serum was clocking in at around sixteen hours of slumber before they awoke, and the fact that Dr. Varma wasn't on the other side of the glass didn't worry him. He'd woken up early, much earlier than he'd normally get up, still quite uncertain how he'd earned the undying loyalty of a pair of such wonderful women.

So since he had the lab to himself for at least a few hours, he did the only sensible thing he could think of – he got to work.

His blood work was clean. Linda's blood work was clean. Audrey's blood work was clean. Not one of them had any trace of the DuoHalo virus in their bloodstream.

Despite all of that, their blood *had* changed. There were hints of *his* DNA in *their* bloodstreams. That was blowing his mind. He'd been doing research on what the serum had been doing to the few people they'd tested it on, but now he had a subject who wasn't going to bitch and moan about constantly being poked and prodded – himself.

They'd been trying to document all the various effects and changes, but they couldn't ask their colleagues to spend twenty-four seven under watch, no matter how much they wanted to. But now he could document all of the things he noticed himself, and with Linda and Audrey. It wasn't ideal, having to use himself as a test subject, but right now, the world was moving far too fast for ideal anything, so he was going to do what he had to do.

By mid day, he'd realized that he hadn't sent any messages to Andy and Eric about poker night, and logged into his email, not having his phone on him, emailing Andy to say he'd just fallen asleep at the base and hadn't left, having woken up there this morning, and apologizing for not calling, but reminding Andy that he didn't have access to his phone while he was on the base. He was sure Andy would understand and the boys would just file it under 'Phil Being Phil.' It was supposed to be their last poker night before they all began strictly following quarantine, and he hoped the boys had had it without him.

Dr. Varma had come by and asked him to make sure he was keeping all of his data in a place where she could access it as well, and thanked him for documenting everything. She also told him that as soon as he felt safe coming out of the room, Major General Fielder had asked him to come by his office for a debrief.

He'd thanked her for the message and agreed to see the General as soon as Linda and Audrey woke up.

Linda was the first to awaken, something he found odd, considering she'd started the imprinting process a few minutes later than Audrey had. "Hey there, Captain Bad Ass Sleepyhead," he teased. "You feeling okay?"

"Okay?" Linda said with a giggle, rubbing her eyes. "Not gonna lie, I feel several years younger. I feel rejuvenated. I feel so full of energy, it's almost an alien sensation to me. I... I haven't really talked about this with anyone, but I've had this recurring pain in my calf for the last few years. It comes and goes, and it isn't nothing severe but it's still been this sort of familiar wound I've learned to live with. And that's all gone. I know, I know, you're thinking 'Linda, you just told me it comes and goes so maybe it's just gone for the moment, but I'm telling you, I don't know how I know it's gone, but I know I know it's gone. And that's strange. I feel like I should be bothered by that, but I'm not. My body's been changed. It's been *improved*, and that's so weird."

"I mean, we still don't fully understand everything the serum is doing, but in curing DuoHalo, it might be trying to repair as many other things in your body as it can. We built this thing to try and restore the human body, but the tech, it's evolving on its own."

"I thought you *created* the thing, Doctor Doctor. How can you not know how it's doing the things it's doing?" She didn't sound angry, more curious about what was going on.

"I *helped* create it, Linda, but I'm not the only person to have worked on it. It's been a team effort, and while I did a lot of the work on it, I don't think any single one of us knows everything about the serum we built. It's just that complicated."

"It's a pretty wondrous thing, this serum you've all built, especially if it's fixing things like old injuries and whatnot. So maybe something good is going to come out of this whole DuoHalo virus."

"I'm a little surprised Audrey's not awake yet," he sighed. "I've run her bloodwork and it came back clean, so I think she's fine. The general wants to see me, and I don't want to keep him waiting, but I don't want to leave her here unconscious."

"m up, I'm up," Audrey said, stretching her arms out. "When Sharon said she and Nate felt energized the next morning, I chalked it up to them just not having a go at each other recently enough, but now I completely understand what they were on about. I'm buzzing, and it wasn't just the sex." She blushed a little bit, looking over at Phil. "Although the sex was magnificent. So we're... what is it, bonded now?"

"Something like that," Phil said. "I'm still not entirely sure what it means, but you've got some of my DNA running through you."

“Well, that's *obvious*, Phil,” Audrey said with a giggle. “Has nobody had the birds and the bees talk with you?”

“I don't just mean semen, Audrey,” he sighed. “I mean it's actually in your blood now, and I don't know entirely what that means. I'm going to be studying it, though, and so obviously you'll know as soon as I know.”

Linda moved over and kissed Audrey, then helped her to her feet, before they moved over to Phil, each of them taking a turn kissing him. “We're a team now,” Linda said, “a squad. You two are my ride or dies.”

Phil smiled a little bit, hugging both women. “I'm truly lucky. Anyway, you two should get dressed, as I need to go and update the General on what happened last night. He'll probably want to talk to you as well, Linda, so you may want to hop through a shower and get freshened up.”

“You really shouldn't go and see him without me, Phil,” Linda said. “I've got a lot to add to that conversation, and I don't like you being anywhere without me.”

“We're on the base, Lins, I'm fine, I'm perfectly safe.”

“Look, let me get a quick shower in and then I'll go with you, and we can save each other a bunch of time, okay? Just trust me on this one.”

He rolled his eyes a little bit. “Alright, fine. Go and have your shower, and then we'll go see the old battleaxe.”

“You could shower with me?” she said, a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

Twenty minutes later, they were both showered and dried off, and headed into Major General Fielder's office, the older man looking like he hadn't slept a wink in over a day. “First thing's first, Dr. Marcos,” the General said to them. “Thank God you're okay. We'd be in loads of trouble if those men had succeeded in their abduction attempt with you.”

“Did they successfully abduct Dr. McCallister, General?” Linda asked.

“That's part of our problem, Captain. As it turns out, Dr. McCallister wasn't *abducted*.”

“That's... good, right?”

“He *defected*.”

“Wait, what?” Phil said. “Look, Adam McCallister and I have had our differences, Lord knows the guy's been a pain in my ass since day fucking once, but I have trouble seeing him as defecting to work for another country.”

“This footage may be a little hard to watch then, but I think it's important that you both see it.” The General tapped on his computer and a screen on the wall behind him popped to life with a video inside of McCallister's house.

The interior of McCallister's home looked exactly how Phil had expected it to be – mostly white walls, marble counter tops, two-tone artwork on the walls, absolutely no character to the home. Adam's bodyguard had been a man, Captain Scott Sabino. The video was clearly taken from a home security internal camera, and Phil wondered how they'd gotten their hands on it. It didn't seem like Adam had even known about it, so maybe that was it. He also wondered if his own house had security cameras in it that he didn't know about. He'd like to think that Linda would've told him, but if it had been there for his safety, she might not have.

McCallister was in his kitchen, making what looked like an omelet, as the Captain turned to look out the back patio door. That was when things got strange. McCallister's phone beeped and he glanced down at it, and his face didn't seem to change at all.

“Stay here, Adam,” Sabino said to him, drawing his gun from his holster, peering out cautiously, as if he'd seen motion out in the back yard. “I think there may be somebody outside, so I need you to remain here and not move, you feel me?”

That made it so much more surprising when Adam McCallister opened one of his cabinets, took out a silenced .45 and put a bullet in the back of Sabino's head, killing the man instantly. The soldier dropped to the floor, and McCallister put a few more shots into the man's body, as if making certain

that he was dead before going back and putting his omelet into a Tupperware container.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” Linda muttered. “Sabino didn't fucking deserve that.”

“I can't fucking believe it,” Phil said, as they watched the video continue, changing camera angles and following Adam as he grabbed a bag from his closet, grabbed his laptop bag and then met three large Eastern European looking men at the back patio. The men stepped in, splashed gasoline all over the inside of the home, then stepped out before tossing a lit Zippo lighter in to set everything ablaze as they absconded.

“Why didn't they destroy the cameras?” Linda asked the General. “Did they just not see them?”

“You can see one them look straight into the camera at one point, so we assume they at least suspected. We think they assumed if there were cameras on site, they were only storing information on site and that the fire would destroy everything, but it's also possible they just don't care. We were able to identify one of the three men who were helping him incinerate the home as Arkady Osterlenko, a member of the FSB.”

“The Russians?” Linda asked. “The fucking *Russians*? Are you fucking kidding me? Do you think he just decided to try and sell the research to the highest bidder, or was there some existing relationship we missed in doing our background research on him? What the actual fuck?”

“How well did you know Adam McCallister, Doctor Marcos?” the General asked him, holding his gaze very intently, and Phil suspected a lot rode on his next few words.

“I only met him when the Air Force took over the project, General, so I've only known the man less than a year. The Air Force took two separate teams at Boeing and merged them together into one unit. I was the leader of one of those teams and Adam was the leader of the other. We didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, but I wouldn't have pegged for him a murder, so maybe that's on me.”

“Well, I want you to go through everything he's done on the project with a fine tooth comb. I want to know what he touched, what he provided and what he could've stolen. Do you think he could've made it out with a copy of your serum?”

“The base block unencoded serum?” Phil shook his head. “No fucking way. Both Boeing and the Air Force have far too much invested into it to let it off site, and like I was telling Linda yesterday, the only two people who could recreate it from memory are myself and Bill McKenna, who had to be on base because I was off base.”

“Could he have possibly gotten a sample post-use?”

“I don't see...” Phil said before trailing off, wanting to kick himself. “Shit. Yeah, he could've gone and done a blood draw from Sharon. Hell, we'd even sent a few vials of the vaccine version offsite as per your request, so that other labs could begin starting mass replication. So yeah, he could've gotten the serum that's been mixed with Dr. Varma's anti-DuoHalo vaccine. Plus he's got the natural antibodies from surviving his encounter with DuoHalo. Do you think that's enough?”

“I think that it's probably worth several billion dollars, even without the ability to strip the core base block serum out from it,” the General sighed. “That's assuming they're not just go into immediate replication in an attempt to try and keep as much of their population alive as possible. Russia's been hit pretty hard by DuoHalo, if SigInt is to be believed, so they're desperate to slow the spread some. I know you're still dealing with having taken the vaccine yourself, Dr. Marcos, but I need you to go through Dr. McCallister's research and see if you can find signs that he was doing any level of tampering to the work at any point earlier on.”

“We're pretty good on peer review, General, but I can take a look.”

“We believe that Dr. McCallister has fled the country, so whatever you can learn, the better. I believe the Russians, one way or another, are going to start inoculating their population against DuoHalo, even with all the side effects that seem to be part of the vaccine. That means we're going to have to go ahead and get ours into mass production as well, and we can start arguing with Congress about how we deploy it all.”

“General, I strongly advise we spend more time doing testing on the ramifications and side

effects before we start pushing this thing nationwide,” Phil said. “I mean, the social consequences alone of introducing a sexually transmissible vaccine... there are a lot of people who won't be taken care of by our vaccine, and I don't currently have a solution for getting Doctor Varma's antibodies into those people safely yet.”

“But the vaccine will take care of a large percentage of the population, and that means we need to get to work on getting it out there. You can keep looking for viable alternatives, doctor, but right now, the death toll is starting to go up far too quickly for our liking, and too many citizens are disrespecting the quarantine, so it's only going to keep rising. Later this afternoon, we're going to have a meeting with a pharmaceutical CEO named James Haunton who has a proposal for us to consider. Until then, spend the day seeing just how badly McCallister fucked us, Phil, and hopefully it isn't going to leave us bleeding from the ass for months.”

Within his first hour of digging through McCallister's work on site, he already wanted to kill the little fucking weasel himself. As part of being made head of the project, Phil had been granted access to everyone's work, including files that people kept private, but until now, he'd seen no reason to go digging through anyone's directories.

McCallister's directory was a field of landmines and bad news.

In one of the first things he opened, he found that Adam had slipped in several early modifications to the serum, and that Adam's 'solution' to get the serum to allow vaccines to work with it included several *intentional* changes that Phil couldn't fully account for.

The aphrodesical effects, the cellular and DNA bonding, the fucking *imprinting* process – all of that was practically signed “Handiwork of Adam McCallister.”

The shithead had been *trying* to bond men and women together with the process, and without understanding exactly what all of his modifications were and why they were in there, Phil couldn't *undo* any of it. He'd previously thought it was strange that of their test subjects, even those who hadn't had English as their first language still said “imprinting” in perfectly unaccented English, and that was because Adam Fucking McCallister had *built it that way*.

Obviously, McCallister had joined the project with an agenda, as what few notes he could find about the imprinting process dated back multiple years, and included notes that implied he'd intentionally worked to get Phil's project brought to work with his, actual paperwork showing that McCallister had petitioned higher ups at Boeing, arguing the two projects would be stronger together than apart. Several higher ups at Boeing had agreed.

He wondered if any of those higher ups had known what McCallister had been working on in his spare time. He hoped they hadn't, but there wasn't evidence one way or the other.

Virology wasn't Phil's specialty, so he also couldn't tell exactly what had been introduced to allow the serum to work as a vaccine suspension and what had been introduced to enable Adam's other designs for the serum. In time, they might be able to pull it apart, but it would've been far easier if they'd had McCallister on site and could just used enhanced interrogation techniques on him until he cracked. Phil normally didn't approve of torture, but this? This was kind of thing that merited it. The man had been tampering with people's DNAs and with their brain chemistry. It was fucking vile mad scientist shit.

What was worse was that many of the notes Phil found inside of McCallister's personal files were in Cyrillic, aka the Russian alphabet, as if it was the man's primary language. He had Linda working to translate them for him, but many of them seemed to be in code on top of being in Russian. How long had Adam McCallister been working for the other side? Had he *ever* been on their side?

There were other problems inside the work that McCallister had done, and Phil could point to modifications that were made during the past few months that had guided their research down these paths, almost like Adam had been trying to get the serum to behave exactly how he'd wanted it to. He'd been crafting it to make women and men symbiotic, each reliant on the other for survival.

Also in the middle of the day came the word that their prisoner had committed suicide in

incarceration, having squirreled away some cyanide pill in one of his teeth. In all the chaos, they had forgotten to put him under suicide watch, and when someone finally went to check on him, he'd been dead for hours.

It was just yet another thing wrong in a laundry list of mistakes they'd made over the last few months, and it was too late to do anything about any of them.

Phil was still fuming by the time he had the meeting later in the afternoon with James Haunton of Veraxiontic, the pharmaceutical company that was offering to help with mass production of the serum, and to give the Bay area the first major test zone. Both at himself and the laxness with which they'd treated the team's integration a year ago. There was plenty of blame to go around.

Time was rapidly running out for them, as the spikes were starting to rise, and Veraxiontic could help scale up production of the vaccine, but they had some asks as part of it, something that Phil never enjoyed hearing. He was busy trying to save lives, and these people were here with their fucking hands out.

First and foremost, they wanted a hand in determining who would get first access to the treatments, at least for the first few months. They would have their people immunized, and Haunton's rich and powerful friends would form a small enclave where the wealthy immunized could live. He'd even brought a proposal, one which would commandeer half of a private estate complex that was adjacent to the very base they were on.

The properties being built there were high end mansions, but more than a couple of the people who had bought mansions there had already died as a result of DuoHalo. Haunton's proposal was that the area would be claimed by the government under eminent domain and cordoned off into a new town, a place he wanted to call New Eden, and there members of the research team on the base and a handful of other incredibly affluent individuals would move in and be safe behind the walls.

The whole thing reeked so much of white privilege that Phil wanted to punch Haunton in the goddamn face, but the man was offering them resources to scale up vaccine production a large amount in a very short time, things they would have to otherwise declare a national emergency for, and considering how little respect the Orange Cheetoh in the White House had for science, that seemed like an impossibility.

It didn't hurt that they'd brought in a couple of people from the governor's office who were also pushing for this sort of "sanctuary test zone."

As unhappy as he was about it, Phil knew there was no way he could be handling this entire situation on his own, so Miguel Cunningham was put in charge of the project. Cunningham assured everyone that he was already in the process of developing a plan that would determine how the vaccine would be distributed and how men and women would be paired up. It was a thing Phil wished he could spend more time managing, but as it stood, he needed to make sure the vaccine didn't have any other crazy side effects, so the deal was made.

As work on New Eden progressed, Phil was occasionally given peeks into what was going on over there, as he and the other members of the team were invited to come and select their new homes in the estates.

New Eden was 125 mansions in a large private enclave up near Mount Diablo, and the properties had been built with intent to sell to wealthy individuals in the area, but the government had agreed to buy all of them and to extend the fencing around the enclave to include the little Boeing/Air Force labs that the vaccine project was currently run out of.

The location of the lab being almost already within the borders of New Eden seemed far too coincidental for Phil's liking, but he couldn't find any written proof that it had been planned that way, no matter how much it felt like it was.

Phil felt the whole enclave idea was absurd, as he walked through the house he'd just sort of randomly picked from the list, saying he didn't think anyone needed a home this size, but the General had made it clear that Phil's research had proven one thing conclusively – multiple female partners

strengthened the immunity a man would have to DuoHalo, so men were being encouraged to be polyamorous, and Phil's health was far too important to put at risk.

More importantly, the team's research had determined that a single sexual encounter with a vaccinated woman would remove DuoHalo from a man's body, but that the man's immunity to it only lasted a few days and then he would be vulnerable again.

The whole thing felt so goddamn perfect, he had to wonder if McCallister had designed both his application and the virus itself, or just gotten lucky and piggybacked into making it work the way he wanted it to as a form to get widespread distribution for his pet project.

New Eden seemed surreal, but it was happening with or without him, so he'd decided to simply enjoy the perks he was being gifted as part of his work saving humanity. A staff was going to be delivered to his home, but he insisted he wanted to keep it as small as possible, and if the option of just having one staff member only existed, he would prefer to take that.

He was told he would be getting a staff of two – one cook and one housekeeper. He agreed not to put up too much of a fuss about it, even though it all seemed a little silly to him. He, Audrey and Linda grew closer, becoming more of a family. Phil even told his sister about it, even though he knew he wasn't supposed to, but if he couldn't tell her, who could he tell?

April turned into May, and Phil was no closer to stripping out any of McCallister's modifications than he was when he started. All of it was so deeply embedded into the work that taking any bit of it loose would make the entire thing collapse like a house of cards.

The nationwide quarantine was now in full effect, and everyone was being strongly urged not to leave their houses under any circumstances. The economy was basically shut down, and the rest of the world was starting to follow suit. The cover story of Corona being the bigger thread was still holding, but the cracks were starting to show, and the death toll was starting to rise, both domestically and abroad, although tellingly, Russia was reporting lower casualties.

Fucking McCallister.

Major Peters, the woman who'd been in charge of the base before Major General Fielder had arrived, had been paired up with James Haunton, a decision Phil still didn't understand, but the woman hadn't wanted to talk about it much with him. It was just one of many questions Phil couldn't get an answer about on how the government was going to deploy the vaccine he and Dr. Varma had developed. In fact, it was starting to feel like the mechanism was taking over, and an entire industry was building up in getting people matched up with others.

Cunningham's system was built and while Phil thought it all seemed insane, that people would be up in arms about it, the decision was made to begin getting people inoculated in the Bay, while also getting everyone else prepped for later inoculations. Nobody else seemed to want to put up much of a struggle, desperate to keep people alive more than happy.

That was the mantra they were constantly repeating around him, day in and day out.

Stay alive.

Linda and Audrey had started reporting strong sexual needs for him within seven days, and by the time day ten had rolled around, Linda had practically fucked him at gunpoint, not that he minded. He had just had been a little taken aback by her raw sexual intensity when she'd finally crossed over her breaking point.

(It was actually more than a little hot.)

All of it meant that he'd had more sex in the past few months than he'd had in the last couple of years, and that was one of the few good things to come from all of this mess.

Despite the fact that he should have been doing more study work on the vaccine and its long term effects, in early June he decided he needed to read up into how the pairing system was going to work, and he didn't care for what he found one bit.

People were going to be sorted into five levels. Level one made up slightly more than 75% of the population. They were the lowest priority. Level twos were mostly government and essential

workers. Level three was law enforcement and military. Levels four and five were far less clearly defined, with level fours being people of “significant” importance, and level fives those of “utmost” importance. Everyone on the project was immediately being given level five status, and they were all being given five people they could assign level five status to.

Cunningham had also developed what he called “the Oracle,” a combination questionnaire and algorithm that would make optimal pairs with the least amount of friction, but as Phil had seen more than a few times over his time in Silicon Valley, there were some baked in racial assumptions into “the Oracle” that Phil found himself at odds with.

Most annoyingly, he couldn't make changes to code in the Oracle, so he was being forced to find his own ways to work around it. They were already running everyone on base through the system, trying to find people they could pair them up with, but while he didn't have access to how the Oracle interpreted the data, he found the system was running them in batches, so he could spend some time looking at the raw data before it was processed.

The data was being weighted, and so when he'd entered what kinds of things he was and wasn't attracted to, all of that had been given top priority. Distance had been given low priority. There was also a number of “hidden” variables, including things like “desirability,” something he was suspecting had been designed so that maybe high profile people who might be contested would be sorted out. He was tempted to see if he could request Layla McIntosh, the singer in his favorite band Twilight Dwellers, but decided against it, because he was pretty sure they would've just *given* her to him, and he couldn't feel good about that. He wanted to be paired with people who wanted to be paired with him.

There were a few things that he *could* influence, though. The areas for initial canvassing for pairing were mostly limited to the incredibly wealthy areas of the Bay – the Sunset district of San Francisco, Palo Alto, Hillsborough, Pleasanton... Lots of rich folks, many of whom were going to get marked as fours, although it turned out New Eden was exclusively for level fives. Phil made sure to include several other areas to get a broader racial and economic selection. Even if they were just rated level ones, they would still get early access to the vaccination, and he could keep people alive who had actual useful life skills.

He also didn't think he had a whole lot of people he wanted to give level five status to, but when he sat down and looked at it, he kept coming up with a math problem. He wanted to give level five to his sister and her husband, as well as everyone in the poker group.

That was seven people for five slots.

A day later, a solution presented itself.

When Phil was meeting up with the canvassing team, he spotted a well-read paperback sitting with one of their bags, and the cover was one he knew intimately. “Hey I'm Dr. Phil Mar—”

“I know who you are Doctor Marcos,” the man replied, eagerly shaking his hand. “I'm Doctor David Straussman, and I'm a big fan of your work. You know your serum truly is groundbreaking and it's going to save a *lot* of lives in the coming months.”

“Thanks Dave, but please, just call me Phil. We're all colleagues here. I can't help but notice you're reading one of the Druid Gunslinger books. You a big fan of the series?”

“Huge! Huge fan of them! I started reading them about six years ago when I was pulling late nights in med school and needed something to take my mind off of my studies for a bit, and I always do a reread of the whole series when the next one's close to coming out, although I'm betting this whole plague thing is gonna slow down the release of it. It's the longest Conrad's ever gone between putting one out, and the wait is killing me.”

After their conversation, Phil had made sure that Dave would encounter his buddy Andy on one of his first runs, and hopefully Dave would be generous enough to solve Phil's math problem to get all of the poker group inside of the sanctuary of New Eden.

On June 17th, they began injecting hundreds of beautiful women with the serum, and Phil knew the world would never be the same.

Chapter Five

July 7th, 2020

“Harder, you motherfucker!” Linda shouted at him as he drilled her from behind, his hands on her hips, jerking her back onto his cock as he did his best to ram her, bent over his desk, the walls of his office thankfully thick enough to dampen the sound so that no one could hear, although Linda was doing her best to make it loud enough for someone to get a hint of what was going on. “Pound me like you want to fucking break me!”

“Jesus, Linda,” Audrey said with a giggle from her seat on his couch, “take it easy on the poor guy. He's only got so much energy.”

“He's fucking got more than that,” the blonde officer hissed back. “C'mon you pussy, punch it! Slap my ass! Yank my hair! Fucking give it to me!”

Phil had been a little surprised by how much Linda loved rough sex, but he'd been doing his best to amp it up so that he could keep her, if not satiated, at least somewhat satisfied. His comfort level had started low, but he'd slowly been pushing it a little more each time, and each time, instead of freaking out, Linda had asked him to go harder, to be rougher, to really rail into her.

His hand lifted up and slapped her toned ass with a loud crack, and she let out a whorish, enthusiastic moan as soon as he did. “Yeeeeeeesssss....” she exhaled. “That's it. Spank that ass! Paddle it until it's so fucking red, I can't even sit down!”

Again, he brought his hand down with an even harder clap, and he felt her cunt squeeze on his cock affectionately in approval, her back arching like a cat in heat as she tried to thrust her hips back more onto his dick. He could feel the flesh started to warm underneath the palm of his hand, and he hooked his fingertips into claws and dragged them hard against the skin, feeling her shiver in delight so hard, he thought she might have even tried to sneak an orgasm past him.

He glanced over at Audrey, and his plump Hispanic partner had her hand down the front of her unzipped pants, clearly fingering herself while she enjoyed the show, although he knew she had to still be tingling, having gotten her turn only a few hours ago, but it seemed like she didn't mind giving herself a second release as Phil did his best to savage into his other partner, his balls thwacking against her clit each time his cock pummeled hilt deep inside of her.

“C'mon c'mon c'mon motherfucker you know you wanna do it you wanna fill this tight cunt up with that hot fucking spunk so much fucking jizz in those balls and I gotta have it so give it to me gimme that load gimme that fucking load I fucking earned! Do it motherfucker! Cum in my cunt!”

Phil's hand slapped down on her ass, and he felt her quiver once more, but then he decided to surprise her, and pushed his thumb right against that exposed pucker of her asshole, hooking it up and in just to the first knuckle as he felt her clamp down on his cock while she started to cum all over again, and those milking spasms made sure she was getting what she wanted, as he poured several squirts of his cum up against the back of her snatch. Her head thumped down against her forearm atop of his desk, her blonde hair covering her face in all directions, having come loose from its tied up bun somewhere in the middle of their steamy tryst.

Half a minute or so later, he pulled his thumb out as he felt his cock softening inside of her. “Too much?” he asked with a playful laugh.

“Are you fucking kidding?” she laughed back beneath her hair. “I mean, if you'd tried to shove that dick in my ass without any real lube, *that* would've been too much, but your thumb? That was fucking *hot*.” Linda giggled a little bit, tossing her head back like Rita Hayworth to fling her hair back and out of her face. “But if you wanna try the back door, you just gotta bring the lube, and then I'm game if you are.”

“Doesn't it hurt?” Audrey asked, sliding her hand out from her panties, wiping her fingers clean with a paper towel. “I've never done anal. Always been too scared.”

Phil slid back, letting his cock drop out of Linda's snatch, as she grabbed her panties suddenly,

yanking them up, as if she wanted to make sure that anything that dripped out of her didn't go too far. "I've done it a couple of times before, but only when my partner asked me to. My last ex wanted to try it, but the one time we did, she said it hurt too much."

"I *like* that it hurts a little, but it doesn't hurt *that* much, as long as you work up to it," she said, as he grabbed a paper towel and wiped himself off a little. "Did she try and work up to it, or did she think she could just go straight in with your cock?"

"Dunno," he said, tugging up his boxers and his jeans. He'd learned that when Audrey and Linda wanted their fixes, there was no arguing with them, and he just needed to make sure they were happy. It was a common enough thing on the base, and they'd even developed a shorthand for it. People were calling it their 'catch-22 time,' and it excused up to half an hour of tardiness once or twice a week. "Just straight in with me, I think."

Linda rolled her eyes with a grin. "That's her own fucking fault then," she laughed. "She should have started with a little plug or something, let her body do a little slow training before she worked her way up to assfucking. If you wanna experiment a bit, Audrey, we can get you a little plug and let you work your way up."

"Lemme think about it, but that sounds like it might be fun."

"And as for you, Mister," Linda said, pointing a finger at him. "If you get a hankering for it, the lube's in the back of your bottom drawer." She winked at him, sliding back into the rest of her jumpsuit.

"You have some already prepared?" he laughed. "How did you know I might be into that kind of thing?"

"You're a dude. All dudes have at least thought about it a little. Besides, I'm into it. Why shouldn't you be?"

He grinned. "Yeah, okay."

"Oh, you wanted to take that quick tour of a bit of New Eden?" Linda said. "How's the schedule today?"

Phil looked at his calendar. "Nothing they can't do without me. You want to come, Audrey?"

She nodded. "I gotta get off this base for a while, so let's make a day of it."

Half an hour later, they were standing inside one of the larger manors of New Eden, as the three of them walked down the hallways. "So I was thinking this one for your friend," Linda told him. "There's another open one just down the street a bit for his roommate, and you said you wanted to keep your friends safe, so I figured this wouldn't be too bad, even if it's got a couple of shitty neighbors not too far away."

"Who's the shitty ones?" Phil said.

Linda pointed to the east. "About a mile east, you have Arthur Covington the 4th's compound, although it's actually about three miles worth of driving, because of all the switchbacks and trees. Then about a mile to the south you have Nathaniel Watkins and his family, although I guess Watkins isn't really that bad."

"You know, I'm starting to think Andy and Eric can actually serve a higher purpose here in New Eden," Phil told her.

"How so?"

"I don't trust any of the fuckers involved in the New Eden project, but I don't have time to keep eyes on it safely. Andy's a good guy, but he's also sharp as a tack. Plus, people have a tendency to underestimate him all the time. He'll be good to have boots on the ground, local eyes to keep tabs on what's going on inside of the community when I don't have time to watch it myself," Phil sighed. "There's just too much fucking going on anymore that if I don't farm some of it out, I'm going to miss out on some important shit."

"How much are you going to tell him?" Linda asked.

"Fuck all if I can help it," he replied. "The last thing I want him coming in here with is prejudiced eyes. Let him make his own decisions about things and people."

"I want to size this friend of yours up, Phil," Linda told him. "I've heard him talking on Discord, and read his file, but I haven't had a chance to meet him yet. You're going to be asking a lot of him, so let's go check him out."

"Tell you what," Phil said. "Let's 'stumble' into him. He was saying on Discord yesterday how they were going to try and make a Safeway run this afternoon, so we can just accidentally bump into him there. You can stay hidden, Linda, and watch him from a distance, as Audrey and I pretend for the whole thing to be a random encounter. I haven't told anyone on the Discord about me having partners yet, so I can spin it however I want to."

"Good," she said. "I like the idea of getting to see him long before he sees me. Oh, speaking of that kind of thing, I wanted to show you one thing about this mansion that I wish ours had. I'm a little jealous of it, actually." She pressed the palm of her hand against one bookcase and pushed a little and the bookcase gave just a bit before popped back, swinging out a little bit.

"Hidden room?" Audrey said. "Very cool."

Linda led them into the room, a nice little study with a desk, two chairs and a couch. There was a balcony just outside of a door, she showed them, but it was nestled back, recessed within the roof and obscured by a couple of trees, so that if you didn't know it was there, the balcony would be almost invisible from most angles, a nice view looking out over into the valley of New Eden from the perch.

They stood out on the balcony, taking a moment to savor the vista before Linda broke the silence. "How long you think before he fucks somebody up here? A week? A day?"

Phil shook his head a little. "Knowing Andy, he'll probably keep this room a secret for at least a month or two, just to give him some place to go and think if he needs to get away from it all. Eventually, he'll tell everyone about it, but it'll be a gradual thing."

The trio stepped back into the room, and Phil noticed there was a bottle of whiskey sitting on the desk, between two crystal glasses. He glanced over at the bottle then looked back at Linda, a question in his eyes. "Look," she said, "I figured if he was your friend and you were throwing him into the lion's den like this, he deserved at least a little thank you, even if he doesn't know it came from you."

"From *us*, you mean," he said, picking up the bottle. "*Jesus!* This is McCallan 25 year Sherry Oak Single Malt. Isn't this, like, a thousand dollars a bottle?"

"Two and a half," Linda grinned. "Of course, I lifted it from Haunton's stuff when we were moving his stuff into his mansion. He had like two dozen of them. He'll never a couple of them missing."

"A couple?"

"Sure, I kept one for us," she said. "You think I was going to go through all that work and not enjoy it some myself?"

"You should leave Andy a note or something. He loves mysteries and shit."

Linda opened the desk, taking out a good pen and a piece of card stationery, and then wrote "*good luck*" on the card, taking as much time as she could to make her handwriting look formal and elegant, a far cry from her normal chicken scratch.

As they headed to the car, Phil pointed out to Audrey that they were going to need to be in full protective gear, even though they didn't need to be. At this point, Phil was pretty sure that he was basically immune to DuoHalo, but he couldn't let on that he was to the public at large. Both he and Audrey needed to look like they were in full paranoia mode, so they had goggles and masks they could wear whenever they went out. Linda also had her own personal gear, but the camo tended to discourage from anyone talking to her anyway.

When they got to the Safeway, Phil opened the back of the Tesla and pulled out his jacket, sliding it over Audrey's shoulders. "Why am I wearing your jacket, Phil?" she asked him.

"It'll help Andy recognize me," he told her.

"Then why aren't you wearing it?"

“Because you wearing it means you're *important* to me,” he said, kissing her softly.

“Oh,” she said, blushing a little bit.

“How soon should we expect them?” Linda asked him.

“He's already here,” he told her. “That's his Mazda 3 over there, the one with the 'Ph33r My L33t N3kkId Skillz' license plate holder.”

“How charming,” she said.

“It was a gift from me,” he countered.

“Ah, well then it's cute.”

“Remember, try not to get seen by them,” he told her.

“You won't even know I'm there,” she said, heading into the Safeway first, Phil and Audrey going in just a minute or so later.

He didn't want to go straight for him, but he also didn't want to let Andy slip out of the Safeway without 'accidentally' bumping into him, so they moved a little bit quickly, and sure enough, there was Andy standing in the frozen aisles, looking at ice cream, flanked by two women, one taller than him and blonde, the other shorter and redhead.

Of course, Phil knew exactly who Aisling Blake and Lauren White were. While he couldn't do much to influence the way the Oracle worked, he could do some basic reviews on the people scheduled to be paired with his friends, and do some quality control. In Andy's case, it hadn't been at all necessary, and in fact, it had almost put him into a sense of false complacency. Aisling wasn't just *sort* of Andy's type; she was practically tailor-made to be a *perfect* fit for him. And when Aisling had been chosen as Andy's first partner, Phil had done everything he could to understand how the Oracle system worked.

The giant questionnaire certainly made up a *lot* of the data the Oracle system used, but not all of it, and it wasn't all weighted the same. The man's preferences were much more heavily weighted than the woman's, something Phil wasn't too pleased by, but supposed was going to be necessary considering how fewer men there were to be safely entered into the system.

Aisling's questionnaire had focused in on a number of things – she wanted a smart partner, she wanted a kind partner, she wanted a partner with an excellent sense of humor and she wanted a sexually adventurous partner, something Phil thought might have been the sticking point, until he looked at Andy's questionnaire answers.

The first thing that had surprised him was that Andy had put down “no preference” when it had come to the monogamy/polygamy question, which had immediately opened Andy's options immensely. Eric had put down monogamy, which had meant he would get a slower drip of partners, but was still going to get saddled with multiple partners eventually.

The women's questionnaire didn't even have that question included in it.

For the first handful of women that had come in, they had been shown a series of 20 pictures, each with their compatibility score beneath the picture, and each and every one of them had gone with the person with the highest compatibility score, even if there were better looking men in the pool. Phil suspected this sort of generous pairing was going to fall by the wayside quickly, simply because they didn't have the time, but for the first few thousand people being matched by the Oracle system, there was a second level of cautionary testing.

Lauren hadn't been quite the obvious match, but the system said they were still an excellent pairing, and Lauren, like Aisling before her, had simply gone with the science, and so far, they'd all seemed quite happy.

Andy, bless his heart, was a bit of a blabbermouth, and had talked about things in their group Discord so that Phil could actually use his friend as a control case, seeing how things were developing for people who he didn't have constant surveillance on.

As he and Audrey approached Andy, Aisling and Lauren, he could see his friend giving him a suspicious look, not recognizing him at all, so Phil decided to break the ice. “Andy, that you under all that mess?”

Andy turned and glanced over at them, looking at the two figures covered basically from head to toe, but then he saw the one-of-a-kind letterman jacket on Audrey, and realized who he was talking to. “How did you recognize me, Phil?” he asked.

“I was taking a wild guess, but I don't know anyone else here in the States who would be wearing a Nautilus Pompilus t-shirt,” Phil said to his friend. “Russian alternative rock band t-shirts aren't exactly a dime a dozen.”

He wasn't surprised to see Aisling wearing it, and was genuinely happy for his friend. One of Andy's unspoken turn ons was seeing women wearing his shirts. He wasn't sure, but he thought he could detect Andy smiling behind the mask.

“Fair enough,” Andy said to him. “We can't exactly talk here, but let's meet up at the base of Mount Diablo, in the park. We can stand far apart enough to talk and still be safe. We've got to drop groceries off, so let's say we meet up in a couple of hours?”

Of course, Andy didn't know that they could be standing right next to each other, breathing in each others' faces and they'd still be impervious to DuoHalo, but it was best to keep up the ruse. He glanced down at his watch. It was longer than he wanted to wait, but to be honest, with the amount of groceries Andy had gotten, they were going to need a bit of time to get everything into their fridge. He suspected it would be the last time they would buy groceries here, since by this time next month, they would be moved into the mansion within New Eden.

About ninety minutes later, Phil pulled his Tesla into the parking lot at the base of Mount Diablo, basically the only car in the lot. People as of late had gotten so paranoid that they didn't even want to be in public parks near each other, afraid of both Covid and DuoHalo now.

“Andy'll park over there,” he told Linda. “If you want to, you can lay down in the back of the Tesla and I can just leave the windows rolled down, or you can try and conceal yourself over closer to where he's going to park.”

“I'll lay down in the back, Phil,” she told him. “I want to be sure you're covered and taken care of, although this is a nice spot for a meeting – sight lines in every direction, but lots of trees, so it wouldn't be easy for a sniper to get into a good position, especially with the sunlight complicating things. I like it. Maybe we'll make a spy out of you yet.”

“God no,” he said, lowering the back windows of the Tesla down to half mast as he and Audrey shed the masks and the goggles, both of them moving to sit on the hood of his car, more leaning on it than sitting on it.

About twenty minutes later, Andy's Mazda-3 rolled into the parking lot, placing the car on the opposite side of the space before he and his two partners hopped out, walking up towards the wooden fencing, beyond which laid the park. “So Phil, where the hell ya been?” Andy laughed at him.

It was a fair point. Phil had sort of dropped off the radar to his friends for the last few months, working through all his responsibilities with the pandemic, and a couple of the members of the poker group had even accused him of ghosting them. Phil just hoped he didn't look half as tired as he felt.

“So, Andy, this is my partner Audrey,” he said, squeezing her shoulder.

'Also, my other partner is laying down in the back seat of my car with a Desert Eagle in her hand in case she thinks you're a threat,' Phil thought, but didn't say out loud.

“Hi Andy!” Audrey said, brightly, waving one hand at him. “Sorry I've kept him off the group Discord, but I didn't want to share him until I felt like we were established.”

“Oh, love,” Aisling giggled. “We're all doing that.”

'No kidding,' Phil thought to himself. Andy looked at least ten pounds lighter, and his goatee was more meticulously trimmed than he'd ever seen it before. He'd made a point not to be around when Aisling or Lauren were getting their injections, and he was pleased to see it looked as though neither of them had any recognition of him. He'd been careful, but there was always a chance someone could spot him wandering around when they were under observation.

“Phil, this is Aisling, Ash for short, and this is Lauren,” Andy said, rubbing the back of his own

neck sheepishly. “Frankly, I'm a little embarrassed they're stuck with me, but they both seem happy enough, so maybe I'm doing okay by them.”

'Typical Andy,' Phil thought to himself. 'The wind blows in his favor, and he's immediately apologizing. But that's good. It means he's staying humble and not getting an inflated head over all of this.'

Lauren nudged Andy in the ribs with her elbow. “Andy's the most humble feller I've met. I think me an' Ash are just a couple'a lucky gals.”

Phil wasn't sure where to start with this, so he decided he would let Andy set the stakes of what they were talking about and how. If his friend needed a few nudges along the way, he'd help out, but for the most part, he was just trusting Andy to navigate the waters himself.

After a minute or so of silence, Andy spoke again. “So Phil... what do you know?”

'Way to throw the ball into my court, Andy,' Phil thought. He clicked his tongue, gauging how much information to toss out in the first volley. “Okay, here's what I know. What I can tell you without either of us getting our kiesters thrown in the hoosegow, anyway...”

“That sounds best,” Andy said.

“It's bad, Andy,” Phil sighed, deciding to fairly set the stage for his old friend. “It's very bad. They're downplaying the body count for the media, but truth be told we're looking at over a million so far, probably a lot more. And it's only going to get worse. The internal projections are that we're looking at five million dead Americans before all of this is done.” Of course, Phil was softballing it, because the *actual* projections were *far* worse than that, but there was only so much he wanted to dump on Andy up front. Best to ease him into the downward slide.

“Jesus,” Andy muttered, clearly shellshocked by the news. “One million people dead? Seriously? How are they keeping all this quiet?”

“Lots and lots of work,” Phil replied, being completely candid for a moment. The cover up had its own team within the operation, and they were growing larger every day. It was entirely possible they were going to relocate to Washington and manage the media response out of there soon. “It's not as bad outside of the US, but that's because other countries started taking it serious long before we did.” In actuality, the numbers of countries outside of the US were starting to see rising casualties as well, but the last thing Phil wanted was Andy getting overwhelmed even more than he already was.

“Are the rules true?”

“I wouldn't be talking to you like this if I didn't think it was safe, Andy.” It wasn't entirely true, but Phil didn't have an easy way to explain how things worked to him right now. “But it's going to get worse. A whole lot worse. People here still aren't taking it seriously. You see the news the other day?”

Andy nodded, sadness on his face. “People crowded into churches, shoulder to shoulder, demanding their faith will keep them safe. Idiots in city hall meetings, claiming the right to not wear a mask if they don't want to.”

Phil nodded back to him. They didn't know it, but there was a good chance all of those people on television were going to be dead within a few months, but he needed to dial it down a little for Andy, at least for the time being. “It's madness. Half of those people will be dead before year's end, and I don't think we're going to have a lid on this until next year. We're living through Spanish Flu Part 2: Electric Bugaloo.”

“Five million dead? That's like one percent of the country. How the hell are they going to keep it all quiet?”

“As much smoke as possible,” Phil grumbled in complete honesty. The bullshit machine wasn't just in full effect, it was running on overdrive. “Keep the cover going until it's untenable. People are going to notice eventually, but the lockdowns are going to keep things contained for a while. But guys like you and me, we need to stay as safe as possible. Because we're high risk.” He didn't *exactly* mean that, because he and Andy were probably two of the safest men in America right now, but people *like* them were, in fact, those most targeted by DuoHalo.

Aisling scowled at him, and for half a second, Phil wondered if she was going to call him on it, because maybe she'd heard people talking at the base or something. "How so? I thought the elderly and immuno compromised were the most at risk."

"They are," Phil said, nodding again, glad to see she didn't know any more than the average public, "but beyond that, it's men between the ages of thirty and forty-five. That's where the majority of casualties have been so far. Thankfully, you and me, we're buffered pretty well."

"What do you mean, buffered?"

Phil smirked, giving a tiny shrug. It wouldn't hurt to let Andy feel a little safer about his position in life, because his friend looked like he was about to drop dead from stress shock, and that would undo all the hard work he'd put in so far. "Let's just say we've been doing some vaccine testing in rather unusual and unorthodox ways. Did your libido used to be this high all the time, Ash?"

She blanched for a moment. "I thought it was just the cabin fever, but now you mention it, I've had a slight buzzing of sexual need since they gave me those shots. What the hell did they do to me?"

He raised a hand to calm her down. "Relax, it'll even out eventually. But it's designed so that you're protecting your partner, swapping fluids, giving him regular dosages of the natural antibodies you're building up inside." They were going to have to start directly educating women about what they were signing up for with the treatments, and Phil made a mental note to get to work on that when he got back to the office.

"Why not just give men the shots directly?" Lauren asked.

"Because when we've tried it, it's been fatal." He took out his vape pen and inhaled a drag off of it before blowing the THC vapor back out. It helped him destress some, but he tried not to over use it.

"But if a woman with the vaccine is having regular sexual activity with a man, he's getting a non-toxic dose, and both parties have about 70% resistance to the virus. I wouldn't have put Andy down as polyamorous, but it's going to strengthen your armor even more, my man."

Andy smirked, looking at his feet sheepishly. "I actually put no preference, so it looks like I'm going to get a full slate."

"Nah, you'll probably stay where you are. Unless you got rated something ridiculous."

'Here comes the bit I really need to sell,' Phil thought to himself.

"Me and Eric got rated level 5s," Andy said, embarrassment in his voice

Phil nearly dropped his vape pen, his eyebrows raising, hoping it looked like genuine shock. The problem was that Andy was a *great* poker player, and so it was hard to lie to him. "Are you shitting me?"

Andy laughed and shrugged a little.

'Thank Christ,' Phil thought to himself. 'I think he bought it. Now don't let up.'

"How the fuck did that happen?" he asked Andy, knowing damn well how it had happened, because he'd basically *made* it happen.

"The guy coming to test us was a fan of the books, so I gave him an ARC of the new one that's been delayed a few months. As a way of saying thank you, he rated me and Eric as level 5s."

Phil chuckled quietly, shaking his head, hoping Andy wouldn't catch him in a whopper of a lie, but he needed to not let Andy in on too much too fast.. "You son of a bitch. I'm not even rated a level 5 and I work for the goddamn military on goddamn black ops shit."

"Allegedly," Andy added, grinning back.

Phil nodded. "Allegedly." He dragged the word out before he looked up then shook his head. "You're gonna get two more, huh? Good lord, I'm both jealous and terrified for you all at once. How are you going to keep all those personalities from conflicting?"

This was one of the things he'd actually been wanting to ask Andy for ages, since his friend had always had a way of managing people, preventing them from getting too angry with one another, keeping all the plates spinning without any of them falling down. The families were likely going to get bigger, and keeping multiple people from killing each other was sort of Andy's specialty. Surely his

friend would know exactly how to do it.

"I'm going to do my best to stay the hell out of their way, mostly."

'Great,' Phil thought to himself. 'You have failed me, friend. It's okay. I didn't expect miracles.'

"That's not going to work forever, luv," Aisling said to him. "It's not like we're going anywhere, even when this virus recedes."

"You say that now, but..."

"No, they're always going to say that. Isn't that part of the public facing info about the pairing system?" Phil said. He hadn't kept tabs on what the people being given the serum were told, but surely they had to at least have been told some of the fundamental rules, right? They had to know they were paired, that other men's semen would be toxic, and that they were going to have recurring sexual needs that needed regular fulfillment. It was, like, five to ten minutes of basic info tops. Jesus, did Andy and his girls really not know any of this shit?

It was Andy's turn to raise his eyebrows. "No, whatever you're implying, it isn't public knowledge. But you're already in for a penny.."

"Might as well be in for a pound, I guess," Phil answered, nodding in agreement. He was going to light up hellfire as soon as he got back to the office, because if they were sending out people with serum in their blood and not telling them the baseline rules, whoever was managing that team needed to get their head out of their ass before the bodies started piling up. "Alright, but keep this just between us, okay?"

"Well, I'll tell Eric, Eric's partner, and my other two partners when they show up, but other than that..."

"Yeah, well, that's what I meant by us, alright?" If he got his way, there would be a personalized phone call going out to every person with the serum in their blood before the end of the day, so it wouldn't matter anyway, and the last thing he wanted was for Andy to know how much he was involved with this project. "Okay, so here's the deal. Do you remember the first time they got a bit of you in them?"

"You mean..." Lauren started.

"I think you know what I mean."

Both Aisling and Lauren blushed and grinned widely. "Most intense thing that's ever happened to us," they both said.

"What do you remember right after though, Andy? Just you. They'll both have been passed out."

Andy stroked his goatee for a second then snapped his fingers. "They kept mumbling a word over and over, so quiet I could barely make it out... something like... imaging?"

The one time Andy *should* have been more curious and instead he's being respectful, Phil thought to himself. Wild. He shook his head and took another drag off his vape pen. "Not imaging, *imprinting*. You're bonded now. Mated for life, like walruses."

"You mean penguins," Andy corrected him, the know-it-all. "It's penguins that mate for life. And what does that mean here, mated for life?"

"You're intertwined on a chemical, biological and physiological level in a way we can't even begin to comprehend," Phil said, exhaling another cloud of THC mist. "If you go away from one another for more than a couple of days, you'll start to feel nervous, anxious, fidgety. After that, it'll be panic attacks, cold sweats. Past that, nervous breakdown. Unless, of course, the other person is dead, in which case that doesn't seem to happen." That was a lie, but the last thing he wanted was Andy and his family freaking out too much this early. He shrugged a little bit, trying to play it off as though he didn't know as much as he knew and more. "We're kids playing with the building blocks of life here, man. We don't even know what we don't know. But you, Lauren and Ash, you're a unit now. And anyone else you add into that will be as well. I mean, why do you think that questionnaire is so damn long? We don't want to screw up anybody's lives trying to help them. Besides, another of the side effects is that being in each others' company will produce natural dopamine to keep things relatively smoothed out, helps

you get past the small stuff, and let's face it, it's all small stuff at this point.”

“And this is happening all over the country?”

“Shit, no,” Phil sighed. “We've barely gotten this off the ground in the Bay Area, and all the tech for this shit is here. There are governors all across the country absolutely in arms against this plan, saying they'll fight it tooth and nail, keep people from getting the vaccine until it doesn't have any of these crazy side effects.”

They were lunatics, insisting everything would be fine, that they would pray away the disease, that their fearless leader had assured them it was all overblown hype, and that one day it would all just disappear. It was callous, but Phil found it just that those people would die in the highest numbers.

“I assume you're still working on that,” Andy asked him.

“Of course we're still working on that,” Phil said, rolling his eyes. The red tape had been infuriating, and he hadn't even been spearheading that portion of the project. “I'm just baffled by how many goddamn Republicans insist a semi-viable solution isn't a solution at all. Even if we were just hitting high risk areas, we could manufacture enough of this current formula to inoculate sixty or seventy million people in this country, all of whom would be 70% resistant to it.”

“They claiming it's a sin against god or something?”

“Worse. But, I guess, more honest.” Phil had a slightly bitter laugh filling the air. “They're angry they can't make a buck off of it.” Fucking vulture capitalists. “Now, of course, there are factions that are just going ahead and doing it anyway. Front line medical workers, emergency services, and a few branches of the armed forces, and their associated contractors. Of course, the whole Bay Area is taking part in it as well, so I guess I would've gotten treated either way.”

“So we're resistant but not immune?”

“Fuck, man,” Phil groaned, trying to avoid giving Andy any solid details for fear it would oust him as working on the serum, “I'm not promising you won't get the virus at all, but even if you do, it won't be life threatening. That said, you still shouldn't go out of your way to expose yourself to this shit. It's a mean as fuck virus under the best of conditions, and this ain't those.”

“You think they're going to start testing this vaccine in wider areas, Phil?” Aisling asked him.

He shook his head. “I wish to god they would, but the Moron In Chief is still calling it Kung Flu and the Chinese Virus, like he can spin blame onto other countries instead of admitted what a fucked up job he and his have done with this.” The idiot couldn't even differentiate that they were fighting *two* pandemics and not just one. Covid was certainly bad enough, but DuoHalo was a thousand times worse, and some of the Orange Goomba's advisers had told him it would just be a momentary blip. He'd refused to take the serum, even with the benefits explained to him, because he insisted he didn't want to have Melania imprinted onto him.

Andy felt his phone in his pocket vibrate at the same time as his Apple Watch buzzed at him. Phil was fishing out his phone as well, clearly having felt the buzz.

There on his wrist, Andy read a news blast from the Associated Press. “President contracts mystery virus, collapses in Oval Office. 25th Amendment being invoked.”

“Well, shit, looks like you report to somebody new now, Phil.”

At that point, everything got incredibly hectic. Phil promised he'd do a better job of keeping in touch, and that he'd do what he could to keep Andy in the loop, and Andy told Phil that it was good to see him, and that if there was anything he could do to help, Phil just needed to ask.

Despite the fact that his phone was blowing up, he and Audrey waited until Andy, Aisling and Lauren got back into Andy's car and drove off.

The news was actually ahead of what his own people had heard, but the report was now that Trump had DuoHalo, and didn't look likely to make it, and that they were going to be invoking the 25th Amendment to elevate Pence to President, but there were reports inside the military that Pence *also* had DuoHalo, and that they weren't sure he'd even make it through the swearing in ceremony.

After Andy's car drove off, Phil and Audrey got back in the car and Linda sat up. “So what do

you think of him, babe?”

“He seems like a genuinely good guy, although I might be a little worried about him spilling the beans to the press or the masses,” Linda said. “I don't know that you hit it home enough how he shouldn't be talking about it.”

“Well, I can try and hit it home again later. Do we know what's going on in the Presidential chain of command right now?”

“Well, Speaker Pelosi and her husband have had the serum given to them, so if milquetoast drops dead, we have someone safe in the line of succession,” Linda said, reading messages on her phone. “Needless to say, the shit is hitting the fan back at the base right now, so pedal to the metal.”

“Going as fast as I can without getting the highway patrol on me, babe,” he told her.

“I think they're probably all watching the news at this point, hun,” she replied.

By the time they got back to the base, Vice President Pence had collapsed during his swearing in, and the machinery in Washington was doing its best to get Speaker Pelosi sworn in so there was someone calling the shots.

Phil's first stop was at the processing team, where he chewed them a new one, saying he'd heard that people being given the serum weren't being provided with a list of dos and don'ts, including vital things like the danger of exposure to semen from someone other than the person was imprinted to. The guy running the processing team apologized, and asked Phil to write a short list of guidelines that would start using immediately, but as it turned out, nobody had even told *him* what they could and couldn't do, and his wife was imprinted *to* him, so anything he needed to keep her safe, he wanted to know as soon as possible.

In fact, it was starting to look like everyone on the base *except* he and his direct team were doing the absolute minimum needed to get people resistant to DuoHalo. He was most of the way through an outline of what needed to be done, what people needed to be told and how to tell them, when Linda came rushing into the room. “Phil, I need you right now.”

“Can it wait, Linda? I'm nearly done wi—”

“*Now*, Phil!”

He'd learned that Linda didn't raise her voice unless it was absolutely necessary, so he saved the document and got up, following her out of the room. “What's going on?”

“What happens if someone's injected with the serum and doesn't get paired up with their selected person?”

“They're supposed to be brought back here and paired up with another person, as soon as possible,” Phil said as they walked and talked, heading towards the staging area. “The longer they go with the serum in their veins without being paired, the harder it's going to be for them to think straight. Why?”

“One of our own came back after the person she was going to be paired with died when she was en route to meet him,” Linda sighed. “And I don't leave one of our own behind.”

“Who is it?”

“Have a look,” she said, as they entered the room.

There, sitting, well, fidgeting more of, was 2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf, dressed in fatigues. She was curling her fingers into fists, unable to sit still for even a moment, shifting and twisting in her seat, as she looked over at them when they walked in. “Hey Doctor, Captain. So, the guy I was supposed to be getting paired up with, when we knocked on his door, well, he was already dead. He'd been dead for a couple of days. I don't know what the hell to do now. Shit, I don't even know what's fucking happening to me. I can't think straight. I can't see straight. I'm going out of my fucking mind.”

“I don't know what to do with her, Phil, but whatever it is we're going to do, we gotta do it quickly.”

The idea hit on him quickly, but he wanted to make sure it would be okay with her first. “Niko,” he said, snapping his fingers in front of her face. “I have someone I can pair you with, but you're going

to need to, well, you're going to need to lie to him a bit, for his own good.”

“Is he a good man?” she asked him, her eyes scrunched up, as if holding the conversation was taking everything she had from her.

“He's one of my best friends, and I need you to look after him, like Linda looks after me.”

“If you say he's a good man, Doctor Marcos, that's good enough for me, but you gotta fucking hurry. I feel like I'm gonna have my hand up my own snatch if I have to wait any longer.”

“Dave!” Phil said, spotting Doctor Straussman on the other side of the room. “I need you to run Lieutenant Redwolf over to Andy Rook's house. Pair her up with him, and do it quick.”

“Doctor Marcos,” Dave said to him, “that's very much out of protocol. The paperwork alone...”

“I'll *handle* it, Dave, but she was dosed almost three days ago, so she needs to go *now*.”

“Okay, let me get the truck,” he said, scurrying off.

Phil felt Niko clutching onto his wrist, so he looked back down to her. “What do I tell him?”

“Keep it as vague as possible,” Phil said, trying to be direct and to the point, knowing that she was inches from slipping into a frenzy. “Go at him as soon as you can, and then when you wake up, go at him again, and a few hours later, your head will clear, and you can reach out to me on the phone, and I can walk you through your legend. Got it?”

“Affirmative, sir. Just get me there, and I'll do the rest.”

“Don't you worry, Lieutenant. You'll feel right as rain by this time tomorrow,” he said, as Doctor Straussman pulled the truck up next to her. Linda and Phil helped her into the truck, closing the door behind her as Phil gave the man the go signal.

“I'm not sure who you're doing the bigger favor, babe,” Linda said to him, “Andy or Niko.”

“I sure as fuck hope I'm doing the right thing,” Phil muttered beneath his breath.

He'd been saying that a *lot* these days.

Chapter Six

July 10th, 2020

Tamika stood up, zipping up Phil's pants as she stood. “Thanks,” she told him. “Gotta get back to studying, though.”

“It's all good,” Phil told her. “And I'm glad to see you're taking your studies seriously.”

“Yeah, well,” the African-American teenager said to him, “at some point we're gonna be outta all this shit, and I'm gonna want to have my own life again.” She wiped a bit of his semen from her lips, licking it off the back of her hand. “Though I think Imma miss these intense orgasms. It's *almost* made me rethink my policy on dudes.”

“Don't go turning bi on my account,” Phil said to her.

“Nah, fuck that,” she muttered. “Chicks is way better than dudes any day.” She headed to the door of Phil's office and headed out into the hallway, walking towards the exit.

Tamika Jefferson was as gay as the day was long, but her father was one of the soldiers on the base, and had come to him, asking him to help find a way to protect his daughter. Phil had explained to the soldier that the system they had in place was the only way to keep someone immune from the virus.

Her father looked horrified, but Tamika, who'd been standing right there the entire time, had said that she'd be willing to take a shot in the mouth once a week if it kept her alive for the time being. Linda pointed out that Phil had been *repeatedly* told to get more partners over the past week, and said if Tamika didn't mind, they could come to an arrangement, at least until they were on the other side of the pandemic. She'd agreed, had been imprinted a few days ago, and had shown up for her first regular dosing today.

It hadn't been a good blowjob, but he hadn't expected it to be, considering Tamika wasn't into men, so Linda had helped her, talking to him to provide mental stimuli enough to get him to an orgasm. Audrey was waiting in the hallway to take Tamika to the Marcos household, as today was the day she was moving into the house.

Tamika wasn't the first woman he'd heard of that had taken one dick into her lesbian life to survive, but she was the first in his extended family. He wasn't entirely certain she would be the last, especially with the mandate that he get more partners *immediately*.

The efficacy group had determined that the bare *minimum* number of partners for a man to have was *seven*, which would convey a 99.4% immunity from the DuoHalo virus. That group was also entrusted with making sure that every member of the research was getting up to the minimum number of partners as soon as possible.

It had pissed Phil off something fierce, and while he was doing his best to resist their pressure, now Linda and Audrey were getting in on the deal, guilting him into filling out the questionnaire and/or requesting a couple of people, until he was *at least* at the seven partners the group was advising.

He didn't have any interest in getting that many partners, but Linda was constantly reminding him that *their* health was dependent on *his* health, so whatever it took to keep him safe, and thus, *them* safe, was what they were going to do.

Arguing with Linda was like trying to negotiate with a hurricane – you were only going to lose against the force of nature. So whether he liked it or not, within the next few weeks, he was going to be up to seven partners, so he decided to mostly go through the system.

As he considered it, he realized it was a chance to evaluate the Oracle system like anyone else, even if he was being given massive preferential status. Ten minutes into starting the exam, he was extremely glad he was taking the time for it.

The test had *changed* since he'd seen it last, something nobody had mentioned during any of the section chief stand up meetings they'd done every Tuesday, so he wasn't even sure *when* the changes had happened, if it had only been changed once or if there had been a serious of changes over the past month or two.

Right out of the gate, he noticed that he couldn't set the slider for women he wanted any higher than 50. It wasn't as though he was setting out to find a partner that old, but learning the limitations that were built into the system were vitally important, so he was being sure to take the entire thing apart and study each and every bit of it.

Next, he noticed the polyamory question was gone, although that came as no real shock to him, simply because at this point, *all* men were going to be in polyamorous relationships whether they wanted to or not. The survival of the species was at stake, and that meant men were going to be repopulating the nation for the next several years.

'We're all going to be Daddy by the time we're on the other side of this,' he thought to himself.

When it came to ethnicity, Phil decided to do something unusual – he left all of them checked except for one. Caucasian. Phil decided if he was going to be forced to have a litter of partners, the least he could do was to make sure he was saving as many different ethnicities as possible. He already had Linda, and one white girl was probably enough.

One of the things Phil had been bothered by when looking at the data about who was being given the serum was that it was a preponderance of white people. He'd been doing what he could to counteract that, even on the very limited scale that he could, but it was starting to get to the point that he felt like he needed to point it out to someone upstairs.

When he decided to dive deeper into the data, he came to an even more disturbing conclusion – the fact that white men and women were getting inoculated faster than minorities was just a side effect. They weren't setting out to *exclude* non-white people. They were setting out to prioritize *rich* people. The racial undertones were just a byproduct of the wealthy people covering their own asses first.

As Chris Rock once said, "I'm not talking about *money*; I'm talking about *wealth*."

He went back and forth between the questionnaire and the general data he had access to a number of times, taking breaks every now and then to look up what exactly some of the specific fetishes that were being called out were.

'Ursusagalmatophilia,' for example, was being turned by being dressed up as a teddy bear.

'Symphophilia,' was a fetish for watching car accidents.

'Quirophilia' was a hand fetish.

Phil found himself wishing he'd paid more attention to the Latin when he was in Catholic school growing up, if only for it to save him time constantly trying to figure out what these damn things were.

Once he got past the absurdly long section about philiias and phobias, he found a question that was a sliding scale where the person filling in the question could choose between ten different ticks on a bar that said, "how different do you want your partners to be from one another?"

On the left end of the bar was "not different at all," in the middle was "somewhat different" and at the end was "very different." He considered what kinds of results would get returned based on where people set the slider. At the left end, he imagined that the women would all be virtual carbon copies of each other, and while that would be fine for some people with a very narrow window of women they were attracted to, he set the bar completely on the other end of the spectrum.

Variety is the spice of life, he thought.

It wasn't until he was near the end of the test when he noticed something unusual. Because he was a member of the team, he had admin level access to the test, so a couple of normally hidden questions popped up in the last section. They were very telling.

The first was that he could see he was set to a level 6 priority, something he hadn't even thought existed. As far as he'd known, there had only been levels one through five, but when he started digging through the massive amounts of paperwork that had been pushed his way over the last month, he found buried away in one file a mention that all members of the team were being set to a sort of super *super* status, level 6, which wouldn't be disclosed publicly. It meant that their requests would supersede anyone other than another level 6. If two level 6s placed requests for the same person, the person who'd placed the first request would be granted. Except for a *very* few number of individuals, all level 6s would be members of the project working on Project: Ark, as the team had been officially designated. He couldn't change his designate even if he wanted to.

The other thing that was normally concealed from users was a proximity slider, which specified how far of range the Oracle system would look to make matches. For level 1s, it looked as though the default range was 250 miles. For level 2s, it doubled to 500 miles. For level 3s, it doubled again to 1000 miles. For level 4, it was set to "US" and for level 5, it simply said "global."

When he saw "global," Phil began to get very nervous, and decided to focus in a little more on that. After some research, he discovered that a number of nations had "bought" their way into getting access to the vaccine. The US government had offered to provide vaccine access as long as the other countries agreed to a handful of conditions – they had to use the Oracle system as well, they had to link their versions of the Oracle system to the US's and they would only have the ability to set their most elite members to level 4s, with no access to level 5 or level 6.

In essence, what this meant was that if a nation took them up on the offer, they would get access to the serum, and would be able to protect its populace, but some of their most desirable women could and probably would be relocated to the US for elite status American partners.

He was *horrified* by this at first, and then baffled the further he dug into it. Dozens of nations – the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, New Zealand and Japan, among others – had agreed to this, in a desperate attempt to keep their nations alive, expecting to have to surrender celebrities and pop stars to the US as the cost of doing business.

While there had been a couple of those, mostly what had happened was that the US military was custom tailoring their requests to get top scientists and researchers from the other countries, bringing them to the states and pairing them up with American scientists. It was a sort of demented love nest version of the old Operation: Paperclip, where former Nazi scientists had been folded into the US after World War II.

All of this was buried under *layers* of obfuscation, and nothing was ever stated directly, but the

more Phil looked at things, the more he was able to piece things together. Miguel Cunningham, the man who had designed and built the Oracle system, and who oversaw its day-to-day operations, looked like he was reporting in to someone in the CIA. Phil even recognized the go-between shell company they were using – it was called Long Thought Research and Development. Andy's roommate Eric worked for them, although way way way down the food chain.

After completing the questionnaire, he brought Linda over to look at it, letting her read through it to see if there was anything he wasn't thinking of that he shouldn't be. In the past few months, Phil had come to lean on Audrey and Linda even more than he'd thought he ever would, the need for fresh eyes on old data vital to him being able to get work done.

“You went far tamer on this than I would've expected you to,” she told him. “I mean, given unlimited power, I don't know that I would've shown the same level of restraint you're doing here.”

“How so?” he asked.

She tapped on the age slider. “Lower it.”

“Linda,” he sighed.

“Phil. Baby. I know you think you're doing the world a favor by keeping it at 22, but you're going to need to be a father, and with multiple partners. Set it down to 18, like you know you should.”

“Eighteen-year-old girls haven't got two brain cells to rub together,” he grumbled.

“Sure, you'll be better for the one or two you get than whoever else they'd get saddled up with, so you're just going to have to learn to live with it. Besides, having a teenage fuckpet will be good for your cardio health.”

“Fine. No point in arguing with you.”

“There's a good boy.” She tapped at another portion of the screen. “You sure about this?”

“Look, in addition to this, I'm also going to have to fill out a house staff requisition form, and that's beyond any direct requisitions I make of people, so if you're worried about being the only white girl in the house, I can make sure that you aren't.”

“I'm just making sure you've thought about what you're doing,” she said. “That's all.”

“Yeah, I'm definitely thinking about all of it, Linda. Other than that, you good with all of this?”

“As long as you don't mind me making a couple of custom additions to the household here and there,” she said with a soft laugh.

“Good lord,” he said, clicking the 'send' button to submit the test into the system. “What now?”

Linda dropped three manila folders onto his desk, one atop the other. “So you have to pick one of those three women to join the family.”

“These three specifically?” he said, picking up the folders, holding them in one hand. “What's so special about these three?”

“They're women I trust, soldiers capable of defending your life with their own and generally along your tastes in women,” she said. “From now on, I want someone actively awake and looking after your well-being twenty-four-seven. I have to sleep sometime, and that means I want a second around, keeping alternating schedules with mine. I can bring them around for you to interview them if you want, or you can just pick one of the three and trust my judgment in the matter.”

Phil opened the folders one at a time, considering each of the three women being presented to him. When he opened the third one, he started to laugh. “Shit, Linda, you could've saved us both the trouble and just told me Violet was in here.”

Linda rolled her eyes, scooping up all three of the files. “Maybe I was hoping you *wouldn't* go for the one of the three of them who's hotter than I am,” she said, turning to move away.

Phil grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back to him, pressing his lips against hers firmly. “Don't you *dare* go insulting yourself like that,” he said, parting from the kiss. “Don't get me wrong – she's fucking hot, but you are way, way hotter.”

“Even if I believed you,” Linda said with a smirk, “which I *don't*, you still picked Master Sergeant Violet 'BigTits' McGuinness without even a moment's hesitation.”

“Sure,” Phil said, “I met her at San Diego Comic Con a few years back, long before she was stationed to our base. She was dressed up as Tifa from Final Fantasy VII, although I'd assumed she was padding her bra to get to be that busty.”

“No no,” Linda sighed. “She just normally wears sports bras that defy conventional engineering. But it's fair. She's a good match for you, and she's very capable of providing personal protection. And I know she's friendly with you in the hallways from time to time. I just hoped you'd take a little longer to think about it, that's all.”

“I mean, we could add all three if you think it's important.”

“It is,” she said, “but you can't. The other two are going to get assigned to other members of importance here on the base. As much as I would *like* to have a crack four woman protection squad on you at all times, I can't hog all the resources just to keep my baby safe. One will go to Cunningham and the other will go to Fielder.”

“Major General Fielder?” he said, blanching. “God, I hate to think of one of those other young girls having to cuddle up to the old man. He's practically geriatric.”

“It would be absolutely inappropriate for me to agree with you, honey, no matter how much I may want to,” she said, taking the folders from his hand. “But I'll let Cunningham choose next, so that the decision isn't in the general's hands.”

“Then he's probably getting Carly, since Nita is very much Cunningham's type.”

“She knew what she was signing up for when she volunteered for this detail, so she'll have to live with it.”

“I get that,” Phil said, “but still... Fielder...” He shivered in mock horror, which made Linda giggle. “He'll probably give her mustache rides.” That set her off laughing all over again.

“Aaaanyway,” she said, dragging out the first syllable, “you should probably make one specific requisition now, just to see how it puts someone through the system. Got anyone in mind?”

“There was a game designer I met at one of the local fighting game nights over at Golfland a few months back,” Phil told her. “Yuko Takahashi. I think she said she works over at Gecko Grifter Games. They're one of those tiny independent studios working out of a coop in the city, sharing workspace with like a dozen other baby studios, each consisting of two to three people total. She was dating this well-known asshole in the community named Grant when I met her, but I saw Grant with some Cuban girl at the last Fight Night, and Yuko was nowhere to be seen, otherwise I would've asked her out.”

“This is a bit more serious than asking her out, babe,” Linda said with a laugh.

“Sure, but it'll give her the option of saying no, and when she does—”

“*If* she does—”

“*When* she does, we'll know that the rejection process works and that people are really being given a choice as to whether or not they want to join up with men who are inviting them.”

“And *when* she says yes, you'll have picked up a girl all on your very own,” she replied. “No reason for you to be so negative about it.” The phone on his desk started to blink so she glanced down at it, scanning for the caller ID number. “Looks like Niko's calling to check in.” She pushed the button to answer it on speakerphone. “Go for Phil.”

“Heya Linda,” Niko's voice said on the other end of the line. “I've stepped out into the parking lot to call you, so they can't hear me right now. Thought I'd call and give you an update.”

Niko had been with his friend Andy for three days now, and beyond making sure she was integrating well with the household, he also wanted to make sure Andy was being looked after.

“Sounds good,” Phil said. “What's the sitrep?”

“He and his roommate got to talking, and I think Eric may have given him some insight into what Long Thought's been working on, how they're expecting the casualty rates to be insanely high. Andy was thinking about going to the press, trying to get them to talk about the particulars on the six o'clock news, but I think I've talked him out of that.”

“Jesus Christ,” Phil muttered. “I fucking *hope* so. I need the press on this like I need another rap on the knuckles with a steel ruler from Sister Thelma. After everything I've done for him, can't he just sit on this one for me?”

“Forgive me, sir, but I was under the impression that he didn't *know* any of the things you'd done for him since all this started,” Niko replied.

“Fucking technicalities.” Phil grumbled. “But yes, you are correct. Andy doesn't know all the shit I've been doing to keep him and Eric out of harm's way, and it's probably best we keep it that way. I didn't expect Eric to be able to bypass Long Thought internal security, but I guess that makes me just another person in a long line of folks to underestimate him. Are you sure you've got them agreed to keep quiet about it for now?”

“I *think* so, sir, but you'd probably better check in with them again soon. Speaking of which, we're getting a little cramped in their place. Aren't they scheduled to be relocated to New Eden soon?”

“Within the next week or so, I think,” Phil replied. “We're doing staff review on Wednesday so I imagine they'll come by Thursday or Friday to pick people up. So it shouldn't be too much longer that you're there. Hold fast and you'll be in better accommodations soon.”

“Copy that,” she said. “I told him I'm a data analyst with the Air Force. He seems to be okay with that.”

“Better come clean that you're in the Security Forces soon, Lieutenant,” Linda said. “It's not a big enough thing to lie about, and the less lies you have to juggle, the easier it'll be to maintain cover that you chose him.”

“He *does* seem like a very good guy, ma'am,” Niko said. “I think I probably would've been okay with choosing him on my own, given a little bit of warning.”

“Still, that's one thing you *don't* want to let him know about,” Linda said. “No man likes to feel like he was somebody's *second* best option. Remember, like I told you yesterday, you are going to be me to Andy like I am to Phil. We're relying on you to keep him safe and sound.”

“Is he really going to be in that much danger, ma'am? As nice as he is, he's just some writer.”

“Except we're going to be sending him into the lion's den, Niko,” Phil said. “I want him to be my eyes and ears inside New Eden, to keep me aware of what kind of shady shit they're trying to shovel under the rug.”

“If you say so, sir. I owe you my life, so I intend to honor that promise.”

“That's my girl,” Linda said. “I'm sure you'll find your life full of action before you know it.”

“Well, once I've gotten *my* shootout with Russian terrorists, I'll consider us even,” Niko laughed.

“You make it sound like it was fun.”

“It sure *sounded* like fun.”

“...Okay maybe it was a *little* fun.”

“See?” Niko laughed. “I knew it. Anyway, I should get back inside. I told them I was going to take a short walk and would steer clear of anyone, despite the fact that I'm buffered against DuoHalo now. Is there a reason they don't know that yet?”

“They'll be given a better briefing when they're relocated to New Eden,” Phil said. “I'm not part of the communications division, so I have no idea what they're doing and how.”

“Do me one favor, sir, and check in to make sure they're communicating to women about the risk of other men. When I went through the injection process, they still weren't mentioning it, and it's a thing we women *deserve* to know about.”

“Copy that, lieutenant,” Phil replied. “I'll literally go from this call to checking in on that. Anything else?”

“Negative, sir. If I think of anything else, or if anything comes up, I'll radio in. Redwolf out.”

The line went dead as Phil looked up at Linda. “Even signing off she sounds cooler than I do,” he told her.

“Honey, we *all* sound cooler than you do. That's just how it is in the Security Forces.”

Phil closed up his terminal and stood up from his desk, Linda moving to the door, closing and locking the door behind them. Since Phil was now head of a division, and since they'd clearly been having problems with leaks, what with McCallister defecting, all the section chiefs had been told to redouble their security, both personal and professional.

Just a scant six months ago, the halls of the base would've been nearly dead quiet during the middle of the day, nothing but a handful of scientists bundled up in their labs, working on research that they hoped might one day let wounded soldiers regrow limbs. Now, there was no such thing as a quiet corner on the base, the hallways constantly filled with people running from one office to another. Operational security for the gate entrance must be a nightmare, Phil thought, and he worried that they weren't keeping close enough tabs on all the people on the base. But there simply weren't enough hours in the day for him to be looking at everything personally any more.

In fact, what had once been just one solitary building with a large underground section had grown into several four story buildings around the one in the center. Built entirely by female troops, naturally. They couldn't guarantee anyone else would live long enough, and they'd been built in record time, because everyone had been well aware of the stakes involved.

The two of them headed to the elevator and rode it up to the ground floor, heading out from the main building and over to one of the satellite buildings, the one the communications hub was being run out of. There were also buildings for the Oracle system, the inoculation processing area, the splinter research and the redistribution hub. There was also one building Phil *didn't* have access to, which he was told was for Air Force specific duties. Suspiciously, however, Linda, who was an Air Force Captain, was told she *also* didn't have access to the area.

Major General Fielder had assured her that it was for compartmentalization, to keep everyone only aware of the things they needed to be aware of.

While Linda hadn't liked that answer one bit, she knew better than to question a general openly.

Phil's keycard opened nearly all other doors on the base, though, so the two of them walked into the communications building without so much as a slowdown. He stopped in the lobby, just to officially check it, before the two of them headed into the building elevator and up to the fourth floor.

When the elevator door opened, he saw the communications head, Leroy Reid there waiting for him, a hangdog look on his face. “Look, Phil, I know we haven't been the best at making sure shit gets done, but you don't need to come over and check on me like I'm a teenager out with the car for the first time, okay man? We've got this.”

Leroy was actually one of the new people Phil liked the most, an African-American man in his early thirties, tall and lanky, like a basketball player without any of the muscle or agility, giant Coke bottle glasses over his eyes, dressed in a button up silk shirt and silk slacks, expensive and passable for fashionable to anyone who wasn't up to date on the latest trends.

“Then maybe you can walk me through a few things, so I know we're on the same page here, Leroy, because I keep hearing that women aren't being *told* that the sperm of men other than those they're imprinted to is toxic, and that's a pretty big *fucking* problem.”

“For the last three days, the people actually giving the injections have been telling the women about the dangers of infidelity, and right now, we're recording a series of videos to show people during their observation period, so we can be sure they're getting all the relevant information. We even borrowed Doctor Varma to help with it.”

“Charlotte's over here?”

“Yeah, in fact, we're filming an imprinting live in just a little bit here, if you want to come supervise,” he said with a tone that implied it really wasn't necessary.

“Supervise no, but I don't think it'd hurt to have a few observers making sure you're getting everything captured right. Who'd you get to volunteer to be on tape for this?”

“One of the Air Force boys, Billy something or other. Him and his girl, Wendy, decided they

didn't mind, because it would get them jumped forward several steps in line. C'mon, we can go sit in the observation room.”

Leroy led them down a hallway and through a couple of locked doors before entering a mostly dark room, stepping a few feet across before opening another door, stepping into yet another low lit room, although in this room were set up several chairs and three HD cameras on tripods, one wall clearly a one-way mirror, as an airman in his forties sat patiently on a chair.

He was the most Midwestern guy Phil could remember seeing in ages. Big, strong, mostly balding with a ring of blonde hair, blue eyes, square jaw, a scruffy looking beard and relatively good looking, despite the fact that he was losing his hair. His partner hadn't come in yet, but the cameras were already on and rolling, and Phil saw Charlotte sitting in a chair in the back.

“Heya doc,” he said to her quietly, moving to sit down in the chair next to her. “Glad to hear you're consulting on all of this. It's good to know someone capable is overseeing all of this.”

“Hello Doctor Marcos,” she said to him with a soft smile, her voice tinged in that kind French accent. She'd been deep in mourning since her husband had passed, and Phil was worried about her. “I had not realized how poorly we were handling the induction process. These videos are an excellent idea.”

“We haven't had time to catch up lately. How've you—”

“Shhh. The man's partner is about to come in.”

Inside the room, the door opened and a soldier brought in Billy's partner, Wendy, an Asian woman in her mid 20s, with a green stripe in her dark hair. She was dressed in a tight fitting t-shirt and jeans, having already removed her shoes outside of the room.

Billy stood up as the door closed behind Wendy. The two of them started to remove their clothing slowly, patiently, almost clinically. “God, I hope they don't freeze up,” Phil said quietly.

Wendy dropped down to her knees and pushed her mouth down around the head of his cock, suckling on the tip of it, as her face scrunched up in ecstasy, the priming orgasm hitting her. After that, she pushed him back onto the mattress, climbing on top of him, sliding his cock right into her shaven pussy, a wanton moan filling the air.

“That's it, baby... you give momma what she wants, or she's gonna fuckin' take it... you're mommy's bitch now, aren't you? Aren't you?”

“I think we'll have to run the video without sound,” Leroy said.

“I think that would be best,” Charlotte agreed.

Chapter Seven

August 26th, 2020

The next few weeks, Phil found himself delving deep into the systems behind not only the Oracle program, but also how New Eden was being built up and scaled into, even as he and his small collection of partners were being moved into their new mansion.

Something about leaving the home that his parents had worked so hard to buy and pay off felt odd, but at the end of the day, there was just no chance he was going to be able to continue to live there, what with the collection of partners he was growing and cultivating.

The first day he had woken up to see Violet standing guard over him and Linda, that had felt more than a little weird, but she'd insisted it was necessary, and that he'd better get used to it. For the foreseeable future, she'd set her body clock to be sleeping from 10 in the morning to 6 in the evening, and at night, she would be making sure the house was safe.

It was odd, knowing there were two women who would literally lay their lives down for him at a moment's notice, but both women had insisted that he get used to the idea, because it wasn't going to be changing any time soon.

Sexually, the two women couldn't have been any further from each other if he'd tried. Linda was fun, active, sporty and adventurous in the sack, while Violet was extremely shy and traditional. Violet

made love. Linda *fucked*. Violet liked to cuddle and spoon a little afterwards. Linda would be just as happy to watch him plowing into someone else once she'd gotten hers. Violet was as hetero as they come. Linda was down for just about *anything*. Both women had their appeal and their respective place in his life.

Audrey had told him time and time again that while she would love to take more oversight of the house, her job as the emotional counselor to the base had her feeling drained and exhausted nearly every single day, so when they were off work, all she wanted to do was to snuggle up next to Phil and Linda and watch the trashiest, least challenging TV she could find. The heavy mental toll that was affecting everyone was hitting her maybe hardest out of everyone.

Even the move had been taxing, despite the fact that there was a staff waiting to greet them, or maybe *because* of that fact. Linda had arranged everything for him in advance, setting him up with a majordomo for the house, a chef and a gardener. All three women would also contribute to keeping the mansion clean and tidy, as Linda felt like they wouldn't need someone full time, not yet anyway.

The trio of new women were gorgeous, and they'd all signed off on Phil, even if he hadn't initially signed off on them. Linda, of course, would not be dissuaded, and wanted Phil to go through a similar experience to what the men arriving in New Eden now were going to go through, including his friends Andy and Eric, who were scheduled to arrive in New Eden in just a few days. People being moved into the mansions were being presented with staffs, and while they had right of refusal, they had to do so to the woman's face, something that they suspected would be much harder to do. It was much easier to go along and get along than to tell someone you didn't want to be their lifeline.

Phil's majordomo's name was Valerie Staples, and she was the first of Phil's partners to be older than he was, at 38 years old, although she definitely didn't look it. With dark hair and soft blue eyes, dressed in a business suit and skirt, Val looked like she should be managing a Fortune 500 company, not looking after his ass. She was all business, and Phil worried that she didn't have a sense of humor at first, but within a few minutes, he'd determined she *had* a sense of humor, but that it was as dry as the Gobi desert, and if a person wasn't perceptive, it could easily come across as mean.

Valerie's partner, Winnie Brookmeyer, was the cook. She was dark haired with blue eyes, like Valerie, but had a much more elfin appearance, with rosy cheeks and pale cream colored skin. Winnie was 34, and she and Val had gotten married a few years ago, but both of them still liked the occasional piece of male distraction, which they'd agreed with Linda was a role that Phil could just take care of moving forward. (Phil jokingly referred to it as being their "stunt cock.") Where Val was serious, Winnie was the life of every party, boisterous, loud and laughing all the time, but not in a way that annoyed. She also had a love of Filipino cooking, and promised Phil that she would do her best to keep his heritage in a regular portion of her meals for the household.

For the gardener, Linda had brought in her friend Bella Porter, a 26 year old tall and slender brunette with vaguely Italian features. Bella, it turned out, had been a 'budtender,' or for the unhip, she'd been a marijuana grower for a local dispensary, and she and Linda had been friends for a couple of years, since Linda's arrival in the Bay, long before her arrival working at the lab at New Eden. Bella was laid back, easy going and wicked smart, although she hid a lot of that behind the ruse of a typical stoner, trying to make herself seem far more checked out than she actually was.

That brought Phil's partner count to eight, which was one over last week's recommended minimum. But last week's recommendation was *last week's* recommendation, and the oversight group was already revising those numbers, based on the ever increasing casualty numbers that just kept rolling in, day after day. *This* week's recommendation was an even dozen per man, although the reports were that the number might go as high as fifteen. Current data was suggesting that if a man hit eighteen or more partners, he would have 99.98% immunity from DuoHalo, as long as he maintained his sexual regimen, and that even if he *were* to contract the disease, an encounter with a partner would cleanse it from his system within minutes.

Those numbers would've been thought of as impossible just a few weeks ago, but now... now

they were almost starting to seem inevitable. The number of dead and dying men across the world wasn't just terrifying, it was civilization redefining.

Phil was coming to dread the morning meetings on the base more than anything else he ever had in his life. It felt a little like being part of a strategy meeting on how to get people off the Titanic, some twenty minutes after the ship had hit the iceberg, and the meeting was being held in the first life raft to hit the water. *They* were safe, and they *knew* they were safe, but the question now was how to get more people to that level of safety, and how to keep the country afloat while they did it. (Not to mention how to avoid pissing some people off that they weren't getting treated as quickly as others, or how to get people to *take* the treatment if they were rabidly against vaccinations. Phil's opinion was that natural selection clearly wanted these people to remove themselves from the gene pool, so the only thing they should do was *let them*.)

That last question, how to keep the country from crashing and burning, was well above the pay grade of the team at New Eden, and so thankfully they were just working on getting the serum out to as many people as they could, and to ensure those people would survive their inevitable exposure to DuoHalo. Someone else could make sure that civilization carried onward; all Phil's team had to do was make sure there were people there to do that.

Dr. Varma had been able to increase the potency of the vaccine that they had grafted onto the serum they were now affectionately calling the Quaranteam serum around the base, and while it still required several women to be feeding into the immunity of one man, resistance to the virus was on the rise. In fact, Dr. Varma had told Phil just the other day that based on her research, he could probably go walking through a field of people infected with DuoHalo and wouldn't so much as get the sniffles, although she very much urged him *not* to test that.

Talking with Dr. Varma had been difficult over the past few weeks, because as much as Phil was trying to convince her to get paired up to some man, any man, she simply wouldn't have it, insisting that since her husband had died, she had no interest in remarrying or even partnering up with anyone. The entire base was trying to respect her grief, but Phil knew that sooner or later, the decision was going to be taken out of her hands, and it would be mandated to her that she get a partner. Phil hoped when it came time for that, they would at least work with her to get her someone she would be happy with, and not just some asshole who would make her miserable.

Niko, Andy's new partner, had actually formed a good friendship with her, so maybe Phil thought to himself, she could convince Charlotte to join Andy's household if need be. When she was on the base, Niko was in many ways serving as Dr. Charlotte Varma's bodyguard, keeping tabs on her surroundings for her, although that had stopped since Niko had been assigned to Andy, since she was being given time to get to know him and the rest of his family.

According to all reports that Niko had given Linda (and that Linda had sort of informally relayed over to Phil), she and the rest of the Rook household were a good match, and that Phil had been right to trust his instincts in putting them together. She was a little young for Andy's type, but if he was going to have Linda pushing teenagers at him, it only seemed fair that he be able to do the same back to Andy and the rest of his friends.

Pretty soon, they were going to have to start pushing additional people on Eric, Andy's roommate. The days of monogamy in the pandemic era were coming to a rapid close. They literally couldn't *afford* to let any man have the luxury of only having one partner, because to do so might well have been a death sentence. It was better than nothing, but a single partner was estimated to provide only a 20-30% resistance to DuoHalo, and with men rapidly becoming more rare than diamonds, it wasn't a luxury they could allow him to have.

Phil's phone beeped at him, a message from the Signal messenger app coming through. The days in which nobody had been allowed to bring a phone on base were *long* since dead and buried, as more and more people came into the lab. Keeping in constant contact with people outside had gone from being something people needed to worry about occasionally to something people needed to do all

the damn time. He unlocked his phone and opened up Signal, seeing the message was from Andy. Speak of the devil, he thought. The message just said "Meet up in an hour at the usual spot?"

Andy should've been hip deep in packing by now, so the fact that he was reaching out to Phil meant something was up, so Phil shot back an immediate response. "Make it two." No way in hell Linda would approve him leaving on such short notice, and even with two hours instead of one, she was likely to give him grief over it.

Linda had made it abundantly clear that she didn't like him leaving the security of New Eden, and so Phil had gone to give her plenty of advance notice. She'd been about to argue and then Phil had told her it was to meet Andy, and she had relented at that point, knowing Phil was always going to put himself on the line for his friends. Audrey was swamped with work, and so Phil would appear to go alone, but Linda would be watching from the distance with a sniper rifle trained on the area, and they'd woken Violet up a little early, so that she could be laying down in the back seat of the car, ready to spring into action if needed. Phil had tried telling her that it was all very unnecessary, but Linda absolutely would not have it, and so all the extra security stayed.

Just about ten minutes before Andy and Niko arrived, Linda set up shop in a little makeshift sniper's hidey hole, something that had put Linda a little more at ease, based on the text she'd sent him. "Andy here w/Niko in tow, so gtg." It was about as secure as they were going to get outside of New Eden, but it would also likely be the last time they would need to be worried, as Phil had just gotten the confirmation that Andy would be picked up tomorrow or the day after. Most of the people who were being relocated into New Eden were being given a basic ten minutes to gather anything they absolutely needed, then taken away, with the rest of their stuff to arrive weeks, maybe even months, later. But since Phil could give Andy a little bit of warning, he figured there wasn't any harm in the matter.

Phil decided it would be best to still play up the paranoia and uncertainty about how the DuoHalo virus worked for the time being, so he went the full regalia, with mask and goggles, although this time he was also wearing a kevlar vest on beneath the baggy t-shirt, at Linda's unwavering insistence, and he hoped like hell Andy wouldn't notice it.

They parked on the opposite side of the empty lot and walked partway across, just as they had last time. The mask and goggles together covered Phil's ears, so there was no chance Andy could see that he had a little earwig transmitter stuffed into one, with Linda on the other end of the line, talking in his ear. "No other car sounds," she said to him, "so unless you're being ambushed on foot or by people in an electric car, I think we're generally in the clear, although I'm going to keep overwatch."

"Paranoid much?" he muttered beneath his breath, the mask making sure Andy couldn't see his lips move, and the level of his voice quiet enough that his distant friend couldn't have heard. He pushed his vape pen behind his mask to take a drag from it, then tugged the mask down briefly to blow out a cloud of vapor into the air, the THC calming his nerves just a little bit. He knew he needed to cut down on the use of it, but hell, if tomorrow could be the last day of your life, live every one without regrets or hangups, he figured. "So what's the 911 call about, Andy?"

"First, let me introduce you –"

"2nd Lieutenant Redwolf," Phil said, cutting him off. Andy would easily suss out that Phil and Niko knew each other prior to this moment eventually, and he felt it best that she had to do as little lying to Andy as possible.

"Mr. Marcos," Niko replied, to his amusement, leaving off the 'Doctor' he had worked so hard to ingrain in everyone in the office. "Didn't know your name was Phil."

So that was how she wanted to play it, huh, Phil thought to himself. Office colleagues who may have bumped into each other now and again, but no real familiarity. Okay, he decided, I can roll with that. "I'm surprised you even remember me, Redwolf. You were pretty out of it when I sort nudged you towards Andy."

Andy cocked his head. "You sent her my way?"

God, Andy, Phil thought, for someone who can pick up on the most subtle of things in a

heartbeat, you truly do have a blindspot when it comes to the women in your life.

“She's part of our tribe, Andy. Geek cred through and through, and I figured it wouldn't hurt to have her kept in the family, so I just made a connection in the system. She had decent odds to end up with you anyway, but why take a chance, right?”

“Guess I owe you one then, Mr. Marcos,” Niko said. He could hear the genuine tone in her voice, and he could tell that the two actually made a pretty good couple, as he suspected they would, despite the age difference.

Phil swiped his hand in the air. At this point, Andy *had* to have put two and two together, and realized that Phil was at least somewhat involved in the development and deployment of the Quaranteam vaccine, even if neither of them was explicitly calling it out. They'd get to it when they got to it. Until then, Phil was happy enough to pretend they both didn't know. “Then I'll call in that favor to insist you never, *ever* call me Mr. Marcos unless we're at work. Deal?”

“I can make that promise.”

“This what you called me about, Andy?” Phil said, suspecting it probably wasn't. He stepped a few paces back and just pulled off his mask so he could just continually draw from the vape pen, hoping his sort of cavalier attitude towards the masking would rub off on Andy without him having to actually explain it. The two of them were certainly protected enough that they could be having this conversation standing right next to each other, but being overly cautious cost them nothing.

“Nah. I've got a bigger problem. So Eric's picked up a runaway.”

Phil frowned a little bit. He hadn't heard hide nor hair about this, and this was partially the reason he'd helped steer Niko into the Rook household, so he wouldn't *get* fucking surprised. “Niko sent me a text last night that they'd added someone unauthorized to their household, but that I shouldn't worry and that we'd get an update soon, so I'm guessing this *is* that update,” Linda said into his ear.

“How do you mean?” Phil wasn't sure if he was talking to Andy, to Linda or to both of them, but Linda remained silent and Andy carried on.

“So Eric's partner, Lily,” Andy said, with the expression of a guy who was tired of asking for favors, but knew he had to ask another one. Phil actually liked seeing it, because Andy had always been the one going out of his way to help other people and so it was nice to be able to pay off some of that karmic debt. “She had a roommate before the whole pandemic, name of Jenny. Now apparently Jenny was set up with some guy.”

“That's how it works, Andy.” Was Lily just unhappy with the guy her friend had been set up with? The system was designed to make optimal matches, so Phil didn't see what all the fuss was about, unless maybe there had been some minor glitch in the system. He hadn't met Lily, but based on her posts to the group Discord, she could be a bit feisty.

“I get that, Phil,” Andy said, frustration in his voice. “But it turns out the guy she was set up with was some kind of domestic abuser.”

“Wait, what?” Phil genuinely scowled. “That sort of thing should've shown up before he got paired up with anyone.” Men were getting paired up as fast as they could, but there were some very notable exceptions, which were violent criminals/ex-convicts and anyone, *anyone*, who had a history of domestic violence. It was something Phil had been *very* explicit about, and something the team had agreed to make a major priority.

They were bonding people for what might be the rest of their lives, and the last thing anyone wanted was for them to be stuck with someone cruel or abusive. It wasn't *just* a red flag, it was maybe the *only* real red flag that they were working around. Being married, being divorced, hell, even being divorced for being unfaithful – none of these were *true* deal-breakers, but guys who beat their wives and girlfriends could get fucked and die off for all Phil cared.

And yet, the system was being worked on by so many people now, it was possible that that one hard and fast guideline had gotten overlooked, overwritten or just left off in an update, someone trying to prune code cutting out something vital and earth shatteringly important.

Now he understood why Niko had wanted this to get to him personally, so he could ask questions and figure out what the hell was happening. This was far too important to be given in a regular update – it was priority one news and something Phil was going to be all over the second he got back to the base. Someone's head was going to fucking *roll* for this.

“I dunno,” Andy answered, interrupting Phil's rage filled train of thought. “Maybe it didn't get reported before, maybe this was his first time and he was trying it on. But before Jenny could get imprinted on him, he tried to take a swing at her.”

“Fuck,” Phil thought to himself. All of Andy's options were legitimate ways that it could've slipped through the system, and they wouldn't have known. The system was good, but it relied on the information people provided. If there hadn't been a report about the guy, nobody would've known. Maybe he didn't need to yell at anyone. He was certainly going to check when he got back to the base, but he'd been on a real emotional rollercoaster over the last sixty seconds. “She okay?”

“She's got some self-defense training, so she got away from the guy unscathed and went into hiding.”

“You get the guy's name?”

“I can have Eric send it to you. But that's not the big concern,” Andy said, not realizing that right now, it was *Phil's* only concern. Wait, he thought, if that's not what he's worried about, then what *was* he actually worried about? Thankfully, Andy continued. “The big concern is that once we rescued her, she imprinted onto Eric. And she's a talking head.”

“Shit,” Phil said, taking another drag. Andy was right. Higher profile people were always going to be a problem, but he suspected it was something they would be able to sweep under the rug without too much hassle, especially since they'd been given a head start. “News?”

“Weather.”

Jesus Andy, Phil thought to himself, you're getting this fucking panicked about a goddamn weather girl? He swiped a hand back in the air again, as if to brush off Andy's concerns like they were nothing, because they truly were. “Send me her name. I'll get it taken care of. Don't even trip about it. That's the least of our problems right now.”

Phil was more worried that it *had* been reported and that the system *had* known the asshole was abusive and that it simply hadn't *cared*, because that was entirely possible. With the girl's name, he'd be able to look up who she was assigned to and do a dive into the man's history and what they had in the system about him. While he was there, reassigning her to be with Andy's roommate Eric would be an easy step. Executive overrides were uncommon, but they could be done without too much muss and fuss. Generally they required two members of the executive committee to sign off on them, but nobody had given him any grief so far in the rare instances he'd needed to use it when he'd done it entirely by himself, as he had when he'd reassigned Niko on the fly.

“Shit getting bad, sir, I mean Phil?” Niko asked, more for Andy's benefit than her own, he knew.

“You have no idea.”

“How bad?” Andy asked.

“We're looking at ten to twenty before it's all done.”

“Ten to twenty million people dead? Jesus!”

“No, *percent*. We're talking ten to twenty percent of America dead, mostly men. We're guessing it'll end up around sixty million dead before the vaccine's in full effect in the middle of next year.” Phil took a heavy drag, and the news hung in the air like a guillotine's blade. It had to sound insanely grim to his friend, and the worst part was that Phil was still underselling it to Andy. He was easing his friend into the disaster like one boiled frogs – raise the temperature slow and steady and they got used to it before they even noticed what was happening. “The news is going to break any day now how fatal the new mutation of the virus is getting, and then everything'll be crazy. The army's going to be deployed here on US soil and martial law's going to go into effect. President Pelosi's at least been quick about it, and she's bunkered down. News hasn't broken yet, but the orange goomba died on the operating table a

couple of hours ago. Looks like milquetoast will be next in a couple of days.”

“Forty or fifty million men dead? That's nearly half of the male population!” Niko said, belying how she knew the actual math of what was going on. “How the hell are we going to recover from that?”

“We're going to have to pair up a lot more women with the remaining men, and encourage them to have a whole shitload of kids,” Phil sighed, hoping Andy would take some comfort from at least knowing the flood was coming in advance of its arrival, especially since it was just around the corner. “But even with that, it's going to be a fucking mess for a generation. Which reminds me, when you go home, I want you to start packing up your things.”

“Packing?” Andy asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, start figuring out the absolute minimum you would need to take with you if you had to leave in a hurry, and then get anything that might take a few minutes packed up. Anything else, just have it at the ready.”

“Should I be worried?”

This was the problem with having to be so vague with Andy, that he often jumped to the worst possible option rather than what made the most sense. “Nah, but it wouldn't hurt to be a little prepared.”

“What's happening, Phil?”

“I can't tell you that yet, but the world's gonna keep on changing, and it doesn't hurt to be ready for it.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Andy was always preparing for the worst, so Phil decided one last suggestion of positivity couldn't hurt. “You'll actually be very happy after it happens, man. Trust me.”

“If you say so.”

“Trust Big Daddy Phil.”

Andy rolled his eyes. “I trust you about as far as I can throw you, and that ain't very far.”

“You'll see.” His watch beeped and Phil turned it up to look at it. “I gotta get back into the office. Send me Eric's new girl's name and the guy she was supposed to be hooked up with, and I'll make a few edits into the system.”

“You know Phil, there are days it feels like you're seriously into some black bag shit.”

“Only some days?” Phil said, taking one final drag off his vape pen before blowing a huge cloud up and into the air. “Then I gotta up my game again. I'll see you soon, brother.” He pulled his mask back up and headed back to his car.

Violet hadn't moved from her concealed cover point in the back seat, and in his ear, he could hear Linda giving them the all clear, driving off first this time, leaving Niko and Andy at the park.

By the time they got back to the base, Phil had the information on Lily's friend, Jenny Carnero, who was indeed the meteorologist for the local Fox News channel, although based on the information that the system had on her, she'd taken the job because it was a job, not because of her alignment of politics, because Jenny couldn't have been any further from Sean Hannity if she'd tried.

The information they did have on her, however, put some serious concerns into Phil, and he immediately began typing up a pretty pissed off memo to all the department heads. The guy Jenny had supposed to be paired up with, Brent Baker, did indeed have a police file on him, with a restraining order having been filed by an ex-girlfriend, with a couple of misdemeanor assaults having been levied against him, and a felony assault charge that somehow Baker had gotten dropped, although the paper trail was still there.

The paper trail was *always* still there.

This was exactly the sort of thing the system was supposed to be preventing, and the fact that it had decided misdemeanors weren't enough to at least warrant human review was absolutely appalling. Brent Baker might have just been an attorney up in Hillsborough yesterday, but today his face and case history was on blast to everyone Phil thought might give a damn.

'What if your sister went to this guy?' he wrote. 'Or your daughter? This isn't just unacceptable, this is criminal, and I will be the first one throwing people under the bus if it keeps happening.'

While Phil went about reassigning Jenny Carnero in the system to Eric Yang, a firestorm erupted in his email, with everyone pointing the finger at someone else, but to their credit, they were at least scurrying to get working on a solution.

It turned out, Brent Baker was a Level 4, and the higher up you went, the more the system tended to overlook mismatches and sticking points. Or at least, that was the way it had been *before* now, because even old battleaxe Fielder was chiming in on the thread, insisting they find a way to ensure that those with violent pasts, especially those towards women, did not get paired up, or got paired up with women who knew what they were going into, at the very least.

While the argument about *that* raged, a second one sprung up, pointing out that the system had basically declared drug convictions to be as bad, if not worse, than violent ones, and since marijuana laws were insanely tricky right now, anything shy of distribution or intent to distribute was, it was decided, not going to be a factor in the system any more. Some guy who spent time in jail for a joint ten years ago shouldn't be prevented from having a partner because of it, especially since marijuana had been legalized in California for the last several years.

By the time evening rolled around, it sounded like the issue had mostly been fixed, and they were reviewing by hand a number of in process assignments now before they left the base. There was a chance a handful of them would need to be redirected in a hurry, but better now than after they'd been paired up with someone.

The last email in the thread, however, left a sense of unease and dread hanging over Phil's head. To close off the thread, Major General Fielder thanked Phil for bringing the issue to everyone's attention, appreciated everyone's hard work in getting the problem fixed, but also made a note that moving forward, the two-person rule for reassignment would be inviolable, and that he was going to try and cut down on "playing favorites."

What the hell was the General talking about?

A few weeks later, just as Phil was about to pack up and head out for the night, Violet came to him with a giant grin on her face. He tilted his head at her and smiled back. "What's so funny?" he asked her.

"I went and checked in on the people who are going to be your friend Andy's staff, like you asked me to," she said. "The gardener and the cook are getting dosed now, and the maid's about to be sent over to the house a few days early, with the other two to follow tomorrow. They're a couple, but seems like it'll work out okay."

"Okaaaaaaay," Phil said, dragging out the syllable. "It still doesn't explain the shit-eating grin on your face."

"C'mon, I want you to meet the maid before she leaves," Violet said, as Linda laughed, rising to her feet, flicking the power off on Phil's monitor for him.

"There's no arguing with her when she's like this, so c'mon, let's see what BigTits has gotten up her nose," Linda said, grabbing Phil by the hand, pulling him to his feet.

"Do you *have* to call me that, Linda?" Violet said to her with a sigh.

"You're lucky I only do it in private," Linda scoffed. "A lot of the men around base would probably say it to your face if they didn't know you could beat the shit out of them with one hand tied behind your back."

Violet smirked, a wicked little grin. "Sheeeeeeeit," she said. "I could do it with *both* hands tied, using just my legs. I'd be one mean curbstomping bitch up in this joint."

"Yes yes," Phil said, turning off the lights to his office, leaving it dark except for the one light above the Ryu statue on his desk that never went out. "You're both very scary. Let's go."

They headed up the elevator and instead of heading over to the parking lot, they headed over to the redistribution hub, where all the women who were being sent out for the day were being checked

over again one final time, making sure there weren't any unanticipated side effects from the Quarateam serum, and that the person they were being sent to had been confirmed as alive within the past 24 hours, even if it was just by phone. The close cut with Niko had resulted in some of the processes getting updated.

There was a small troop transport over in the New Eden section, something Phil thought was odd, because really the town was next door to the research lab, so running someone over one at a time when they were ready would be easy enough to do. Maybe nobody had thought of it, he decided. He'd send a note.

There were seven women sitting around, waiting for final approval, each of them having planted their butts on top of their suitcases, and as Phil headed over, he turned to Violet. "Which one's our girl?"

"The tall black girl and the Mexican girl are going to some ex football player named Bryant Walters, the Korean girl is apparently going to be the bodyguard of some dude named Covington, the short black girl and the tiny blonde are going to that tech bro, Nathaniel Watkins, the super skinny brunette's going to some Russian businessman I've never heard of called Vikovic and the tall busty blonde's going to be your friend's maid," Violet told him, outside of earshot range. "She's a feisty one. Name of Nicolette Seydeaux."

"Why does she look familiar?" Linda asked him.

Phil started laughing. "She's going to be his *maid*? You've *got* to be fucking kidding me."

"I'm clearly missing something," Linda sighed.

"Look at her again, babe," Phil told Linda, "and imagine her talking with a French accent."

Linda looked for a second and then Phil saw it dawn on her. "Oh my god, I see it..."

"Right?" Violet laughed. "Anyway, I figured you might want to tell her that the guy she's going to is a good guy, since she's right here."

"I'll do you one better than that..." Phil said, strolling over. "Miss Seydeaux? Can I have a minute of your time?"

Nicolette looked up at him, clearly surprised to see a male face, and then walked to meet him half way. "Hello? Are you the man I'm going to be paired up with? I'm--"

"Yeah, I caught your name from one of my security detail," he said, taking her hand and shaking it. "I'm Phil Marcos. The person you're going to be paired with is an old friend of mine. Has anyone ever told you that you look almost *exactly* like the actress who played the maid in the movie 'Clue'?"

The woman nodded with a smile. "I get that a lot, especially if I'm wearing the outfit," she said with a wink. "I like wearing the outfit. Who's your friend?"

"His name's Andy Rook, and I wonder if you wouldn't mind helping me play a joke on him. I'll owe you a favor, and I'm a pretty good guy to have owe you one."

"Sure, what did you have in mind?"

"How good is your French accent?"

Nicolette blew a stray blonde curl from her face. "Not great, if I'm honest."

Phil's grin spread even further. "Even better. Here's what I want you to do..."

Chapter Eight

October 3rd, 2020

Phil found himself ready to do the one thing he absolutely hated more than anything else in the entire world.

He needed to ask somebody *else* for help.

Phil had lived much of his life like he was a mob boss – he didn't take favors, he gave them out, and he did his absolute damnedest never to collect on them unless he didn't have any other option. But this time, this one time, this was too far out of his skillset.

“Linda,” Phil sighed. “I think we need to head off site again today.”

“Jesus, Phil,” Linda grumbled. “Are you sure there isn't anything you can do here onsite?”

“This one's way above my paygrade,” he grumbled. “And I'm a bio-engineer, not a goddamn code monkey. I need someone to help me understand what I'm looking at.”

“You've got someone in mind?” she said. “Someone you can trust? Someone discrete?”

“I do,” he said. “And they're local. Within the walls of New Eden. We aren't even going to leave the town.”

Linda stood up, nodding. “That's something anyway. It okay if we do a bit of scouting and recon first, or does it need to happen *now now*?”

“It needs to happen today,” Phil said, “but it doesn't need to happen right now. I know you don't like surprises, so I'm going to do whatever I can to make it easier on you. Any time today.”

“Where are we headed?”

He handed her a slip of paper with an address on it. She took the paper from him, opened it, smiled and then tossed it into the shredder. “You could've just said. I've got someone on the inside over there, so that place is five by five at all times. You want to go now?”

Phil nodded. “I want to go now.” He picked up his laptop, slid it into his bag and they headed for the elevator. Operational security should've gotten tighter in the wake of all the chaos, but instead, it'd gotten a great deal more lax, at least in terms to the base itself. The reason, or so Phil had heard, was that because New Eden was functioning as an extension of the base, so the border security in and out of New Eden had gotten strict while the base itself had relaxed. That wasn't how Phil would've managed things, but it also wasn't his concern. Just six months ago, carrying a laptop out of the base would've gotten him shot on sight. Now, nobody even blinked an eye.

On their way through the security checkpoint (if you could even really call it that anymore), Phil saw Linda sending a text message, presumably to her woman on the inside at their destination, letting her know they were coming.

Phil did wish he knew a bit more about the size and reach of Linda's spy ring, but any time he broached the subject with her, she just sort laughed it off and politely told him it was better that he didn't know, just in case he was captured and tortured. He liked to think she was joking about *that* but she might *not* have been, and Phil wouldn't have put it past her either way.

They got into the Tesla and headed off the actual base and into New Eden, Linda driving which gave Phil the chance to sort of look over the suburb that hadn't existed just a year ago. There had been some of the preliminary mansions, and some of the places like Andy's even predated that, but the nucleus of the town had sprung up and been built as fast as possible by whoever they could get, in exchange for getting them higher up on the pairing priority. Once they had a team of skilled construction workers (which often included their partners), they were willing to do as much work as possible to keep people safe.

If they needed to, there was still plenty of room to expand within the walls of New Eden. Most of the mansions had sizable plots of land covered in trees and lawn right now that could easily give room to second buildings. Some people, like Covington, were already getting second homes built on their plots of land, just places where they could keep all the people in the new weird extended families were expected to have moving forward. Linda was already pushing him to do it at their place, and so he was suspecting Niko was probably beginning to lean on Andy as well.

It was the first time Phil had been over here, but he suspected Linda had been by this way at least once or twice, especially if she had someone from her team placed here. The mansion was around the same size as his own place, one of the mid sized mansions in the area, an automated gate without a guard at it. Most of the places had cameras as their front line of security. Even Andy's place, which was one of the bigger ones, didn't have security staff at the gate.

They brought the Tesla up to the front of the house and hopped out, a woman Phil had seen a couple of times around the base. She was a very fit Latina woman who was still in her fatigues from the

base. She'd been assigned here a week ago, but now that she'd been imprinted and familiarized with her partner, she'd started going back to work again. "How's it going, Arroyo?" Linda said to her.

"He's a good dude," the woman replied, reaching out to shake Phil's hand. "Heya Dr. Marcos, how's it going? 2nd Lieutenant Rita Arroyo. Don't think we've been formally introduced before now."

"Nice to meet you, Rita," Phil said. "And please god, any time we aren't on the base, call me Phil, okay? The last thing I want is everyone thinking I'm getting a big head or something."

Rita grinned, shaking her head with a laugh. "Not at all, Phil. Not at all. Anyway, I told him you were coming, so c'mon in. Let's get to it."

As soon as he walked into the place, Phil noticed how little they'd gotten settled in. There wasn't any sense of personality on any of the walls, and while the place was huge, Linda had made sure that as soon as they'd settled into their home that his personality was writ large on all the walls. Maybe he wouldn't have done it quite as quickly without her there, but he felt like there still should've been something on some of the walls somewhere.

"It still hasn't settled with me that this place is mine," Eric said to him as he met him at the door to the living room. In terms of coders, Andy's former roommate Eric was one of the sharpest people Phil knew. "You were thinking I hadn't decorated yet."

"I might've been."

Eric smirked. "You were, and it was obvious, Phil. I don't mind, because you're right, I haven't decorated yet. Andy and Ash said the same thing when they were here yesterday, so I'm not letting anyone else over here until we spice the place up some."

They moved into the living room, one of the living rooms anyway, and the inside actually had some personality to it, a few large pictures hung on the wall, landscape photos that Eric had taken on vacation of the years. They'd been in his bedroom in the old place, but here they seemed much more fitting.

"See?" Phil said, gesturing to the walls. "You've gotten a start in here."

"Yeah, well, I... *we* spend a lot of time in here, whether it's watching tv or while a handful of us are working. You know us, code from just about anywhere," he said, sitting down next to Lily on the couch. She looked pleased to see Phil, but hadn't gotten up from her seat, her laptop in front of her clearly vexing her in multiple ways. "Lil, say hi to Phil."

"S'up Phil," Lily said, not looking up. "Kill anybody lately?"

"Nah," Phil said with a laugh. "Linda does all my killing for me. How about you? Stepped on the necks of any of your foes the last few weeks?" They'd only met briefly, when Eric, Lily and Jenny had arrived at the mansion a week ago, Phil insisting on giving them the personalize tour, so he could basically prep both Eric *and* Lily for the idea that Eric would be getting more partners over the coming weeks. Rita had shown up literally less than an hour after Phil had left them that day, and Phil was starting to suspect Lily hadn't entirely forgiven him yet.

"Wish I could get close enough for me to do that, but no," she grumbled. "Sorry, not mad at *you*, just dealing with a shitstorm lately. Someone's been fucking with our tracking data, and considering we're doing mad business what with the pandemic going on, the last thing I need is some fucking blackhat coming in and pissing all over my code."

"Ah, well then, don't let me stop you from shitting all over their Cheerios," Phil chuckled.

"So what brings you by, Phil? Judging by the unexpected arrival, I'm guessing it isn't just a social call to see how we're adapting."

"It isn't, but it doesn't hurt that I can do that while I'm here," Phil said to him. "How *are* you adapting? Getting settled in to the place, used to having staff?"

"Thank fuck you only gave us the one housekeeper slash cook, Phil," Lily grumbled. "I think if you'd have given us a full time gardener and a full time maid like Casa De Rook, we wouldn't have had enough for them to do on a daily basis."

"It's entirely possible it's coming, Lily," Phil told her. "Sorry about that. As it stands, though, the

minimum number of female partners a male partner needs to have to get good-to-great immunity is more than you're pulling down over here.”

“I let you add a bodyguard for him, Phil,” Lily sighed. “What more do you want from me?”

“I want you to let more women into the *house*, Lily,” Phil chuckled. “You can still be Queen Bee but the hive needs more people taking care of the honeymaker.”

Eric laughed, pointing at Phil in a 'I see what you did there' gesture, while Lily just rolled her eyes. “Fine. Just make sure they understand who fucking runs this house and that they shouldn't get in my way when I'm in a bad mood.”

“Absolutely Lil,” Phil chuckled. “It's your house; Eric just provides for it.”

“Too fucking right,” she said, stabbing a finger in the air, not even looking up from her computer. “As long as they all remember that, you can send a dozen fucking dancing girls in here for all I care.”

“I see she's lightening up,” Phil said to Eric with a smile.

Eric smiled and nodded back, even as Lily pointed a finger at him, still not looking up. “Don't you encourage him. He's a bad influence.”

“So why are you *really* here, Phil?”

“You've still got all your clearances, right, Eric?”

“From one spook to another, Phil, I haven't the foggiest what you're talking about,” Eric said with a devilish grin. “Course I do. Why?”

“I want you to look at something for me,” he said, reaching into his laptop, pulling it out and turning it on. “Take your time, don't rush it. I want you to read through the entirety of the code and see what you think of it.”

Phil and Linda talked a little while Eric was reading through the code on Phil's laptop. About four minutes into reading into it, Eric looked up at Phil, a frown on his face. “Is this what I think it is?”

He nodded. “This is the Oracle code. One of the most recent drafts of it, anyway. I know the guy who wrote and maintains it is constantly tweaking it. Keep going. See what you can see in all of it and tell me what you're looking at.”

Eric continued, skimming through it piece by piece, tracking his way through it. Phil could see he was heavily concentrating and didn't want to interrupt, but the wait was driving him crazy. It was maybe fifteen minutes later before Eric spoke again.

“Okay, so I think I've got a grip on the broad strokes,” Eric said. “Why am I looking at it?”

“Tell me how it works,” Phil replied.

“Broadly or specifically?”

“Start broad and narrow your way down.”

“Alright, so if you get right down to it, it's not all that complicated of an algorithm. It's pretty similar to what sites like OK Cupid and Match use for their back end matching,” Eric said. “That's just the first pass, though.”

“First pass?”

“Right. So what this Oracle program does is to set a man's sexual preferences down to a single profile, and then runs all the women in the database against it. Whenever a new woman is entered, she's pushed through the system and it grades her viability with all the available men in the system. Then it considers things like distance between the two, and number of partners that particular man already has. It's extremely more heavily weighted in the man's favor, however.”

“How do you mean?” Phil asked.

“Okay, so imagine you have 100 points worth of weight to assign this, and on your typical dating site, you assign them as a 50/50 split.”

“Sure.”

“Here, it's more like a 80/20 split in the man's favor,” Eric said, waving a finger in the air while he talked. “To some extent, sure, I get that. Men are currently more rare than women, so the goal is to

make sure that the men are satisfied and not rebelling against the system. But this is pretty heavily biased towards men, even taking that into consideration.”

“Anything else?”

Eric nodded. “It's this portion of the code that I'm a little surprised by, simply because whoever was building this spent a *lot* of time getting it right and smooth,” he said, tapping the screen. “Once the system is in the process of considering assigning a woman to a man, it *then* goes and runs a compatibility screening against all the other women assigned to that man already. Sexual if they're bisexual (and maybe even if they *aren't*, I'm not entirely sure about this bit here) but just straight up personality-wise, assessing what a house dynamic would be like should the additional person be added to it. I mean, I'm talking the kind of socio-political algorithm the likes of which I've never even *dreamed* about. *This*, this is the reason why the women's questionnaires are so much fucking longer than the men's. It's not just evaluating women against men; it's evaluating women against each other, making sure that when they're added together, the system isn't building some kind of ticking time bomb just waiting to go off.”

Phil's face scrunched up uncomfortably. “Can you give me an example?”

“Sure,” Eric said. “So one of the things this code does is flag levels of assertiveness and immediately after that, it flags levels of competitiveness. Essentially, the software is building a template of 'is this woman going to be the alpha of the house,' and 'if not, is she going to conflict with the existing alpha?' It *internalizes* a whole ton of 'roles' around the house, ranging from 'alpha,' 'counselor,' 'protector,' 'builder,' 'homemaker,' 'muse,' I mean the list goes on and on. There's like hundreds of various personality archetypes in here, and everybody gets flagged with at least one, but usually some combination of them. I don't have access to the database this is all connected to, but I would guess that a standard output probably gives each profile between five to ten ranked archetypes, and then cross-references that against *everyone else* in a particular home someone's being considered for. Is it going to make some mistakes? Sure, definitely.” The man sounded almost like he admired the code. “But this is pretty comprehensive, and if the evaluating questionnaires are doing their job right, there's going to be generalized house harmony in, oh, like 80-90% of the households, and that's without people having to work too much at it. I'd argue that catastrophic failures would be rare, and they're likely to happen in the lower ranks of men, simply because the system has a threshold it needs to hit in terms of assigning each man a number of partners. Is this number right?”

He nodded back at Eric. “Yeah, they keep turning the number of women that should be assigned to any man up, because of the casualties rate on the constant climb.” He leaned back on the couch as Linda squeezed his hand. “But you know all about that. It's nice being able to talk to another guy who's at least a little in the know.”

“The CIA's got us doing analysis of other countries and their response to DuoHalo, and I gotta tell you, Phil, as much as we sort of suck at this, we don't suck at this as badly as everybody else sucks at this,” Eric said with a soft sigh. “Some of the countries are very much up shit creek without any paddles. Like, we're not number one at this response, but we're definitely top ten. Some of these countries, though, they're going to be trying to import men, to up their respawning numbers.”

“What do you mean 'import men?' What does that even mean?”

“I mean that one of the theories the logistics and modeling team has put together is that men are going to be the new currency, at least for the next several years. Countries need to keep their population from dying off, so they're going to start trading men around like breeding stock at some point. That's assuming you guys figure out the deimprinting problem,” Eric told him. “How's that coming along, by the way?”

“It's not,” Phil replied. “We have an emergency thing that works in case of death, but we can't even really tell you *why* it works. If a dude dies, we've got a twenty-four hour window in which we can harvest sperm from his corpse, and something about the sperm in a decomposing fashion will essentially de-link a partner, but they go into a need frenzy, the kind of thing that happens when a

woman goes too long without getting her fix from her partner. And she will reimprint on whatever man she takes on as soon as that happens. We haven't had to test that it works multiple times, but there's nothing in our modeling that says it won't work repeatedly. We'll keep an eye out and see what happens if it comes to that."

"Speaking of keeping an eye out," Eric said, tapping the screen, "this software has a couple of back doors in it that I don't like the look of. That's something you should know about."

"What do the back doors *do*, Eric?"

"Hard to say, but it looks like someone with the right level of admin access could just insert a person and override the Oracle profiling system," he said, handing the laptop back over to Phil. "The system will use that person's templating in later matches, though, but the system can't guarantee as much harmony if people are just messing around with it willy nilly."

"There's been talk about putting in a 'request' system into the program, so that people can suggest to the system particular people they'd like to be paired up with. I know some work on that's already started, so maybe that's the back door you're—"

"No no, I saw that script in there, and it's mostly done, and it follows the normal rules with just a few minor tweaks and nudges in that it starts with a specific candidate rather than just anyone," Eric interrupted. "That's being done by someone who didn't write the main portion of the code. Neither was this back door, either, for what it's worth. The insertion process, the one using the back door and not the script, overrides *everything* and just *tells* the system 'you're pairing this person with that person so get fucking used to it,' and it just *does* it. It also fabricates a false pairing report if anyone looks at it, so it's basically impossible to tell the difference between scripted request and an implanted mandatory matching after it goes through. And the process runs a person through the profiling system so it takes all that into consideration for latter runs. It's not too stable, though."

"What do you mean?"

"So, assuming you used this backdoor to insert someone *once*, the problems with latter people would be almost entirely minimized and compensated for," Eric said, leaning back in his seat as Lily finally closed up her own laptop. "But each successive time you used it, it's going to complicate things, not additive but multiplicative. That means your first and second people that skip the process have like a 0.5% of causing things to go haywire. Your *third* person goes to 2%. Your fourth is probably 8-10%. Your fifth would be 20-25% problems. Any time beyond that, well, you're just playing Russian Roulette with your social life at that point, because the system can no longer adequately predict how the social construct model for your home is going to work at that point, so it basically throws its hands up in surrender. At that point, anyone you request, through the script or through the backdoor, is going to be just flat out approved, because the system has marked that person as a corrupted file and says 'Well, there's no hope to this case any more, so don't assign it anyone until it asks, and whenever it asks, fuck it, give'em whatever they ask for, and don't waste your time thinking about it.' The person who wrote the backdoor must've had two mandates in mind – make sure that anyone added this way just happens, and make sure it can't be traced back. Everything else? Fuck it. Not in spec."

"And there's *no* way you can back track who's come in from where?"

Eric tossed his hands up in defeat. "Like I said. The data's all designed so that the backdoor mimics it perfectly. What with the script you've got here, I don't even know why the backdoor exists other than someone wanted to guarantee, and I do mean *guarantee*, that they could send person A to person B, no questions asked, no chance of rejection."

"I can think of a handful of people who might have demanded that level of power, although I wonder if they know exactly how dangerous it can be to them."

"Probably not," Eric chuckled. "I mean, if *I* was the coder who had to put this in, I'd have told the client, 'don't over use it otherwise it may have problems,' but beyond that? Caveat emptor."

"Let the buyer beware indeed," Phil said.

"Hang on, back up," Linda said. "You're telling me there's a way for a man to just... to just

fucking *take* a woman he wants?"

"Well, *yes*," Eric said, "*but* it could also be just as easily used the other way. Men are given priority when they're put into the system, but the backdoor can also be set up to *anticipate* a person coming in, like a spider laying in wait. Once a man is put into the system, the spiders laying in wait get to see it *before* it goes into the main pool. It looks like they're also starting to forcibly relocate living men, but we all knew that was coming sooner or later."

"Did we?" Linda asked.

"Well, *I* did," Eric laughed, "but then again, I'm watching big data boards for this whole mess like my life depends on it, which, y'know, it might." Lily snuggled up against his side, wrapping her arms around him.

"So, what," Lily asked. "They're just going to move dudes from one place to the other?"

"Not *all* of them, but a *lot* of them, yeah. The farming communities are getting hit the hardest, so lots of that land is getting redistributed. Tons of that stuff is automated machines these days, but you still need human oversight on it, so some of the denser urban clusters are getting broken up and people are getting scattered around the country a bit more. There's still going to be your major metropolitan areas, but they aren't going to be anywhere near as densely populated as they were."

Phil nodded. "I saw what they're doing for places like NYC and other big metro areas with large skyscraper apartment buildings or condos. They're giving an entire floor to a household, and telling them to knock down any doors or walls they want within reason. So those forty and fifty story skyscrapers now just have forty or fifty households in them. They're sort of becoming mini-cities, because typically those buildings are also converting one floor into a cafeteria/restaurant, so that they can stay within the protective walls of their building most of the time. Like, a skyscraper becomes like a little mini colony ship."

"That's fucking crazy," Lily said. "And people are okay with that?"

Eric leaned down and kissed Lily's forehead. "More than okay, it seems like. Contentment and satisfaction in your typical colony building is higher than almost any other type of settlement."

"*Almost* any other?"

Phil chuckled, shrugging. "The 'mansion cluster' approach of New Eden still has the highest, but it also cost the most to set up. They're trying small-to-mid contained cities as an approach in a handful of locations – the Pacific northwest, some of the skiing towns up in Colorado, a handful of the mid rural south east towns. We'll see how those turn out."

"You're *sure* I have to let them send more bitches at my man?" Lily grumbled.

"He's at, like, 40% DuoHalo resistance right now, Lil," Phil told her. "Believe me, you want that number as high as you can fucking get it."

"Yeah yeah yeah..." she muttered. "Fine. *Fine*. Open the floodgates. Start sending bitches left and right at him until he's guaranteed to live through this shit, but they'd better understand he's *mine* first and foremost."

"Trust me, Lil," Eric said to her. "I'm *positive* the system has you flagged as a *massive* alpha, and they won't send anybody to butt heads with you. That said, if you've got any friends or girlfriends you want to bring into the house and keep safe..."

"It means sharing them with you, which I'm not happy about," Lily told him. "But it would be nice to have a couple of my girls around to make sure I'm not going crazy or anything. And you say it'll run them through a compatibility check first, make sure the horse won't upset the apple cart or anything? Since you've got so much faith in this code."

"You know as well as I do, Lil, that no code is perfect," Eric replied, "but if you want to bring a couple of your friends in, either the system will reject them upfront or we'll make it work."

"Thanks for this, Eric," Phil said, patting the laptop before tucking it under his arm. "You and Lil have a chat, see if there's anyone you want us to run through the script for you, and I'll get your friends moved to the front of the line."

“Thanks dude,” Eric said, standing up with Lily, as they started to walk him and Linda out.

Linda had been unusually quiet during the whole conversation, and Phil had learned one thing – that meant she was absorbing information and thinking. When they got out to the car, they climbed in and in the privacy of the Tesla, she finally spoke on what she'd been thinking about.

“Who the hell has access to make a backdoor like that?” Linda asked him. “Cunningham clearly didn't do it himself. How big is the Oracle team?”

“I think there's somewhere between eight and twelve people on it, including Cunningham, and it could be any one of them,” Phil said. “I had Eric take a look at it because he's excellent at spotting buried code, things that are tucked in and hidden, meant to look like something else. The rest of the team probably doesn't even know it's in there, and if I called it out to them, they'd probably freak out, and it'd just disappear and reappear later. Better that I know it's there and they don't know I'm onto them.”

“I guess,” she sighed. “I just don't like the idea of any woman being *sent* to a man she'll hate.”

“I don't like it either, Linda, but if they do it too much, it'll blow up on them and then we'll know where they're going.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Let's just get home.”

She drove the car back across New Eden, stopping to grab some BBQ to take home, Phil having texted their cook, Winnie, that they were bringing home carryout tonight. She shot back a message saying that they should not make any other stops on the way home. Phil called to ask if everything was okay, and Valerie, the house manager, answered.

“Look, Phil, I don't want to worry you, but Audrey's acting a little weird, and I'd just feel better if you could get home and check on her,” Valerie told him.

“Weird *how*?” Phil asked.

“Twitchy. Impatient. I know it says here she dosed up from you just a couple of days ago, but it's almost like she's near the nine or ten day mark.”

“Okay, we're almost home, don't worry.”

A few minutes later, they were pulling into the garage at the house, and as soon as the car pulled into the garage, Audrey was rushing into it, pulling the door open, lunging in, shoving her lips against Phil's in a messy kiss.

“Phil. Fuck me. Right fucking now,” Audrey said to him, her eyes a touch reddened.

“But...”

“*NOW*.”

Shit, Phil thought. Better give her what she wants...

Chapter Nine

October 6th, 2020

It had been a few strange days since his meeting with Eric, and much of it had been spent running tests on Audrey, trying to figure out what was happening with her. Without warning, it seemed like Audrey's window had shortened. When Phil had come back from Eric's house, it had been almost like she'd been going nine or ten days without his cum, instead of the four she'd actually gone without. That wasn't good, and had Phil worried.

The tests had come back that there wasn't anything wrong with her, only that she'd actually fought off a new variant of DuoHalo, and that information had sent all of the base into a tizzy. It was odd, because *nobody else* on the base had contracted it, as far as anyone could find.

The Quaranteam serum was doing its job. They'd developed a rapid results test that could determine DuoHalo was in someone's bloodstream, or if someone had recent antibodies developed by the serum, and Audrey's blood had new antibodies, but nobody else on the base had them, not even Phil or Linda themselves, and they spent most of their time with Audrey, day or night.

There had been a few hours when Audrey had run into town the previous day, and that was

when they'd determined she'd caught it, so they'd checked in with the restaurant she'd stopped in at, and found that the owner and the staff had all gone through similar symptoms over the previous day, but nobody could be sure where they'd caught it from.

The track-and-trace system they'd built allowed them to check with everyone who'd come into the restaurant that day, and while the ones in the afternoon had gone through similar symptoms, the ones who had come in early in the day as well as those in the evening hadn't. That meant there was a very narrow window of about two hours in the middle of the day where someone had brought the DuoHalo variant in.

It wasn't possible to figure out who specifically brought it in, simply because many of the people who came in during the lunch rush paid in cash, and the owner's security cameras hadn't got great angles for when several people had come in simultaneously and picked up orders.

That was a problem, but the fact was that the serum was doing its job.

It wasn't this particular variant Phil was worried about.

It was the next one.

And the next one.

And the *next* one.

They'd been theorizing and preparing for the possibility, but this was the first one that had broken through into the protective shield they'd tried to make by locking in people within New Eden. They were mostly keeping folks from leaving and returning regularly, but there were a small handful of people who could go in and out, simply because they were too important to not be allowed to. The idea was to not let many people in, in an effort to try and minimize the chance of exposure, even with their layers of protection.

From their initial research into the antibodies, the DuoHalo variant that had briefly infected Audrey, which they were called 4.b, wasn't as strong or deadly as the original strain, but it did seem more persistent, and it also seemed to be mucking about with the Quaranteam serum's protocols.

For the first few days after they'd fought off 4.b, the person's sexual needs window was shrunk by around 35%, although it only seemed to have that impact on women. The men who'd come in contact with it hadn't even blipped, nary a cough or a runny nose, at least those who'd momentarily had it within the walls of New Eden.

Once the first variant appeared, it was like opening Pandora's Box. There wasn't just one, there were dozens of variants popping up all over the nation, and even more across the world. Many of them weren't that troubling, but a handful of them were starting to interact with the Quaranteam serum in odd and unusual ways, none of which made Phil feel any better.

The only bit of good news amid all the chaos was that the serum was doing what it was supposed to, keeping people infected by DuoHalo from having serious health problems, including death. The worst symptoms that people protected by Quaranteam serum were getting were: headaches, exhaustion, vertigo, nausea and intense voracious appetites, both gastronomical and sexual. That was a far cry from those who were unvaccinated, who were still dying at an 80-85% rate in men, and a 15-20% rate in women.

Word about the serum was starting to spread from survivors to the unvaccinated, and Phil had done everything he could to make sure their inoculations weren't just focusing on wealthy, affluent areas, but also hitting industrial and inner city areas as well. There had been some pushback from untrusting people, but they were starting to spread the word about how high the fatality rates were.

As Phil had expected, it had helped that he'd suggested they send in non-white members of the Air Force and the CDC to demonstrate the serum and its effectiveness. It wasn't going well, but at least it was making a little bit of progress. Lots of people, rightfully so, brought up the Tuskegee experiments. Phil empathized, he really did, but it was important to him that they did everything they could to get people protected and put together with serum carrying partners.

He'd suggested to the outreach teams that they work via contacting relatives and kinfolk, and

that was at least making a little bit of progress. Once one person found their new life and their place in it, having them tell all their male relatives about it had been working well enough as a starting point. The progress wasn't fast, but it *was* working, and that was a good beginning from which to make further headway. Sometimes they'd tell their friends as well, and that helped the trust circle expand even more. Anything that did that was progress in Phil's book.

What it also meant, from a numbers point of view, was that the adoption rate in African-American, Asian and Hispanic communities wasn't anywhere near as high as it was in white communities. There'd been some push back within the government that if these people didn't want the serum, they shouldn't be wasting their time trying to change their minds, but Phil was adamant that they keep pushing and just take the time hit, otherwise he and his team would strike and stop research work on combating further variants that might appear.

That seemed to scare the shit out of the higher ups enough that they kept their committal levels to what they were, and that meant everyone just kept on working.

(Phil also pointed out to the higher ups that the adoption rate for the serum in the southern states was also significantly lower, for similar reasons, and that nobody had suggested they just stop trying to convert the poor southern white folks, who'd also been putting up a similar level of fuss, into taking the serum, and that had certainly put the final nail in the argument's coffin. Nobody liked being called racist, especially when they were being racist.)

Phil had also started looking into some of the other things that were happening nationwide, because as much as he would've loved to just get head down and focus on his little corner of the world, he needed to know what was happening outside of the relatively safe walls of New Eden.

The military, divisions of which had started the pandemic as highly resistant to taking the Quaranteam serum, had started clamoring for it after suffering heavy casualties. The US military was only about 15-20%, so in the early days of DuoHalo, it had decimated entire bases.

The Air Force had been the first to go full bore on the serum, especially since they'd aided in its development, so their losses were the most contained, looking at only about a 45% casualty rate. The Navy had been the next to get onto the Quaranteam serum train in a big bad way, and had suffered about a 50% casualty rate before they'd begun deploying the serum. The Army, which had the highest number of women in it, had suffered around a 60% casualty rate. And the Marines, who clocked in with only 7% women, had been the last and most resistant to adopting the serum, lost nearly 75% of their personnel, leaving them extremely short handed.

Every single living person in all the military branches, including the reserve, had been buffered with the serum now, and were doing their best to take care of critical infrastructure and maintenance across the country.

Law enforcement had been a much different story, and the federal and local levels couldn't have been much more different.

The CIA had been first in line with their sleeves rolled up and their arms out, demanding to get dosed with the serum as quickly as they could. The CIA's workforce was nearly half women, and they'd already gone about establishing a new system to help them manage the side effects with a minimal impact on their activities. Phil wasn't entirely sure what that meant, because the CIA was still notoriously tight with their security, but the CIA's director had said in a memo to the Joint Chiefs that they had suffered only an 18% casualty rate, and urged all the other branches of law enforcement to get on board before they lost all personnel when they were needed the most. From what Phil could read in-between the lines, he suspected that members of the CIA were mostly being matched up with *other* members of the CIA, keeping the loop tight.

Because the CIA had been all in with it, the NSA and the FBI had generally followed suit, although there were some divisions of the FBI that had suffered higher casualties than most, in parts of the country where vaccine paranoia was running the highest. Across the board, the two branches were looking at around 40-45% casualty rates, in line with what the Air Force had suffered.

Local law enforcement, on the other hand, was all over the goddamn place. Many officers were insisting they weren't going to take the serum and would just “deal with getting sick,” even with the numbers about casualties that they had access to. And it varied a *lot* based on regional attitudes. For example, in the larger metropolitan areas, the police were looking at about 50-55% casualty rates, simply because they were prioritized so early for serum vaccinations, and because most of the officers there seemed to see the value in it. But smaller town police forces were being wiped out, especially in both the south and the more rural states, where irrational fears over “government microchipping” and “unproven science” were starting to cause protests and refusal to take the serum.

Phil hated to be cold about it, but he, like many other people in the organization, had come to the conclusion that they just didn't have the time and resources to save people with unjustifiable concerns about the serum, so while they were doing their best to convince everyone, those who were actively pushing back the hardest were mostly being left to die.

It was a daunting decision to have to make, but the dead count was already so unfathomably high that everyone was just doing what they could to get through the day. Nearly the entire military had been retasked to do one of two things domestically – either they were aiding in the vaccination effort, by transporting either the serum or people taking the serum, or they were doing the more grisly job, in corpse detail.

The amount of dead bodies across the United States was now so high that they were reverting to contingency plans that the military had long held and hoped they would never have to use. Bodies were being identified, marked as deceased in the national registry, then either burned or added to a mass grave, both of which were becoming disturbingly common across the United States. They didn't even have time to notify next-of-kin, simply because there were so many corpses to manage.

All of this was also being done as quietly as possible, trying to keep the general population from panicking before a nationwide announcement could be made, and that was still looking like it was a few months away, in late November or early December, when they'd gotten around 60%-70% of the surviving population inoculated with the Quaranteam serum. It would mostly be to get the hard holdouts to voluntarily take the serum, and to reach those in more backwoods portions of the country.

Part of the way they'd been doing media blackouts was to shut off both the internet and the cell phone networks of areas before they rolled in, limited people's ability to communicate outward. They were also trying to do sorties at night, so they could determine where there were large volumes of bodies to take to processing.

Even with that, however, it was tough to keep a lid on it, and word was starting to get out. The government's stance on the matter was unflinching – “we're working on it, stay at home, only go out if you absolutely have to and mask up if you do.”

One of the working theories that the CIA had about why international reports about death tolls hadn't been screaming from the rafters was that in many cases, the international media had suffered *the most* fatalities, and they simply didn't have the work force to be able to get stories out, although the CIA director's debrief also stated that some nations were putting “national security” stamps on reporting, and doing their best to keep things under wraps so as to not cause a panic, with the UK, Canada, Germany, France and Spain all taking this approach.

The CIA debrief also included a bunch of other fascinating, although not entirely confirmed, bits of information, such as that both Russia and China were suffering even higher casualty rates than the US, even though both countries were trying to project strength by claiming they were suffering only minimal losses to their population. Satellite photography had uncovered both countries were doing large scale mass graves as well, however, which completely went against their propaganda.

Phil spent a long while reading the debrief from the CIA, and the other kernel of information that he found utterly fascinating was that New Zealand hadn't apparently suffered almost any casualties (or at least that was what they were claiming) and Australian men were definitely more resistant to DuoHalo naturally, something literally all the scientists were doing their best to try and understand.

Australia was still contracting DuoHalo at around the same rate as everyone else, but instead of the typical 80-90% fatality rate in men, which had been basically a universal constant everywhere else, only had a 50-60% fatality rate in men. With a male population of around 12 million, this meant Australia was going to have millions more male survivors than had been expected.

Canada, by contrast, was getting hit harder than almost anyone else, with a near 95% fatality rate for men infected by DuoHalo, so efforts to get the Quaranteam serum to their allies to the north had been intense and prioritized.

The current version of the serum was in mass production by nearly every pharmaceutical production team the US could manage, and the government was getting some insane deals from foreign countries to get their initial batches of the serum, including things the likes of which Phil was incredulous of on one hand and more than a little disturbed on the other.

While Canada was getting a great deal of help from the US, one of the proposals Phil had seen kicked around was that Canada simply *give* the United States the provinces of British Columbia and Yukon, so that Alaska would be connected to the US via land. The idea seemed absurd on its face, at least to Phil, but the death tolls were getting high enough that Canada was freaking out, trying not to just be an empty country that the US inherited simply by virtue of coming in and cleaning out the dead bodies. If the deal went through, all of the inhabitants of those two provinces would immediately become American citizens (in addition to retaining their Canadian citizenship) and would be given a choice of relocating into what remained of Canada or staying in the two new American states. It wasn't a done deal yet, but the negotiations were pretty far in, and from what Phil could read, it looked like a fifty-fifty shot of actually going through.

Other countries were struggling to make similar deals, offering huge trade imbalances or the sorts of resources that would've been ridiculous in any other world, but the serum was a lifeline to keep a dying population afloat for many of these countries. There were even nations willing to give up their own sovereignty to become part of the United States, if only to keep their population from being completely annihilated. The fact that there was a Powerpoint presentation floating around entitled "Do We Want To Own Indonesia?" floating around was mind-boggling, but it was happening, and was being actively considered.

The reports on Russia especially made Phil nervous, simply because he knew for a fact that Adam McCallister, the former project chief over what had eventually become the Quaranteam serum, had defected to them, taking all of his research with him, including a fully functional version of the serum, and the template with which to mass produce it. So why were they still dying in such massive numbers? Was it a distribution problem? A manufacturing problem? Were the Russian people refusing to adopt the serum? Was it an intentional dieback plan by the Russian government? Phil couldn't seem to find anyone with a firm answer to the matter, which made him all the more nervous about it.

What the hell was happening with Adam McCallister?

Within two weeks of 4.b appearing, they had identified twelve major variants across the globe. The Quaranteam serum prevented any *major* health problems from *all* of them, but many of the variants impacted the serum's baseline functionality, either reducing the time period in between partner couplings or intensifying the voracity of those encounters. All of the variants were more tenacious than the original, lingering in the air longer and surviving away from the host more successfully. The most dangerous strain was when they were calling the Smooth Variant, which the Quaranteam serum could still fight off, but would temporarily cause all of the victim's hair to fall out. The hair loss wasn't permanent, but it certainly had caused some panic in the first few victims.

Another detail in the report about the variants that Phil had found fascinating was that all of them were showing enhanced versions of what they were called the Daniels Effect, named after Charlie Daniels, their biofeedback engineer who'd first noticed it.

The Daniels Effect was that people who were introduced into a Team (as groups of individuals consisting of one male and several females were being called) ended up bonding with one another on a

level they hadn't anticipated. In doing so, they found that being around members of their team were naturally increasing levels of dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and other neuropeptides. Just being around other members of the same Team increased comfort and mental well-being. It also seemed to be counteracting the inherent tension that isolated groups of people often encountered. Everyone had noticed it – being around your Team just made you feel more at ease. It also meant that members of a Team were more likely to be able to settle disagreements without escalation or aggravation. Teams, the new family unit, were just fighting less.

When afflicted by a variant, the Team tended to cling together even more vehemently, closing ranks and becoming more xenophobic, at least temporarily. A Team would close ranks, refusing to venture away from each other until they had all fully fought off the variant, letting them as a group choke it out.

Daniels wasn't the only one with a discovery named after him. Martin Grant, who had been a weapons engineer brought onto the project late in the process, had discovered that the Quaranteam serum was also granting a higher than normal toxin resistance to those who'd taken it, and he'd discovered this in typical Martin fashion – he'd been having trouble getting drunk lately.

As it turned out, it was now somewhere between 30-40% more difficult to become inebriated, and the body, post serum, also seemed to share similar resistances to other toxins nearly across the board. This also meant that anesthetics had needed to be adjusted, as they simply weren't having the desired effect. The same was true for pain medications, although some men had reported that they were experiencing less chronic pain problems post getting a Team, many having dropped opioids entirely.

Unlike women, who stood a 1-in-10 chance of experiencing some level of cellular regeneration, men weren't gaining any sudden benefits when they were first pairing, but it seemed like constant couplings were slowly reducing and removing chronic problems in men. The more partners a man had, the faster it seemed to be working. It wasn't solving *all* problems – far from it – but things like arthritis and fatigue were getting stripped away, if the data was to be believed.

(It didn't do a *damn* thing for sense degradation, Phil noted, which meant he was stuck wearing glasses for the rest of his life.)

It did also reduce the male refractory period by a sizable amount, but that was partially by design, as Dr. Varma had worked to ensure that if sexual coupling was going to be part of the serum they couldn't shake it wouldn't be one that impacted the health and well-being of those they were treating with it.

Audrey's cycle hadn't reverted back, even two weeks after having fought off the variant, needing to couple with Phil every four or five days, much more regularly than the typical nine to eleven days that was average. Dr. Varma assured the two of them that her cycle would slowly expand back outwards, but that it was something that would happen over months, not days, and that they should be particularly attentive to her needs until it did.

And Phil's house wasn't getting any smaller. During the two weeks while he'd been working on studying the variants, Yuko Takahashi, the video game engineer he'd put in a request for, had shown up, and had gotten paired up with him in an encounter that couldn't be described as anything other than rowdy. Yuko, it turned out, had been the kind of girl who liked sex on furniture. And on the floor. And against the wall. And she had shown up early in the morning, just after Phil had given Audrey a dose, which meant it took him quite some time to get her imprinted, with Yuko having several orgasms before Phil's arrived.

Phil's Team seemed to like Yuko a lot – she was whipsmart and very sarcastic, and happy enough to keep working even while rearranging her life to get comfortable within the House of Marcos. She wasn't bisexual, much to Linda's dismay, but was willing to tolerate other girls being around from time to time while having play time with Phil, as long as they focused on him and not her. She integrated well with the existing Team, confident enough to feel comfortable in her place but not so complacent that Linda or Audrey could walk right over her.

Unlike everyone else who entered their data into the Oracle system, where they just had to trust the results when they showed up, Phil could track someone from the moment they'd been matched to him, checking on what criteria had paired them up with him, and if he still wanted them to be paired. It also let Linda perform security background checks on all candidates they were lining up for him. With Yuko, he was at a total of eight partners, including staff, a number that had Linda livid, and so she was doing everything she possibly could to get more viable partners for Phil to show up as quickly as she could. She wanted him to be at twelve before the end of September, which meant he had to pick up the pace. She'd even gone over his head about it, telling Major General Fielder that she needed to put a priority delivery onto Phil's file, for his own safety. And, naturally, Fielder had agreed with her, as his health as one of the top minds behind the Quaranteam serum was of the utmost importance, and so Linda had even suggested he go about requesting a few people.

Phil was also scheduled to get at least one person through the international personnel exchange program that the people around the office were jokingly referring to as Operation Honey Trap, where countries would give up scientists and spies in exchange for access to the Quaranteam serum in bulk and quick. Promises had been made that they would still be working within the existing Oracle system, so that they would get along with not only the person, but the person's entire Team.

He'd been told that a woman named Paloma Gallegos would be arriving for him soon, and she was an officer from the National Intelligence Centre from Spain, which was the sort of Spain's equivalent of the CIA. She was going to be paired up with Phil, and going to become a US citizen. Phil wasn't entirely certain how to feel about it, but he'd been told that the spy exchange was being done in an effort to bring countries closer together. He wasn't sure how the entire process would work, how someone dedicated to the service of one country could shift that to another, but the higher ups assured him it was for the best, and that she had agreed to shift her loyalty to her new country.

Linda had done her homework on the woman, and decided that she would actually be a good match for Phil, and that she seemed like the kind of woman Phil might've picked up on his own, even if she was, and these were Linda's words, joking or not, "slightly out of your league."

"I just don't know how you feel comfortable having a foreign intelligence agent being brought into our house, Linda," Phil said to her, as he was getting in the car for her to drive them home after a long day at work, him in the back seat (not his choice), her and Audrey in the front.

"People are willing to give up a lot for safety, and as part of the program, the rest of Paloma's family gets preferential treatment when it comes to the Quaranteam serum," Linda said. "It's all about getting access to it as soon as possible, and Paloma had four brothers, all of whom were definitely at risk. She'd been adamant they not leave their homes, but one of them did and he died in the first wave of casualties, so she's making damn sure it doesn't happen to the rest of them. She's coming over on the next diplomatic exchange flight from Europe, and she'll be here in a couple of days."

"What the hell do *I* have in common with a spy, Linda?" Phil sighed, leaning his head back against the back seat of the car, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"Well, she speaks Japanese for one thing," Linda told her. "And she's been to Japan a number of times for that Comiket festival I know you've gone to. She's one of you, an ohtanto or whatever."

"Otaku," Phil corrected with a chuckle. "And I guess if she's been to Comiket, she can't be that bad. Violet said there's someone waiting at the house, too? Charlie?"

"No, Rochelle," Audrey corrected. "The Black Lives Matter lawyer from Atlanta. She arrived this afternoon, but you were so deep in work, nobody wanted to pull you away from it. You seemed particularly troubled about that variant you were looking at, the Smooth Variant. What's got you so worked up about it, baby?" She reached back behind her and stroked his leg with one of her hands. "The freaky hairloss thing?"

"Well, that part's just disturbing," Phil said. "No, the thing that's got me the most worried is that there are signs of non-natural mutation in it, almost like someone's trying to *improve* the virus, to make sure it's strong enough to survive long enough to wipe out anyone who isn't protected by the serum.

Who the fuck is crazy—”

“Look out!” Audrey shouted, pointing ahead of them, as an airborne drone dropped a grenade down onto the road in front of them, Linda swerving the car just in time to get around it, the back right corner of the vehicle lifting off the road for a moment from the shockwave of the blast.

As the car veered off the road and into the woods, Linda was already calling asking for backup, telling Phil to keep his head down. The vehicle had bulletproof glass, but explosions were an entirely different kettle of fish, and Linda said she was trying to keep the vehicle in the trees so the drone couldn't get a bead on them through the tree cover.

All Phil could think was that it must be Thursday, and how he never could get the hang of Thursdays.

Chapter 10

October 20th, 2020

When Linda had told him, early on after they first hooked up, that he was going to have to get used to a life “under fire,” he absolutely, positively hadn't thought she meant it *literally*.

In addition to the drone dropping grenades, Phil heard the CRACK CRACK of a couple of bullets striking the bulletproof glass of the car's rear window, bouncing off without doing much more than causing some half dollar sized impact scars. Linda continued to weave the car as best as she could through the foliage, but it was difficult, since there was no clear road, and the trees were close enough together that speed wasn't much of an option.

“Fuck this,” Linda said, bringing the car back towards the street once more. “We're too slow in the woods so the only choice is forward and fast. Hang the fuck on, baby,” she said to him, as she pulled the car back onto the pavement once more. “Audrey, I need you to play drone spotter for me. Let me know if you see it.”

“Dammit, Linda, I'm a doctor, not a sniper!” Audrey said, even as she was craning her head, looking out the windows, trying to get a bead on where the small flying vehicle had gone. The buzzing sound was still lingering in the air around them. “There! Two o'clock!”

“I see it,” Linda said, swerving to her left to avoid another drop. Drones typically didn't carry large payloads, and so it was likely that it would be out of ordinance after another strike. “And it looks like we've got unfriendlies coming up the rear.”

There was a black SUV slowly pulling up behind them, with a big burly guy hanging out of one window, trying to get a good line on shooting their car, even as Linda kept the vehicle shifting in constant motion, making it hard for the soldier to get his shot lined up.

“Dammit, Linda, give me your sidearm,” Phil said.

“What? No! Are you crazy?”

“Linda, goddamnit, gimme your gun!”

She growled and with one hand reached down to grab her pistol, a Colt .45 that she treasured dearly, holding it back to him. “Don't fucking drop it, and don't put your head out the window, and *don't* make me fucking regret this.”

“Relax, baby, it's just like 'Duck Hunt,’” he said with a laugh, hoping he could convince himself that he was more confident than he actually was as he rolled the window down a little bit before sticking his arm with the pistol out of the window, firing a couple of wild shots back at the vehicle behind them. Crazy enough, however, one of Phil's shots actually cracked into the center of the vehicle's front windshield, although he thought that he had missed both the driver and the gunman. It was enough to cause the vehicle to come to a screeching halt, however, as Linda sped off, driving away from the SUV at top speed.

Once far enough away from the SUV, Linda's phone finally connected with the base, the call having been jammed during the brief but harrowing conflict. “Hey Chief, what's up?” Niko's voice said from the other end of the line. Good, Phil thought to himself, she was on base tonight. That meant they

definitely had someone they could trust there.

“Listen, Redwolf, and listen good,” Linda said. “We have a hostile incursion within the New Eden borders. Black SUV, no plates, and at least one enemy drone in our airspace. They were after the principal, but we have evaded pursuit and are doubling back to base. Send up the alarms, and alert the border guard to be on watch for anyone attempting to breach the perimeter, most likely on foot. That means I want patrols in the hills, on the gates and on the fences. I do not want these motherfuckers who threw fire from the sky at my man to escape custody this time.”

“Understood, chief. Any indication as to who the hostiles are?”

“I saw bullets and bombs, Lieutenant, and not much fucking else. Phil?”

“The big guy with the rifle hanging out of the truck looked wide and mean and blonde. Large bushy blonde beard. Nordic, maybe?”

“Russian?” Linda asked.

Phil scowled. “Honestly, I don't think so, but who the fuck am I to tell you the difference between a Russian soldier and a Swedish one?”

“Yeah, okay. Anyway, I want the base hot and lit up when we get there, Redwolf. You get every last member of the security detail either on their principal or on this fucking manhunt. I don't want it done now, I want it done yesterday.”

“Then I'd better stop yapping with you, boss, and get to work.”

“That's my girl,” Linda said before tapping the end call button. “Any sign of the SUV or the drone?”

“Nothing in the rear,” Phil replied.

“Nothing up front,” Audrey said.

“Let's just hope it stays quiet on the way back,” Phil said.

“Shit, babe,” Linda grumbled. “Don't jinx us.”

The jinx didn't take, however, and the rest of the trip back to the base was quiet, or as quiet as could be expected with the three of them utterly riled up, hearts still pounding full of adrenaline. Before this year, Phil had never been in a shootout before. Now he was starting to think of them as regular occurrences, and he didn't like how easily that seemed to be coming to him.

Once they got to the base, Phil was glad to see that everyone was taking it seriously, as the security forces were glancing behind them, making sure they weren't still being pursued. Colonel Layla Robbins met them at their parking space. She was the woman who had taken over the top down security of New Eden, and as soon as they were out of the car, Robbins was slipping in to pull out the thumb drive connected to the Tesla's camera systems. The footage wouldn't be incredibly high resolution but it would give them a start as to identifying who had just tried to take a shot at them. “Glad to see you're all okay,” Robbins said to them. “Give me an hour to download and process this, and we'll debrief after that.”

“Got it, boss,” Linda said to the woman with a curt salute. Once she was gone, the three of them headed down into the intense security of the underground bunker. As soon as the elevator doors opened, he saw Bill McKenna waiting for him, a giant goofy grin on his face as he tossed something Phil's way.

Phil caught the object, realizing it was a rolled up t-shirt, as Phil unfurled it and saw that it read in giant black letters “I GOT SHOT AT YET AGAIN AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT” across the center of it. He chuckled. “Cute.”

Linda and Audrey headed off in one direction. While Linda generally liked being at Phil's side all the time, within the security of the base's lower quarters, she felt comfortable letting him move about on his own for a while, knowing it made him feel a little less like a rat in a cage.

“You need to stop making a habit out of getting shot at,” Bill told him. “Since you're back on base, I've got some new data for you we should probably talk about.” Of all the people he was glad were on the base still, Phil was most happy that Bill was still working with him. They'd been on the project together since the beginning, and despite the fact that Bill was almost twenty years older than

he was, the two had a very natural rhythm that had allowed their partnership to reach all sorts of incredible things.

“On a scale of one to ten, where one is a play-by-play of your favorite Manchester United highlights and ten is Linda playing Tekken in the buff, how much am I really going to care about this data, having just been shot at?” Phil grumbled, walking alongside of Bill.

“Call it a very solid eight,” Bill replied.

Phil stopped, making Bill stop with him, as he turned to look at his colleague, then sighed deeply, turning directions, as Bill moved with him, the two of them heading over towards the older doctor's lab. “Good or bad?”

“One of each.”

“Jesus Bill,” Phil laughed bitterly. “You really can't just make it a little easier on me. I just got fucking shot at.”

“Oh lighten up, Phil,” Bill grinned. “When you finally have a scratch on you, then I'll consider laying off, but until they draw blood, Superwoman's record remains unblemished.” The two men headed into Bill's office, which had gone from a disaster area before DuoHalo to a literal explosion of papers after. Most of the windows were covered in dry erase marker, formulas and notations scribbled all over the place. There were no less than five plugged in laptops scattered around the room, each of them no doubt running some long-form computations or analysis of something or other.

If there was anyone Phil considered completely trustworthy inside of the building, Bill was it. They'd been brought into the Air Force together, gotten their clearances together. Phil generally liked to avoid making friends at work, but Bill had been the total exception to that.

“So, you want the shitty news first or the good news first?”

“Let's end on a high note.”

“Shit upfront it is, then,” Bill sighed, moving to sit down at his desk. He picked up one laptop, looking at it for a moment before deciding it wasn't the one he wanted, setting it back down on the desk before picking up the other one that was on the desk. “Ah,” he nodded, tapping it a few times, scrolling through a wall full of data before stopping on a section of it. “So the shit is that the virus has some pretty aggressive target vectors when it comes to a specific classes of people, kids specifically. Anyone between the ages of 10-18 who catches DuoHalo, that's game over. What's worse is that we can't give the Quaranteam serum to anyone under the age of 18.”

“Presidential veto finally came through?” Phil asked.

“Worse. You know Mary Pope?”

“McCallister's old research assistant? I wasn't even aware she's still on site.”

“She is,” Bill said, looking down. “She has... *had* a 15 year old daughter, Nikki. Apparently Nikki contracted DuoHalo. Still not sure how, considering she's been in New Eden for the last three months, but she still caught it. So Mary smuggled out a dose of the Quaranteam serum off base. Was apparently going to try and get Nikki imprinted on some boy she went to school with, but the minute Mary injected Nikki with the Quaranteam serum, her body rejected it and she went into shock.”

“Jesus, Bill, there are loads of reasons we haven't been giving it to anyone under the age of eighteen, and I thought we'd been *very* fucking clear on that with everyone on the base.”

“I thought we had too, Phil, but the woman was desperate. She's seen the same data you and I have, how anyone between 10-18 who catches DuoHalo is basically dead, so I guess she felt like she didn't have anything to lose.”

“How bad did it go for Nikki?”

“You've seen how bad it is giving a drop or two to someone that age, Phil,” Bill said, taking his glasses off, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Mary gave her an entire dose. Nikki was dead in under a minute. Heart exploded.”

“I get the 'life in a bubble' isn't a great way for these kids to have to live for the time being, but we don't have any other options,” Phil said, finding just enough space available on Bill's couch for him

to slump down onto it without knocking much loose. “Not only can't the Quaranteam serum help them, it's actively fatal to people that age, just like it is when given directly to men.”

“Unfortunately, I think that problem's going to solve itself, Phil,” Bill replied. “The data makes it look like we're just going to see an entire removal of that slice from the age spectrum across the board, and almost nothing we can do about it. It seems harsh to say that if you're born between 2004-2010 you're basically a dead person walking, but shy of locking them in a sealed chamber until they're old enough for Quaranteam not to kill them, I don't know what else we can do.”

“We keep looking for solutions, but we let the people above us make the hard calls about when to say let it go, I guess,” Phil said, scratching the back of his neck. “So that's the bad news. Gimme the good news so that I don't have to feel so utterly despondent about all of this.”

“The survival rate of DuoHalo for ages 0-9? It's 97%, Phil,” Bill said, optimism creeping into his voice.

“Are you *sure*?” Phil said as he stood up immediately, making his way over to look at Bill's laptop. “That seems insanely high, especially compared to the main spectrum numbers.”

“It's not fatality free, but basically it seems like anyone in that age group who catches DuoHalo is going to recover from it, mostly without too many complications,” Bill said, pointing at a column of data in his spreadsheet. “And while that's mostly good, it's also a bit bad.”

Phil snapped his fingers, gesturing down at the sheet. “It's a spread vector. Fuck sake, Bill, it's a fucking *carrier wave*. It's designed to linger in kids and while it doesn't kill *them*, it can reinfect *parents, teachers*, fuck, any fucking adult around them who isn't protected by Quaranteam. It's designed to make sure that this virus keeps killing people off for at least another ten to twenty years, just as if it needs to make sure there isn't a scrap of population on this planet who hasn't been reached. Tell me that's fucking random chance and not active design and I'll spit in your eye.”

“That's just it, Phil,” Bill told him. “Anymore, anything we're encountering is an offshoot of the original DuoHalo virus. We're never encountering the OG in the wild any more. We've got so many variations, and I'm sure at least some of them show deliberate signs of human tampering.”

“Is it someone's trying to make it weaker and just fucking up? Is it someone trying to make it go faster, hoping it'll burn out quicker if it does? Who's fucking *doing* this, Bill?”

“For fuck's sake, Phil, you think if I knew I wouldn't tell you?” Bill had taken up swearing a lot more over the past several months, and as shocking as it had been at first, now it all seemed so warranted that Phil rarely remarked on it. “I've got just as much caught up in all of this as you do.”

Phil let out a very deliberate slow breath, nodding. “Sorry. Sorry, I know you do. How's Jen handling all of this anyway?”

“Not fucking well,” Bill aid, tossing his glasses onto the laptop he'd left on his desk. “She's tried to put on a brave face about all of it, but the poor girl missed the last half of her senior year of high school. No senior Prom. No senior skip day. No graduation ceremony. Her and her friends were going to spend the summer backpacking across Spain and France, and instead, they've barely left the house in months. Now she's imprinted on her high school boyfriend, and you know how I think those sort of early relationships are for stunting emotional growth. But she refused to listen to me and to go through the Oracle system, because I'm only her fucking father working on the goddamn project that'll keep her alive. What the fuck could *I* possibly know about *anything*?”

“How bad is he, your daughter's boyfriend and now partner?”

“Tony?” Bill asked. “He's *fine*. I mean, he's fine for being *eighteen*, but shit, Phil, we're all basically savages at that point in our lives. We don't know the difference between our eye sockets and our asshole, most of the time. Tony's less of a big deal than Kenna was,” Bill said with a laugh. “I mean, I turned her down, and that still didn't make Jen happy, but I think it made her less *unhappy* than it would've if I'd accepted her.”

“Who's Kenna?”

“Girl she grew up with. Known her since she was like twelve. Oracle wanted to pair her up with

me, and Kenna had apparently been harboring quite the crush on me growing up, but no way in hell was I going to get paired up with one of my daughter's friends," Bill bristled. "No way, no how. Jen yelled at me because I wasn't keeping her friend safe and close, but when I reminded her what being safe and close would've entailed, I think she realized she lost the argument and stormed off. Couldn't really fucking win, no matter what I did."

"Well, Jen's living with that Tony guy now, right? So maybe out of sight, out of mind?"

Bill shook his head. "No fucking way I'm doing that to myself, my wife or my daughter. Everyone would pretend like it was fine right up until the moment it wasn't, and then there's no undoing all that damage. Hell, I've already been saddled up with a couple of girls barely older than Jen anyway, so the very least that I can ask is that they don't already *know* my daughter..."

"How's Grace handling all of it?" Phil said, referencing Bill's wife.

"I think she's finally in her element with all of it," Bill laughed. "After the first month or so, she started treating the new family like another one of her non-profits, giving orders and coordinating appointments, and while she's still very much not interested in sharing with any of our new housemates, she makes sure they all get their fix and that nobody's feeling neglected."

"Your wife's *never* sat in on any of your sessions with any of your new partners? Not even once? I find that hard to believe."

"Oh, she's been around a few times. With me and Julia's first time she wanted to be around, not because she was worried what I might do with Julia, but because she was worried I wouldn't do *anything* with the girl," Bill smiled. "So Grace stuck around and played counselor and cheerleader, making sure I knew that I was worth it, although who the fuck would ever believe that, I dunno."

"Have I seen a picture of Julia?" Phil asked him.

"She only showed up last week, so maybe I didn't show you yet," he said, fishing his cell phone from his pocket. "Here, take a look and see what I mean." He tapped on his phone to bring up an image and then handed it over to Phil.

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayum," Phil said, his eyes widening a little at the photo. "That girl isn't just actress pretty, she's model pretty. In fact... hang on... *wait*. Is she-?"

"One of the Victoria's Secret models? Yeah. Yeah she is."

"Fuck. Bill. If you *didn't* get performance anxiety around her, I'd be asking you what your secret was," Phil laughed. "There are tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of men who have jerked off to that girl you now call a partner."

"Know what's funny about it all though?"

"Wassat?"

"She's only been with three guys in her life before me, and they were all utter *shit* in the sack," Bill laughed, slapping his knee with one hand. "Once I found that out, well, my confidence came back to me a bit. I expected she'd had every piece of dick this side of the Mississippi she ever wanted, but it turns out that because of her job as a model, she'd always been keeping guys at a distance. So she didn't know shit about fuck all when it came to getting off, so I made sure I got her off a couple of times before I imprinted her. Made me the hero of the house for the last week and change. And now that Julia's talking about how cool I am, it's made me slightly cooler in Jen's eyes."

"Grace's too, I bet."

"Nah," Bill said, waving his hand in the air. "Grace and I have been together almost thirty years at this point. Not a whole lot's going to sway her opinion one way or the other."

Phil shook his head with a smile. "You've got an internationally recognized supermodel cumming out of the palm of your hand, and it's not even worth an attaboy from your wife? Tough crowd."

"Friend, you don't know the half of it! But it keeps me honest, so I can't complain too much, and Grace is still happy, so, happy wife happy life. It'll just be weird when I'm eventually showing up to Jen's college graduation with women who are *clearly* out of my league."

“It's going to be a very weird future, Bill,” Phil said. “Let's just worry about getting you *to* that graduation before we worry about what your daughter's friends think about you having one of your wives model lingerie for a living. Was that the good news? The stuff about young kids not being fatally affected?”

“That was *part* of it. The other part is that early data makes it look very likely that children of Quaranteam dosed parents will have strong to very strong resistance to DuoHalo, and the majority of the variants we've seen so far. We had a couple of pregnant mothers in our first handful of Quaranteam rounds, and one of them just gave birth to a healthy boy named David, and I gotta tell you, David does not give a *fuck* about DuoHalo. We've run his bloodwork against basically every variant that's come through these doors, and David's blood just murders it within *seconds*. Maybe we'll be able to do something with the antibodies he's generating, but I wouldn't hold your breath for us to be doing anything with it any time soon. Still, I like the sign that we're going to not have to worry about this with any kids we have moving forward. So assuming we make it through the next twenty years, the problem'll just go away. And the massive population drop means we're even doing less polluting and there's a better chance the planet's going to survive all those twenty years.”

“Well look at who just became a giant fucking ray of sunshine and optimism,” Phil chuckled. “Let's just put out an announcement now. 'Hey! People of the world! Assuming you don't die, it'll get better! Eventually! We're pretty sure!' That'll go over very well...”

“Better than 'News Flash: Everyone Going To Die Soon' would, I think,” Bill shrugged. He glanced over and gestured at Phil's Apple watch. “Looks like the missus is calling you.”

Phil glanced down and sure enough, Linda's face had appeared on it, as well as text indicating she was calling. He'd left his phone on silent/no vibrate so it was lucky that Bill had spotted it on his wrist. He pulled his phone out, tapped to turn it on and held it to his ear. “Hey Linda, what's up?”

“We need you down in your office, like, now babe,” she said to him. There was some kind of clatter going on behind her. “You know that lady from Spanish Intelligence you were supposed to be getting tomorrow? Well, she's here now and she's not gonna wait. So maybe you can come down here and take care of her now, and we can go to our debriefing afterwards? But we *really* need you here *now* if you take my meaning.”

“I'm already walking down that way now, Lin. See you in a minute.”

Linda's tone on the phone hadn't sounded panicked but more amused by the whole thing, though her word choice had definitely stressed that he not dawdle. So he made his way down the hallway, up the stairs, around the corner and back into his nestled office at the end of the hallway, opening the door to see Linda standing over a woman tied to a chair, Violet off to one side looking embarrassed. After a second glance, Phil realized it was Paloma Gallagos, the woman from the Spanish National Intelligence Centre, the former spy who'd been traded away to their country in order for her family to get priority access to the Quaranteam serum.

Paloma was in her mid thirties, with golden skin and jet black hair, a long and angular face that was still nonetheless very attractive. The woman was covered in sweat, however, and her facial expression was that of exhaustion, her eyes lidded closed, her head lolling around a bit, as if in a state of delirium. She was dressed in a black tank top and black cargo pants, although she didn't have shoes or socks on.

“Linda dear,” Phil said, “why is our soon to be partner tied up?”

“In the time between calling you and you getting here, I think I've figured it out,” Linda told him while making sure Paloma's wrists were bound to the chair. “Just after we left, Paloma came to get a tour of the place and to meet any of your partners who were still around. In this case, Violet. She did that European kiss on both cheeks thing, and I think Violet had some of your spunk dried up on her cheek, so it started up Paloma into the pre-imprinting.”

“Okay,” Phil said cautiously. “That explains why she looks exhausted, but again, why is she tied up?”

"I think it's easier if I show him instead of telling him, Paloma," Linda said, her voice almost kind and motherly, a side of her Phil didn't recall seeing. "Just the once. Then we'll get you imprinted nice and quick, okay?"

The Spanish woman whimpered then nodded.

"If I told you this, you wouldn't believe it, so watch closely, babe," Linda said to him. She reached down, pushing Paloma's thighs wide, and then very gingerly smoothed her fingertips against the woman's crotch through the cargo pants, and in immediate response, she seized up, letting a throaty moan escape from her mouth as it looked like she was in full bloom orgasm at even the lightest touch. Linda pulled her hand back, and the woman gasped and panted for breath, trying to twist and wriggle her hips, as if she could find no safe way to keep the feelings from reverberating throughout her. "It's like that at the littlest touch or caress. Nipples too. Woman's a hair's breadth away from an orgasm at all times, and she's fucking exhausted. She kept getting herself off and wouldn't stop, which is why we tied her wrists up. For her own good. So we need to get her imprinting, but I want you to make sure it's inside of her pussy, so she doesn't lose a drop of your spunk."

Linda had already reached down and was stroking his cock through his pants, as he looked from Paloma back to his partner. "Isn't that just going to be rough on her?" Phil asked her.

"She can't wait, and we're just gonna have to get you through it," Linda said, unbuttoning his jeans, pushing them down so that she could fish out his dick, giving long and deliberate strokes to it. "But you're barely gonna fuck her. I'm gonna get you most of the way there, and when you're starting to get close, you can push inside of her to get both of you over the last of it."

"Got it all planned out, do you?" Phil said, although he had to admit, Linda knew exactly how and where to touch him, and his prick was already rock hard within her calloused fingertips' grasp. "Think I'm just gonna pop as soon as you put me in her?"

"Shit, babe," Linda laughed. "If I were you, I would... she's gotta have the tightest cunt I've ever seen in all my life, and I've seen my fair share. Vi, get her pants off."

Violet nodded, reaching down to pull Paloma's pants along with the woman's cotton panties that were more sexual fluid than not at this point, the very sensation of the fabric brushing against Paloma's cunt setting her off on another orgasm again, the woman stamping one of her feet against floor. "Dios mio, I never thought I would say this, but I am fucking *tired* of cumming," Paloma groaned.

"Just another minute or two," Linda said to her before looking back at Phil. "Even without the hair trigger, she's pretty fucking hot, isn't she?"

"She's... she's kinda familiar looking, actually," Phil said.

"What? No. There's no fucking way you'd have ever met her. But shit, I dunno, maybe. You can ask her once she's locked in on our Team," Linda said with a laugh. "God, you're already so fucking slick wth precum? This some secret turn on I didn't know about?"

"It was... hell, it was astonishing how hard that woman came..."

"You're about to put all that to shame," Linda purred, starting to lead him over towards Paloma. "Paloma dear, if you want him to do it, you're gonna need to provide vocal confirmation."

"Dammit, man, does a girl have to come right out and say it when she wants you to fuck her? Get that pinga inside your puta and fucking do it already!" she hissed at him, her eyes closed, her knuckles white, she was gripping onto his chair's arms so tightly.

Phil moved to lift her legs, placing one of his hands on each of Paloma's hips as Linda kept his cock aimed and lined up. Sure enough, as he started to push in, she had a *very* snug pussy, and once the first few inches were in, she started clamping and spasming around him. Phil did his best to resist it, getting a few long and deep thrusts in, but around the fifth or sixth hilt deep pump, she vicelocked around him like dead man's switch, and started milking him as his orgasm burst from him and inside of her, Paloma letting out an almost feral howl of pleasure, her arms strong enough to rip the ropes and pull her arms free before finally slumping back into the chair, all of her muscles going slack at the same moment in time, as she began to whisper "imprinting" over and over again.

They did their best to get her on the couch and covered up, but the woman was as limp as overcooked pasta, practically oozing over them as they did their best. Ten minutes later, however, Phil, Linda and Violet were finishing their shower as Phil heard his cell phone beeping. They quickly toweled off and got dressed, then headed down to the briefing room, where Colonel Layla Robbins was waiting with Major General Fielder.

“Shit just got weird, Captain,” Layla said to Linda as they all moved into the room, sitting down. “We got an ID on your hit team, but fuck if I can figure out what to make of it.”

They all got seated, as Linda offered a shrug. “Okay, Colonel. Who the hell are they?”

The wall projector sprung to life and an image captured from Phil's car of the man with the machine gun popped onto the wall. “This is Kerry Butler. The guy driving the car's name is Paul Isaacs. As far as we can tell, they've got no affiliation to the Russians, the Chinese or any other known force that's been trying to get their hands on the base Quaranteam serum.”

“So if they're not Russian,” Phil said. “Who the hell are they here on behalf?”

“As far as *we* can tell? They're Z Special Unit,” Layla responded, as both Fielder and Linda nodded, while both Phil and Violet stared at them blankly.

“Fine,” Phil finally said, “I'll bite. Who the hell are Z Special Unit?”

Linda scowled. “Phil, it's the fucking *Australians*.”

He was *certain* he'd misheard.

“Whatnow?”

“Z Special Unit are a division of the Australian Special Operations Command.”

It was a very long time before anyone spoke again, but Phil just couldn't help himself.

“Are we at *war with Australia* and nobody thought to tell me?”

Chapter 11

October 22nd, 2020

While there were a lot of things Phil had adapted well to post Quaranteam, there were a handful of things that were still taking serious adjustment to. The biggest? Sharing a bed with as many people as he now did. Audrey and Linda had refused to sleep anywhere he wasn't, and every partner who'd been added to his family seemed to consider the matter. While the staff had been more than happy to remain in their own beds, and Tamika only swung by weekly for her fix, Paloma and his other new addition, Rochelle, also wanted to share his bed, so Phil had two women on either side of him at all the time, which meant he couldn't get up in the middle of the night if he wanted to.

After having been mostly single for most of the last decade, it had been easy to just get comfortable having the bed to himself. Hell, before the crisis had started, Phil hadn't bothered upgrading beyond the twin bed he'd had growing up. Once Linda and Aubrey had imprinted on him, though, that had immediately changed. Phil hadn't even known mattresses could be delivered as quickly as Linda had had a new bed – box springs, frame, and mattress – show up the day after her arrival, a move that had been a little pointless, because less than a month later they'd been moved into New Eden, where the house was already stocked in advance.

The bed in the house in New Eden easily fit everyone, although perhaps that was the incorrect way to think about it. There was *room* for everyone in the bed, should they want to sprawl out and have some space to themselves.

They didn't.

Or, rather, the *ladies* didn't.

And Phil was learning to deal with the fact that he was always going to be sleeping under a blanket of arms and legs, whether he was happy about it or not. Audrey always plastered herself on one side, and the other side seemed to get taken up by a rotating assortment of Linda, Yuko and Paloma. Rochelle liked being near him, but didn't need to be touching him, which was good, because the rotating position could be hotly contested some nights.

Originally, he'd made them settle it by having a Guilty Gear Xrd REV 2 tournament, but now all the girls had figured that out, and were spending half an hour a day practicing their fighting game skills in general, which, as sexy as it was, made solving problems even trickier. For now, he'd decided he was going to stay out of it, and let them solve the matter for themselves.

That did, however, mean he sometimes ended up in situations like the one he was currently in, where he wanted to get up, take a shower and get back to work, and instead he was... buried beneath a blanket of arms and legs. It was about half an hour earlier than he'd normally get up, but Phil was eager to get back to the lab, as there was some research that was starting to seem particularly promising. But Paloma was slowly rubbing her calf against his crotch through his boxers. He turned his head to look over at Paloma, who had a sly smile on her face, even though she had her eyes closed.

"You can pretend you're still asleep," Phil whispered to her, "or you can get up with me and we can go into the bathroom, and spend a little bit of time together before we need to wake the others and go to work."

Paloma didn't pretend to be asleep much longer.

Just after he'd given Paloma a nice big load, Linda moved in to join them, and before he knew it, he couldn't get out of the shower until he'd given a dose to Paloma, Linda, Yuko *and* Audrey. He was a little surprised the house staff weren't lined up as well when they finally got around to drying off. Phil wanted to make a joke about it, but all the girls were getting along so well, he felt like saying something was going to break the spell.

The group of them headed in to the base, leaving Violet back at home to sleep, although the plan was that starting soon, Paloma would take over some of Violet's shifts, so that she could have a chance to sleep in the same bed as Phil from time to time. Phil had been a little surprised that Linda had trusted Paloma that far, but as it turned out, even as different as the two were, they were alike in many more ways, and got with each other incredibly well. Linda had even made the Spanish woman an honorary member of Linda's Girls.

During the past week, Phil had been doing more than his fair share of digging into the Australians who'd attacked him, when he wasn't up to his nipples in DuoHalo research, anyway, which wasn't all that often. Z Special Unit were sort of the Australian equivalent of the Navy SEALs from the USA, or the SAS from England. They were a special forces unit designed for more complicated and subtle work, and their presence in New Eden certainly hadn't been by accident.

Although he wasn't actively being encouraged to keep tabs on such things, now that international negotiations were starting up on other nations obtaining the Quaranteam serum, he wanted to see exactly what the rest of the world was looking like, and after an initial shock to the system, Australia had done relatively well for itself, keeping most of its men in isolation, and apparently getting their hands on some black market doses of the Quaranteam serum, something that made Phil even *more* nervous about how the month was shaping up.

Had the Australians tried to get Phil in order to not to have to pay for the serum? Was that the extent of their plan, and if so, why hadn't it seemed like they were trying to take him alive? The most recent attack had felt more like an assassination attempt than a kidnapping operation. Did they have their *own* version of the serum? And if so, why weren't they using it or, more importantly, also offering it for sale?

The Aussies had been one of the leading countries engaged in negotiations with the US for priority access to the serum, and were already willing to pony up quite a bit in exchange for a high ranking spot on the waiting list. Was it a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was up to? Could their government really be *that* in the dark as to what their military was up to?

Butler and Isaacs, the two members of Z Special Unit they'd been able to identify, hadn't been apprehended, nor had they been spotted leaving the country, so no one was sure if they were laying low, waiting to strike again or they'd fled and just not been spotted. And official inquires to the Australian government were met with confused, if not concerned, replies, stating that both men were

considered presumed dead, having supposedly died in a botched operation some 18 months ago. 'Whatever they're up to,' the Australian PM claimed, 'we've got nothing to do with it. Seems like they went rogue. You'll be doing us a favor by killing them.'

So that hadn't been at all helpful.

And, as Fielder had told Phil, it all sounded like a very convenient plausible denial, the kind any real special ops team would have in place in advance of a particularly dangerous assignment.

It wasn't the only thing troubling Phil, no matter how much they were telling him to keep his head down and his eyes on improving the serum.

The Russians hadn't responded to hails for weeks now, and that was also quite troubling, because Phil *fucking knew* they had McCallister and as far as any of the satellite images were showing, they were still doing mass graves and burning incredibly large numbers of bodies. They *had* McCallister, and he *had* to have given them a working version of the Quaranteam serum by now, so why the fuck weren't the Russians *using* the goddamn thing? And if they were, why wasn't it *working* for them? And if it was, why were so many fucking people still dying in Russia?

Doses of Quaranteam had been delivered to a handful of close allies of the US, with the UK getting a test run of 50,000 doses, France and Germany 10k doses each, and a thousand doses to any country asking for "proof of concept" in late August. That was how they were in the process of selling it to the other countries – letting them see how it worked for themselves, and protecting some of the upper echelon within the existing power structures, the ones that were left anyway.

Phil couldn't decide if he was more amused or disgusted imagining the Royal Family of Great Britain getting paired up. He did feel a little guilty about it, knowing that there was a chance the rejuvenating side effects might youthen Queen Lizzie back a decade or two, if she got lucky. He also knew that they were likely bristling against the break from tradition harder than anybody else.

(He also wondered if they would have been as eager to take the serum if they'd known who'd developed it – based on how the Royals had treated Meghan Markle, he suspected the fact that he wasn't white might have affected the blue bloods willingness to trust the science.)

But the problems weren't just abroad, because the base itself was continuing to feel less and less like the place he'd been working at for the last few years and more like something else entirely. The building that Phil hadn't been allowed to go into continued to grow, and he still had no idea what the hell they were doing over there, because he wasn't allowed to go into it, other than it was "Air Force special operations."

Once a week, Linda would yell at the General about how she didn't like being kept in the dark about things happening at the base where she was a high ranking member of the security forces, only to be repeatedly told to worry about her protectorates and not the security of the base itself.

That building also had a ridiculous amount of data coming and going through it, because it seemed like every other week, they were laying even more fiber to the building. Phil couldn't even begin to imagine what was being done over there that would require such massive constant data transfer. Well, he *could* but he didn't *like* any of what his imagination had come up with.

He and Dr. Varma had been doing more research on a number of the new variants, including the incredibly troublesome Smooth Variant. Because what they'd feared they now had *proof* of. There were particular chemical markers in the virus that were 100% human made.

Someone had intentionally *improved* DuoHalo and had let it loose onto the world. And the *way* that they'd improved it made both him and Charlotte a lot more nervous, because it revealed *intent* . The virus had been improved in that it was transmissible longer, and the hair falling out was actually a marker that a person was no longer contagious, although weirdly enough, the hair *itself* still carried the virus with it for another day or so, and could easily jump into the lungs of someone cleaning up the hair. It was an *engineered* attempt to make the virus as transmissible as possible.

No one knew where Patient Zero for the Smooth Variant had come from, but they had clearly done a round the world trip and hit several major international airports. Even worse, it seemed like

whoever Patient Zero was, they'd gone about trying to make sure they were spreading the new strain as much as possible. It was almost like they'd chosen the maximum number of airports they could hit while criss-crossing the globe without ever stopping.

He'd gotten reports that Andy and his Team had arrived at their house about a month ago, but had been ordered to remain in the manor for the first month before exploring New Eden itself, which was actually for the best, even though Phil didn't want to be the one to lecture Andy on how to live his life. The months of September and October were the busiest that New Eden had ever seen, between all the rush work infrastructure that was needed to scale up and insulate the colony even more than original.

Security had been intended to be a sort of optional side benefit, but after McCallister had been exfiltrated and people had taken a couple of shots at Phil himself, the security for New Eden had skyrocketed, and on the day Andy and his Team had moved in, they were in the process of putting fences up around every single border of New Eden. Guards were being added to the perimeter, and extra forces were being brought in so that there was a border patrol around New Eden twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Having a border guard would've taken some getting used to, but immediately after the Aussie agents had taken their shot at him, it had been decided that New Eden was on one-way lockdown. People came in, but they didn't go out, with the exception of the people who were running out for supplies, and those people were going through screenings that made the TSA look mall cops one week from retirement. Without a virtually unquestionable reason to leave, people needed to remain within the borders of New Eden at all time for the foreseeable future. That managed to do something truly astonishing...

...it pissed off literally *everyone*.

The order had been handed down by someone *above* Major General Fielder, and Fielder had been following the order to the letter, but his displeasure about the order had been spilling out onto pretty much everyone on the base. He'd been stomping around and snapping at the drop of a hat. Linda had told him that she thought it was because he felt like he was no longer in *complete* control of the base, and that outside forces were starting to take too much of an interest in the day to day workings of everything. That meant Fielder was micromanaging far more than he should've been. And he was only one of hundreds of people who were no longer functioning at the top of their game.

All the scientists had also gotten pissed, because it had gone from "you'll have a few months to move all your stuff into your new homes" to "everything that's not here right now will get brought to you eventually, get used to the idea" in a single shift. Bill had been the *least* grumpy about it and he'd still been a complete pain in the ass.

The military forces on and around the base only compounded the anger, as the people on the base felt like their performance was being questioned by the new increase in border security, and the new border forces had an attitude that felt something like 'well, if you'd done your job *properly* you wouldn't have needed our asses here,' and were happy to express that at a moment's notice.

In addition to all the internal pressure, the external pressure kept building at a ridiculous rate, but it seemed like all the internal debates about how hard to push the Quaranteam serum to the American public had been settled. It was clear now that they weren't going to get another path through at any point soon, so they needed to lean hard on protecting the American people, no matter how odd or unusual the serum was, or how unconventional the new way of life was going to end up being.

DuoHalo had cut through the veins of the American people with no mercy and no cessation, and it wasn't stopping. The biggest part of the problem, especially with the newer strains, was the lack of early symptoms. People could catch DuoHalo and be contagious for up to two weeks before they might be presenting. That meant there was little chance to track where it had been picked up or how many people that person had been in contact with. The damn thing was a sleeper agent, laying in wait and building an army, right up until the moment that it killed you.

With the early strains, the danger had presented early, but it was almost like whoever had been

tampering with the virus had *wanted* to ensure that it reached every single person on the planet eventually, something that it looked like was definitely going to happen within the next year or so.

For now, however, with death tolls so ridiculously high, the transmission rate was starting to decline. Not because the virus was any less contagious than it had been before – if anything, the new strains seemed to lie in wait even longer before presenting symptoms, which meant it was infecting a greater amount of people – but because there were so fewer people around to catch it.

That had put the Executive Branch into shock. The longer they waited, the more likely it was there wouldn't be any men left to *save*, so the military had gone into full active deployment across the country, functioning as additional labor for the Corps of Engineers, as well as all the construction crews that were trying to get as many new safe harbors up and running as they could.

They had also drafted up a plan that was called Operation: Sudden Shock. In an effort to keep the casualty rates contained and secret from the public at large, at the beginning of December, a letter would be sent to every surviving person in America with a list of family members they had whom had died due to DuoHalo. The strict shelter-in-place orders had worked wonders at keeping most people in the dark with how many people had actually died – they were just under the assumption that their loved ones were in urgent care, and that the doctors simply didn't have time to keep individuals abreast, because there were so many cases, when in fact, their loved ones had died weeks or even months ago, and simply no one had the time to tell them, or, more accurately, they'd been ordered *not* to inform next-of-kin of the passing, so as to prevent widespread panic.

As a nation, though, they were getting closer to that every day. The dam of silence would only hold so long, and very soon, it was going to break, if they didn't act soon.

Plans were being made for a Presidential Address to happen before the end of the year, and Operation: Sudden Shock would happen soon after it did. The hope was that because there would be so many people to grieve all at once, the sudden shock of it all would overload the synapses, and people would simply let the shock of much of the mental anguish wash over them, similar to pain gating theory, where once a level of pain was too high, other pains all simply disappeared into the background, even when they were still present.

It would be a collective trauma, shared by everyone in the world, but one they could manage and work their way through, over time.

That was the theory, anyway, and psychologists and psychiatrists were working overtime to try and find the best way to manage it all. This was the best they had currently come up with, and Phil couldn't say he was at all pleased by it, even if it wasn't his direct problem to solve.

Even crazier than all that, however, was the fact that the conspiracy nuts were starting to get uncomfortably close to the truth with their rantings and ravings. There had been an increase in people calling talk shows to complain about 'secret government colonies' being built all over the country, but as much as Phil wanted to dismiss them, they were right on the money, going so far as to have actual locations and maps drawn up. Of course, they weren't right about *everything*. Despite how great it sounded in concept, the Quaranteam serum couldn't be aerosolized, so they couldn't fly it over and use 'chemtrails' in the air to distribute it, no matter how time and cost effective it *sounded*.

(Of course, Phil had also been *incredibly* depressed to find that no, the Air Force *didn't* in fact have access to secret alien technology that would help them in this moment of crisis. His dreams of flying across the country in a silver flying saucer with the USAF logo on the side of it had died hard that particular day.)

They were also starting to seriously ramp up the number of partners that existing men had, and within the span of a couple of months, many of the men already in the program were likely going to get a little overwhelmed. Phil had looked at the docket of what was coming down the pipeline, and Andy had been stable at six partners since not long after his arrival in New Eden – his three actual partners, and the three members of the staff – but there were going to be a lot more showing up soon.

Andy's seventh was actually scheduled for today, a case of opportunity where someone had

asked to be put with the Rook household. New partners were currently on pause for most of the people in New Eden, but it wasn't going to remain that way for very long at all. Andy had between one and three arriving close to Halloween, and then in early November, Phil would have a talk with Andy to see if there was anyone in the world he wanted to extend a personal invitation to. Otherwise they were just going to open the flood gates on him and let the women start pouring in.

By the end of October, the Air Force was going to have the relocation efforts in full effect, doing everything it needed to get people across the country to their new partners, to get people safe in their new homes. They were ramping up efforts for it now, doing some initial testing work and operating at maybe 10-25% capacity, but in about three to four weeks time, America would be going through the biggest relocation of its population since the Gold Rush of 1848.

They'd consulted with him a little, mostly asking how people could be safely transported without contracting or spreading DuoHalo, and every time he gave them an answer, they seemed equal parts shocked, appalled or entertained.

Part of it, Phil had told them, was down to how fast women were going to be relocated. If it could be done fast enough, it would be easy enough to assume they already had DuoHalo in their system, and it didn't matter who they spread it to, because everyone would be getting the serum when they got where they were going. As long as the soldiers were already partnered up, they would just need to have sex with one of their partners, and whatever DuoHalo had infected them would likely die off as a result.

If they wanted to be more careful, Phil pointed out that everyone could be put into their own small oxygen tent bubble from acquisition to delivery at the serum injection location.

Relocating *men* would be an entirely more complicated set of problems, to which Phil's first piece of advice was “don't” followed by “hermetically seal them in something.” After continual requests, he finally made a step-by-step process of what it would take to get a man out of his home, relocate him to a new home and keep him from dying of DuoHalo along the way. Imprinting a woman on them en route was definitely a recommended option. Even a single partner increased a man's resistance so much that it would likely keep the man alive if exposed along the way.

They'd come back to him with schematics for what they were calling “Sky Love Buses,” which were cargo planes whose large compartments had been changed into small mini isolation units, that could hold multiple men in small chambers. They were going to try and have at least one woman ready for imprinting in the compartment when they went to get the man, so that both of them would have a level of protection in transit. In fact, they'd actually developed a system called Merry-Go-Round, which would keep track of who was paired with whom, where they were, and how they were being moved around the country.

When it came to relocating large groups of women, however, the Air Force had a much more direct route, simply filling 747s with women and bringing them to an inoculation center. As long as all the military members managing the large groups of women were imprinted or imprinted upon, they wouldn't even need to be wearing masks. If it made people feel safer to see masks and goggles, though, then by all means, Phil's memo said, go for it.

The thing that bothered Phil the most, however, was contained in the margins of some of the proposals, notes that had been scrawled into consideration by one person or another who didn't intend on taking credit for the idea. That was the problem with ideas – they were just as contagious as viruses.

In one of the margins, there was talk of something they were calling the MAPS, an anagram which stood for Male American Positional System. It was purely theoretical, for now, but the idea seemed to be gaining support throughout the mostly female run government.

As a concept, it couldn't be simpler. Men were important to America now, because of their scarcity, which meant the government wanted to know where they were at all times.

“For their own protection.”

They were talking about permanently lo-jacking every male in America like it was the most

rational thing in the world, like it wasn't a gross invasion of privacy and personal autonomy. If the proposal made it out of committee, at the push of a button, any person in the government with access could know, down to a couple of feet, the exact position of any American male.

The very thought of it chilled him to the bone, and while Phil had always considered himself pro-choice, he now felt even more empathy for all the women who'd had to endure all the times the government had tried to mandate how they used their bodies.

Because the government was seriously considering not letting him be trusted with the location of his own.

There were plenty of people bringing new data to him, Bill insisting that it looked like the age range of immunity for youth might even go as high as eleven or twelve years of age, but for the rest of the afternoon, Phil was caught up in writing the angriest memo he possibly could, stating how unequivocally opposed he was to the idea of tracking men, and that if the plan moved forward, he would cease his research in protest.

He hoped it would be enough.

Chapter 12

October 26th, 2020

It seemed like his raging memo had done the trick, because the last few days, all talk about strapping tracking anklets to every living man in America had come to a complete standstill, although he suspected that they were probably still continuing, just with him not on the thread anymore. But his threat to stop working on further research had been echoed by a number of his colleagues on the thread, so he suspected they were reevaluating whether it was worth the potential uprising they might get if they went through with it.

Research into a better solution hadn't turned out any solid results, but a couple of researchers on his team were making progress towards separating the serum from the vaccination, although Phil believed them about as far as he could throw them. They were junior researchers, and so they liked to over promise and under deliver. He had warned them that the people in charge of the project wouldn't be anywhere near as relaxed about it as he would, but they were young, and young people liked to throw caution to the wind until they were burned a few times first. That singeing of their wings would be educational to them.

Today, however, he was scheduled to have a lunch meeting with a man he'd been hearing a lot about but hadn't actually met – Arthur Covington the 4th, a person he'd been hearing about for months but hadn't actually met.

Covington was reportedly the kind of person Phil had grown up hating, the sort of person who was convinced their money gave them free license to do whatever they wanted to whoever they want, and that their wealth put them completely above reproach. He'd bought his way into New Eden before the pandemic was even starting, and now that it was in full swing, he was trying to convince the powers that be that his money enabled him to make decisions for the rest of the world. He'd been one of the contributors towards getting a second wave of military on the base, which had put him somewhat at odds with General Fielder, but for some reason, the General wasn't willing to take his anger out on Covington himself.

Maybe Covington's money was that much of a shield. Maybe he really was that untouchable, even to the power of the US military. Or maybe Covington had dirt on Fielder that he was using to ensure his suggestions were always enacted without much in the way of resistance.

Regardless of how Covington had gotten his influence, he was wielding it more and more openly these days, having basically dictated that Phil meet up with him for a lunch meeting, off base, no less, which made Linda's blood boil, but there was only so far she could go in contradicting direct orders from the General.

The diner that Covington had asked them to meet up at was a place called 'Better Days,' and it

was themed after the sort of 1950s nostalgia that had fueled things like the show *Happy Days*, although to Phil's eyes, it was mostly just a reminder of the hyperidealized fantasy that older white folks seemed to have about how the country used to be, but never really was. He practically expected to see a sign up saying “no hippies, no colored, no Irish” and was thankful when he didn't.

The place didn't have any customers in it, with the owner seemingly manning the grill and a couple of his partners working to staff the place. It was a tactic he'd seen done for a number of the businesses that had opened inside of New Eden. Most of the businesses weren't owned and run by people who'd originally been categorized as Level 5s, but the Level 5s wanted New Eden to have all the amenities they felt like they were entitled to, so a support community called Little Eden had been built next to New Eden, also within the quarantine zone.

Little Eden was an invitation-only community, and business owners had been reached out to before the pandemic had even started, but once the lockdown had happened, the invitation to come to Little Eden and serve the residents of New Eden had come with the promise of surviving the pandemic, and that was a hard thing to pass up.

Phil had been through Little Eden, and while the houses there weren't mansions by any stretch of the imagination, they were nice, sizable houses, designed to handle large households of six to ten. That had been planned so that the business owners could have children, a school even set up within New Eden that would serve both New Eden and Little Eden, but now the houses were tending to additional partners. Children would definitely be on the way, though.

The original proposals had been distressingly overwhelming Caucasian, and he'd put his foot down, insisting that there be restaurants catering to a wide variety of ethnic tastes. He had enough sway to ensure that there would be good sisig, good pho, good szechuan food, and damn good tacos, in addition to all the things that were white people staples like cheesesteaks and burgers.

And while Covington could've had their lunch meeting at any of the less Caucasian places, of course he'd chosen the throwback burgers'n'fries joint. He'd expected Covington to show up with some of his partners, so Linda had insisted Phil bring a few of his as well, so Linda, Audrey and Tamika, with Paloma providing overwatch for the building from a sniper's perch across the street.

The prick entered the building like he owned it, looking around the place before his eyes settled on Phil and his partners. He was dressed in an all-white suit, escorted by a large brute of a woman that he didn't recognize on one side, and one of the researchers from the base, Dr. Rachel DeMarco, whom he sort of knew from her work with the program, although she had come in with the second wave and didn't report in to him. There were so many people on the base these days that he was glad that he even recognized her, but after McCallister, he'd made a point to learn as much as he could about anyone who had access to his research. And while the man hadn't even said a word to him yet, Phil already wanted to punch him in the fucking face.

“Ah, you must be Mister Marcos,” Covington said, walking over towards him, his gait slow and deliberate, as if he was enjoying wasting Phil's time.

“It's *Doctor* Marcos, *Mister* Covington, and you'll do well to remember that if you want this conversation to progress much further,” Phil shot back. “I'm only here because General Fielder made it sound like I needed to give you half an hour of my time, but that's the exact amount I've had dictated to me that I have to give you, so if you think I'm going to talk with you any longer than that, especially if you can't remember my well-earned title, you will be sorely disappointed.”

“My most sincerest apologies, *Doctor* Marcos,” Covington said, as Rachel moved to sit down first, then Covington himself, the giantess preferring to stand, her eyes moving to keep watch on the door, having obviously decided that Phil and his family weren't real threats. “I did not mean to offend. I knew that many of the people working on the Quaranteam serum weren't doctors, so I took a guess and guessed poorly. I should have asked Rachel, but she and I are having a bit of a spat currently, so she's not talking to me. I'll find some way to make it up to her, I'm certain. But since it's clear you're very important over at The Garden—”

“The what?”

“Oh, Rachel calls your base The Garden, what with the town being called New Eden.”

“Does that make the serum the Apple?”

“Don't go thinking you're God, Doctor Marcos,” Covington warned. “You've made a very powerful tool that is saving the life of all the men of the world fortunate enough to get it, but remember all of those whom never got a chance to take your little miracle drug.”

“I'm well aware how the thing I helped make is only saving as many people as it can get to, and that that number isn't anywhere near as high I'd like it to be. And you reminding me of that doesn't raise your estimation in my eyes. If anything, it lowers it. I know who I am and what it is I'm doing, far better than you do, I imagine. So, again, I repeat... what do you want? Why am I here?”

“You're here, Doctor Marcos, so I can get a look at you, first and foremost. You're a very important person in terms of the research going on right now, and so I think it's essential I know a bit more about you, and the directions you're currently pressing on your research.”

“I'm working to try and find a way to inoculate gay men and gay women, but I haven't had any luck with that. So far. It's been very high on my priority list.”

“And you think that's important, do you?” Covington said, with a sort of odd detachment.

“You don't? I think it's vitally important,” Phil responded. “I think the solution we have is currently serving a large collection of people, but we're letting down those for whom the solution doesn't work, and it's my obligation to get a solution for those people as soon as I possibly can.”

“Mmm,” Covington replied. “I suppose, but I don't think they're worth consuming *all* of your time, do you?”

“I didn't *say* it was *all* of my time, but it's a *lot* of my time. I *do* think they're worth it, though. If anything, they're *more* important than anyone else right now, because we don't have anything *for* them. Why, is there something else *you* think I should be working on?”

“I think you should be working on ensuring that the next generation is going to be taken care of. I understand that we're looking at fatalities in many of our children?”

“Yes and no,” Phil said, trying to gauge exactly what it was the man was looking to learn from him with this line of questioning. “Kids up until the age of about 11 or 12 will catch DuoHalo, get very sick but almost always make a full recovery. Something like 98-99% survival rate.”

“And the teenagers?”

He sighed, giving a little shrug. “It's already too late, I think. Basically anyone between the ages of 13 and 17, even pushing up to some 18 year olds, for whatever reason they're *extremely* vulnerable to DuoHalo, and I think they're nearly completely dead, across the globe. They were hit early, and there's nothing we can really do for them.”

“Aren't we due to have that problem with all the children under the age of 11 as they age up into that age range?” Covington asked, clearly not having anywhere near as much access to the data as Phil had thought that he had.

“No, that's one of the few places we got *really* lucky. Kids that age after they have DuoHalo seem to have a natural immunity that prevents the disease from affecting them a second time around, even if they're carrying it. That's both good and bad, because it means they're keeping the virus around and spreading it to other people, but they aren't going to have to worry about taking the Quaranteam serum, or about the virus causing more problems for them further down the line.”

“Unless it mutates again,” Rachel interjected.

“Yes, well, if it mutates again, it's anybody's game what it's going to do, and we'll all be scrambling to keep ourselves ahead of whatever the problem is,” Phil replied. “You should know that by now, Dr. DeMarco. Whenever we get a curveball thrown at us, we all just do what we can to keep on swinging.”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed. “I just don't want Arthur getting the idea that we don't have new priorities being thrust on us each and every day. Because he seems to think we all have the luxury of

just living in our own little crystal palaces and can ignore the rest of the world. The world is very unpredictable, and you and I are spending most of our days just trying to keep our heads above water.”

“I understand that, my dear, but what I'm trying to get a handle on is how Doctor Marcos thinks we're going to come through all of this, and that's something that many of your medical friends have gone to great lengths to keep private.”

“And I'm trying to discern what it is you *really* want to ask me, Mister Covington,” Phil shot back. “If you're trying to determine if I'm subtly shaping the direction of the country, I assure you, sir, I am trying to save every living soul I'm capable of, regardless of race, gender, orientation or financial status. I do not make exceptions for anyone.”

“Yes. Well. Since you wish to be blunt, what I'm *truly* trying to learn about you, Doctor Marcos, is if you are the kind of man who would engage in the exchange of favors, mostly just keeping me abreast of what sort of developments you're having over there at The Garden, so I'm not caught like a child with his trousers down when chaos breaks out, especially if I could have simply gotten a heads up in advance. Like with this McCallister fellow. If I had known there was someone we weren't supposed to be letting out of the country, I could've spoken to my people and put the word out and perhaps we could've apprehended this fellow before he was able to flee to our enemies abroad.”

Phil's eyes turned to look at Rachel, as he frowned at her. “That's classified information you're bandying about rather casually there, Mister Covington, and I would caution you about discussing such things in public,” he said in a low, insistent tone. “I'm obligated to notify the General about this conversation as soon as I get back to the base, in fact. Because this entire conversation constitutes a potential security leak.”

Covington waved a hand at him dismissively. “I have all the clearance I need, Doctor Marcos. And you failed to answer my question. Would you be interested in a quid pro quo, where you provided me with up-to-date information in a real time fashion about what threats we are currently facing, in exchange for which I would provide financial and social easement for you and your family?”

“No, Mister Covington, I think you can safely assume that I am not,” Phil said, shaking his head a little. “Not only is it in violation of both the contracts I signed with Boeing and the Air Force, the very thought of it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, one that I can't say I'd be eager to have as a permanent fixture. You have nothing to offer me that I am not entirely capable of getting myself.”

“Don't be too certain of that, Doctor Marcos,” Covington said as he and Rachel moved to get up from the table. At least Phil had been able to convey to him how much his presence wasn't welcome. The man hadn't even had time to order lunch, but then again, neither had Phil. He suspected the wait staff had seen the very tense conversation and had chosen to remain distant until it had cooled off a little, at which point they would approach. “You might find yourself in need of my assistance sooner than you think. I am a man of quite immense and powerful resources.”

“You very well might be, Mister Covington, but it doesn't mean shit to me, so why don't you fuck off, before we have to test who's security team is more eager for a fight,” Phil said. “My money's on Linda, but then again, she's pulled my ass out of two firefights so far, and outmaneuvered a drone trying to drop bombs on me.” He grinned maliciously at the older man, staring him down. “So what do you think, hm?”

“Not today, Doctor Marcos. But soon, perhaps. Perhaps even sooner than you might expect. Be seeing you,” he said as he and his two partners moved to exit the diner, Phil exhaling a deep breath of tension when they did.

“Jesus, what a fucking *prick*,” Phil muttered to himself once the man was gone. “I've never had to look up 'white privilege' in the dictionary, but I'm pretty certain if you did, you'd have a spot on description of that asshole in graphic detail in the example section.”

“Yeah, well, you've done your due diligence now and don't have to worry about his sorry ass again.”

“Somehow I'm certain I haven't heard the last from that asshole, Linda.”

“Old white crackers gonna crack on,” Tamika said, not looking up from her phone. Phil was sort of amazed that she hadn't looked up from it the entire time, holding some insanely long conversation with one of her friends via text. Phil had never quite understood how people could type that much for that long with their thumbs, but during the time they'd been sitting in the diner, he was certain the girl had written a small chunk of 'War & Peace' into her Galaxy. His hands hurt just thinking about it. Phantom thumb pain.

“She's got a point,” Audrey said with a smile, pretending to lightly punch the girl in the shoulder, which made Tamika look up and grin at.

“Well, we're here,” Linda said. “Might as well have lunch.”

Just as she'd said that, Phil's phone beeped, and he chuckled. “Looks like we'll have company. Hopefully Covington's stink isn't still in the air. That was Andy. They're just coming into downtown to see the town square of New Eden and wanted to know if we wanted to meet up at the diner. I told him we're already here.”

“It was luck, then,” Linda said.

“Or fate,” Phil replied.

“Theirs or ours?”

“It could hardly be one without the other.”

“Fate,” Linda said once more, with a note of resigned acceptance, and Andy and his family walked in through the door.

As they approached the table, Phil wondered how Linda and Niko were going to play it, since as far as he knew, Niko hadn't indicated that she knew any of Phil's partners before now, even though she'd been working on the base. He wondered if she'd simply chosen to dodge the question, or wave it off as him not having full clearance to hear about what she did when she was on base.

“Hey Phil,” Andy said to him as he approached the table, clearly looking happy to be out of the house. “Audrey. You already know both Lauren and Aisling, but this is Niko. I know Niko's met Phil before, but I don't believe we've met your other two companions.”

“I've met one of them,” Niko said, as she slid into the booth, offering half a salute to the blonde. Clearly Niko intended to play it off as casual coworkers, not 'hey I'm sitting with my boss' vibes, hoping Linda would dismiss the otherwise inappropriate casualness. “Captain.”

Linda seemed to be taking her cues from Niko, although Phil had no doubt the two of them had discussed some level of backstory in advance of this moment. Linda was far too much a planner to let that sort of thing just slide by. “Lieutenant. Hi Andy, I'm Linda, and this is Tamika,” Linda told them. “2nd Lieutenant Red Wolf and I are stationed together, although I suppose we're both stationed here now.” Tamika seemed mostly interested in her cellphone, not even looking up to say hello.

“Yeah, if you don't mind me asking, Captain, what are we going to do?” Niko said, scooting until she was right next to the captain. From Phil's vantage point, he could see Niko slip Linda a small thumbdrive, which Linda immediately pocketed before anyone noticed it. With her having been quarantined in the new Rook Manor for the past three weeks, she hadn't had a whole lot to do, so Linda had told him Niko had a few thoughts on their protocols moving forward, which she'd put into file she wanted to hand off in person. Phil almost wondered if Linda and Niko had coordinated this meeting on their own without his or Andy's knowledge. He wouldn't put it past Linda, not that he minded.

“They're moving all our work within the walls,” Linda said, playing it off like both of them had ever been doing work outside of the base within New Eden. “So I guess we'll have a tiny base on site before month's end.”

“Roger that.”

“How you holding up, Phil?” Andy said, sliding in next to Niko, Aisling sliding in after him, Lauren moving in last. “I know you weren't originally planning on having multiple partners.”

'Oh Andy, you sweet sweet naive boy,' Phil thought to himself. The gulf between what Phil knew and what Andy *thought* Phil knew was wider than the Suez Canal. While he'd had as many

partners as Andy had, if not more, since the whole thing had started, he'd always sort of projected to Andy that he was keeping a small household. Sooner or later, he was going to have to let Andy in on everything, but he had to wait until the paperwork came through granting his friend officially top-secret clearance, at least in regards to the Quaranteam serum and the DuoHalo epidemic.

“Well, the world's not up to what I want any more, Andy,” he sighed. “But I'm making it work, even if I am a bit more tired than I used to be.”

“We had to set up a shift schedule of who gets intimacy time with Phil,” Audrey said, giggling a little bit about it while poking Phil. She wasn't kidding, but was keeping it vague, because nobody could remember what Andy was and wasn't supposed to know. Eventually they were just going to bring Andy in from the cold, keep him abreast of everything, but there were levels upon levels of paperwork that had to get done in advance of that, and the waiting was driving his whole house crazy. “I'm surprised you haven't had to set something up like that.”

“Andy's learned that we keep his best interests in mind,” Aisling laughed. “And we know about what his limits are, and rarely try and push him past them.”

“How's the new place?” Phil asked his friend, as Linda and Niko slid out of the booth to go and talk a little bit outside of the earshot of Andy. “Bet it blew your mind when they drove you up there.”

“I still don't think I really need a mansion, Phil.”

‘Oh Andy, if only you knew just how much *pussy* the government's about to start throwing at you, you'd be down on your *knees* thanking me for getting you a house large enough that you all fit in and out of that tiny-ass condo you were in before,’ he thought. But it was probably safe to tell Andy at least some of that, considering how fast things were about to start moving.

“You say that now, but believe me, in about two weeks’ time, you'll be thankful for all the room. There's going to be an influx of new partners quickly, as we're struggling to get as many people vaccinated as we can as quickly as we can, which means there isn't as much time as we'd like to let everyone get acclimated.”

“Mmm,” Lauren sniffed. “The newest member of our family showed up just before we got here.”

“You sound unhappy, Lauren,” Audrey said. Phil couldn't argue with that. Lauren looked annoyed and Phil immediately realized he must've missed something. One thing he was doing after the debacle with Lily's friend was keeping tabs on each pairing all of his friends were getting. Taylor, the girl they'd just been sent, seemed like she would be fine, with no red flags, so he wondered what the hell he'd overlooked.

“Well, she's my ex-girlfriend who cheated on me, but we'll work it out, I guess.”

“Ouch. That sort of thing's not supposed to happen, but I suppose sometimes it slips through the cracks,” Phil grumbled. Of course they weren't doing full prior relationship screenings. It was yet another thing that nobody had had time to think about. At least they had set it up that people could decline pairings now – women were being offered the chance to decline before they were sent, and men were offered the chance to decline upon arrival. It was a little manipulative it being set up that way, because their psychologists had told them it would be much *much* harder for men to turn women down to their faces, so it would roll into a sort of almost automatic acceptance. “Everything's gotten so much harder to manage now that we're moving at warp speed. The death rate spiked on the east coast, and everybody freaked, so people who were hoping to get a later version of the vaccine without the, ah, side effects, are now practically storming the facilities, demanding to get injected with it, no matter what it does to them, as long as it protects them from the virus.”

“Yeah, I saw reports saying that a European company thinks they're close, but nobody's ready yet,” Aisling said. “Are we shipping this vaccine anywhere else?”

“Hell, Ash,” Phil sighed, “we've barely got enough for the west coast right now. They're struggling to get more manufactured for the rest of the US, but we aren't in any state to be able to provide it to other countries right now.” It was a complete and total lie about the state they were in and

the virus distribution, but until Andy was cleared, he had to keep his friend as in the dark as possible. The international deals were getting closer each and every day.

“I only ask for my brother back in Dublin. He desperately wants to leave the house, but I keep telling him, stay inside and stay safe.”

“That's all most people can do right now,” Phil nodded. Maybe he could find a way to have doses sent out to specific people, but right now, he just didn't have the time, and he certainly didn't have the authority to do it without getting permission. Thankfully, Eric arrived to derail the conversation. “Hey, look who's here! Slide into the bench, Eric.”

Eric had arrived with Lily, Jenny and Sarah, the most recent addition to the House of Yang. Phil had worried a little that Sarah might have ruffled some of Lily's feathers, but Eric didn't even mention Rita, his bodyguard, who was likely outside of the place, keeping overwatch. Maybe she and Paloma were having a conversation. “Hey everybody!”

For the next couple of hours, everyone was trying to settle into their new normal. Phil and Eric both knew so much more than Andy did, but Eric was under the same orders Phil was – don't let Andy peek behind the curtain until he'd had the complete background check finished to give him all his clearances. The various partners of all the households seemed to be getting along well, and Linda and Niko had slipped out at one point to take food out to Paloma and Rita without Andy catching sight of it. When they were coming back in, Andy was about to look over that way, but Phil told Andy that he was going to step outside for a few minutes to vape up to distract him, which worked. Andy and Eric both admitted with all the people talking, it was getting harder for them to hear each other.

“You holding up okay, Eric?” Andy asked his former roommate. “You look a little overwhelmed.” He wasn't wrong, but Eric wouldn't be able to give Andy the real reasons – Long Thought was involved in a lot of the negotiations between other countries, so they were doing such heady conceptual agreements even Phil didn't like reading the daily updates.

“Let's just say I'm a bit in social overload. That and trying to get settled in the new place is doing my head in.” Eric leaned his back against the outside of the diner, stretching his arms over his head. While the mansion might have been a bit much for him to adapt to, the bit about social overload sounded like horseshit to Phil. “And I'm sore from all the fucking. And I miss the cats.” Both of the last two reasons checked out, though.

“Why don't you guys come over next Saturday then, and we'll all hang out. Have ourselves a party like we used to. Any of the other members of the old gang getting moved into the complex?”

Phil nodded. “Ari and his five women will be moved on site before the end of the week. He had plenty of space before, but when they offered him a free trade-up, he didn't say no. Oh, and I don't know if you knew Jenna or not, but she's part of a family now, and they're being moved here next week, so a couple more people and the whole board game group will be back together again. We can play Ascension again, or poker, or both!”

Eric nodded. “Yeah, I'd like that.”

“Cool. We'll consider it a party, then. Oh, hell. We can even make it a costume party for Halloween. I don't imagine we'll get much in the way of trick or treaters here.”

Phil wagged a finger at him. While there weren't a giant amount of children in New Eden, there were *plenty* in Little Eden, and as part of the 'trying to feel normal again,' all the residents of Little Eden had been encouraged to take their kids out trick or treating to the mansions of New Eden, and the residents of New Eden were being told to have candy on hand. Nobody had told Andy yet, clearly, so Phil decided to make the point clearly. “You'll get trick or treaters, I'd bet on it. There's nearly a hundred children here in the village, so they'll make a point of hitting every house they possibly can.”

“All the better then.”

“So are you really doing okay with Lauren's ex being added to your household?” Phil asked with genuine concern. If they hadn't imprinted Taylor yet, Phil could still have someone come by and move her to another household. “I figured you might not have been able to speak your mind in front of

her, so I thought I'd ask now that she can't hear.”

“It came as a bit of a shock, but we're making it work, I guess, or, rather, Lauren is,” Andy said with a shrug. If Andy didn't think it was a problem, then Phil resolved not to worry about it. Andy had always been one of the best judge of characters, so Phil would trust him. “I told Lauren that whatever she came up with, I'd go along with, whether that be sending her back to the Air Force or inviting her into the family. She, that is, Taylor, Lauren's ex, is being punished for what she did to Lauren before, but she'll eventually be allowed into the family, as per Lauren's decision.”

“Do I even want to ask how Lauren's punishing her?” Eric said with a laugh.

Andy joined in the laugh. “You do not.” He stopped, scrunched up his face, then smirked. Phil had to do his best not to laugh *too* openly, because he was certain that Niko had told Linda what had happened, and that meant Linda would tell him. “Well, you might, but let's just say don't fuck with the ladies of the Rook household. Payback is a...”

“Hey!” Niko said, having just stuck her head out the door. “Get your asses back in here. They're bringing us desserts!”

Once dessert was finished, everyone went their separate ways, with Andy and his family heading out to explore the town, and Eric and his family heading home. Phil was going to head back to the office, but Linda instead took him to the back of the diner, and pushed him into the bathroom, along with Audrey and Tamika.

“We're not heading back to the office?” he chuckled, as they locked the door to the small, private bathroom.

“Oh, we are,” Linda chuckled, as she moved to position Phil's back against the tile wall of the bathroom, lifting his right arm up, pinning it in place as Audrey did the same with his other arm, keeping him from moving, as Tamika finally put her phone into her purse, grinning at him as she dropped to her knees.

“I always wanted to do this some place good and public,” she said, as she unbuttoned his jeans, tugging them down just enough to pull out his cock, shoving her face down onto it immediately, as Audrey leaned her head in to press her lips against Phil's, so his moans were falling into her mouth.

Tamika may have been young, but the girl had serious skills, as she started bobbing her head up and down on his dick, forcing her mouth all the way to the base of it before drawing back, slurping loudly, like she wanted them to be caught, or at least for one of the waitresses to hear what she was up to. Phil hadn't put Tamika down as an exhibitionist, but he had promised to tend to whatever needs the girl had, he would indulge.

The last month or so had been particularly confusing for the young black girl, who had confessed she was starting to soften on her 'chicks only' philosophy, something Phil had made a little concerned. When Tamika had joined the House of Marcos, she'd been an adamant lesbian, but over the last few weeks, she'd actually told Phil she was starting to feel like she considered him attractive, and that she might eventually want to fuck him. The announcement had taken everyone aback, and Phil had immediately made an appointment for Tamika to spend some time in counseling. He didn't want to be taking advantage of her, something Tamika had insisted he wasn't, and it had opened an entire other path of research he needed to do, because Tamika wasn't the only strident lesbian who had taken the serum out of desperation and was slowly starting to find their bonded partner sexually attractive, but *only* their bonded partner.

It had Phil worried for moral reasons, but Tamika had been adamant that he wasn't making her do anything she didn't want, and now she was vigorously sucking on his prick like she was taking satisfaction from his very rapidly racing heartbeat and his shallow breaths.

“This was her idea, babe,” Linda whispered into his ear. “So you may need to start wrapping your head around this.”

Tamika popped her head off his cock with a wet slurp before looking up at him with a wicked grin. “Gonna make me work for it, huh? Game on, motherfucker.”

He had no idea where she'd been getting lessons on how to suck cock from – although he wouldn't be surprised to find it might have been Audrey or Linda – but she'd taken all the lessons very seriously, and only a minute or two later, when her lips were around the base of his dick, he felt his body giving way as he spurted against the back of her throat, which only made Tamika moan more eagerly on his dick, the taste of his jizz sending her into an intense orgasm of her own.

When she finally popped her lips off his cock, she looked up at him and made sure she didn't have any of his jism escaping her mouth, a strange smile on her lips. “Yeah,” she laughed. “Sooner or later, Mister Marcos, you and I are gonna *fuuuuuuck*...”

Chapter 13

October 28th, 2020

The whole damn thing was starting to come apart at the seams, and Phil wasn't entirely certain what the hell any of them could really do about it. The news was going to break soon about the deaths that the nation was facing, and the cover stories they were using to try and hold it under were beginning to chip away. The cover up really wasn't one of his priorities, but he knew that the better it held up, the easier it would be to get people through the process.

Hospitals had even been given emergency doses of the serum, for what were called ‘Hail Mary’ cases. In a last ditch effort to try and save men who'd been infected with DuoHalo, women were being directed to try and keep whatever men they could alive, so if there was an unimprinted woman near a man who'd come into the ER with DuoHalo, if she thought she could even *vaguely* be a match for him, emergency authorization for dosing the woman with the Quaranteam serum and her getting imprinted on the man immediately had been authorized. The so-called ‘Hail Mary’ program had resulted in at least fifty men who would've been fatal cases of DuoHalo making a complete recovery, although they had lost a few as well, and had been forced to reimprint those women using the necrotized sperm method, something nobody *liked* doing, but was the only possible option at that point.

The Air Force was doing what it could now to start really moving people from place to place, and it was being done in so many different methods that Phil had trouble keeping track of them. There were Air Force cargo planes transporting people back and forth, but they had also just temporarily commandeered a number of commercial airlines as well. The main difference was that the commercial flights were full purely of women, and the Air Force cargo planes had men on them, but each in their own quarantined plastic bubble. It was a lot of people to have to relocate, but it was life and death, and the Air Force was doing their best to manage the situation.

The lab at New Eden had expanded even further, so they could do more and more injections every day, and the observation time post-injection was dropping every day. The idea was that they'd gotten comfortable enough with the process that if something went wrong in the period of time between injection and imprinting, they'd know it almost immediately, so observation time had fallen from 12 hours down to just an hour or so now, unless candidates had extremely uncommon conditions, like exposure to dengue fever, malaria, shingles, scurvy or other medical complications.

In preparation for Andy's party in a few days, the girls were all starting to put together costumes, including making one for him, just because his free time seemed to have disappear somewhere along the way.

“Hey babe,” Linda told him. “I think we need to take a field trip. You up for getting off the base for a day?”

Phil looked up from his workstation with a thankful expression on his face. Anything to get him out of New Eden would be a welcome respite. Before he'd had the advantage of going to see Andy, but with Andy and his family safely tucked away inside the walls of New Eden, the idea of going anywhere had become almost impossible. The ordered lockdown had been quite strict, so if there was something that called for him to go off site, even if just for a few hours, he was going to take it without hesitation. “Absolutely. You sure we're going to be safe?”

“It won’t just be us,” Linda said. “You’ll be one of four doctors we’re going to take to visit a handful of locations. We want to get a number of perspectives on how the high rises are going to function before we start moving people into them en masse. They’re already doing it for a couple of them, but you know what a mess San Francisco is, so we’re going to do a tour of four different sites, evaluate each of them not just individually but collectively as well.”

“Let’s get to it, then.”

“Ah ah,” Linda said. “One sec.” She reached behind her and grabbed a bullet proof vest, sliding it on over Phil’s shoulders, strapping it in place before grabbing a light jacket, pulling it over it, so that the vest was completely concealed. “I’m done taking risks, and if we’re going to be outside of what I feel like is a safe zone, we’re taking all available precautions.”

“All precautions?”

“It’ll be you, me, Paloma *and* Violet, so you’re safe as houses. Basically, all the dignitaries on this little excursion will have no less than two personal security escorts.”

“But I’m getting three?”

“Because you’re my special boy,” Linda teased with a laugh. “And because my safety’s dependent on yours. I’m not in favor of you going off base, but I think in this particular case it’s important that we do so. And when I tell you that I need you to come and take a look at something, just do it, okay?”

Phil’s expression devolved into a little scowl. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“It might not even be able to happen, but if it can, I think I’m going to buy you a little bit of time for a one-on-one conversation offsite where we know nobody’s listening. We’ll see if that works or not. It’s going to be done on the fly.” She flicked her fingers in his direction. “Set yourself as Out of Office for the day, and let’s get going.”

They headed upstairs and over to the motor pool, where they were taking Humvees to drive off the New Eden estate, bulletproofed within an inch of their life. Phil couldn’t see who was in the other Humvees, but the minute they passed the gate marking the edge of New Eden, he felt himself give a deep sigh of relief. He hadn’t realized how weird it had been staying within the borders of New Eden, and in some ways, he could empathize now with the people who were starting to go stir crazy from the confinement of being told to stay at home and not go out for anything. He had a whole town he could move around, and yet the concept of “go no further than this” was enough to put everyone ill at ease.

The Humvees headed down 680 before taking the interchange to switch to 580 heading west. The freeway was basically still abandoned, although Phil could see the occasional car out and about, never quite sure if it was someone who was safe to be going out or someone taking their life in their own hands. The drive down 580 into Oakland was especially peaceful, the giant mountains on either side of them mostly barren of trees, providing a stark contrast to the quiet hills of New Eden, which had been overwhelmed with foliage, so as to provide everyone with a high level of privacy.

“It is so peaceful out here,” Paloma said, her voice still heavily tinged with that European Spanish accent. “I do not imagine it was this way before the pandemic set in.”

“You were never out to the Bay before you relocated here?” Phil asked her. He and Paloma were slowly learning to trust one another, peeling away layers of the woman’s spy instincts a bit at a time. It wasn’t that she wasn’t warm or friendly, merely that she avoided giving any personal information by way of reflex. The less she said about herself, the less lies she had to remember. But Phil had pointed out time and again that they were part of a family unit now, and Paloma was doing her best to let her mental defenses down a little bit when it came to him.

“No,” she said. “I’d never left Europe before this. Much of my work was internal security within the borders of Spain, although I did, from time to time, have to venture out into other parts of Europe. I had often wondered what the draw of America was, but agreed to be part of the cultural exchange, and now I find myself considering how truly remarkable much of the land is here. I do hope that I will find the people as palatable when I’m able to meet more of them.”

She had her hand on Phil's thigh, as she often did when she was sitting next to him. Phil wasn't entirely sure if it had been something in her particular genetic makeup or if something environmental had given her a stronger than anticipated reaction to the Quaranteam serum, but Paloma had gone from nearly ice cold before her imprinting to liking to have as much physical contact with Phil as she could get, even if it was just sitting near him with one of her feet pressed against his leg. She almost seemed like she needed the constant reassurance that he was nearby, and was always eager for physical affection, ready to escalate things at a moment's notice if Phil gave any inclination of being in the mood. Her fingers on his thigh were always just a few inches away from his cock, as if she was just waiting for him to give her the signal. He'd gone out of his way to make sure he wasn't giving her false go signals, but also to keep her satisfied. In addition to needing to be near him, she also had a much shorter refractory period in terms of needing regular doses. The average timeframe for most women on how long they could go between doses was about ten days, but if Paloma had gone more than five days, she would get itchy and agitated. It was something that had Phil studying her bloodwork during his increasingly rare spare time. He wondered if it was a reaction to something in her specific genetic makeup or reacting to some environmental factor that had altered her body somewhere along her life.

"We aren't going to have time for you to scratch your itch on the way there, Paloma, but if it's really bothering you, by the time we're heading back to the base, it should be dark enough that I don't think anyone'll be looking into our windows, if you really can't wait," Linda said. He'd expected Linda to be a bit more paranoid with Paloma, but the two women had spent *extensive* time talking when he was otherwise occupied, and they'd seemed to find some common ground, an understanding between women of similar professions who were now united behind one cause, that of keeping his ass safe.

"I appreciate that, Linda," Paloma said. "I may well take you up on that. I tend to find the more men I am around, the faster my need for Phil's release grows."

Phil frowned a little, taking out his iPhone and opening the Note he kept on Paloma's various oddities, adding in yet another line item into his list of strangeness she experienced regularly. "Going to sound like a weird question, Paloma, but have you noticed that your sense of smell has gotten stronger?"

"Yes," she said, as if the realization was just dawning on her. "And I can distinguish between many men by scent. You, your friend Andy, Dr. McKenna especially, but I think I can recognize perhaps as many as a dozen different men by scent alone. Is... is that problematic?"

"No, not per se," Phil said, "but it is unusual, so let me make a note of it. We've had reports of some women gaining enhanced sense of smell post imprinting, but it's generally been restricted to being able to identify their partner at short ranges. Being able to recognize *other* men? I think that's a new one."

"But there's nothing... wrong... with me?"

"Hey," Phil said, taking her hand and squeezing it. "Stop getting in your head about it, okay? Everyone's reacting to this stuff very differently, and there's no right or wrong way for it to be. Whatever changes it's making to you, we'll get through them together."

Paloma smiled, looking down at her hand being held by him, then looking back up at him nervously. "Thank you, Phil. I do not remember being this easily emotional before the treatment."

He gave her a sly little wink. "Well, that's one thing I think you have in common with a *lot* of the women who've taken Quaranteam – more raw and intense emotions."

"We're all right there with you, Paloma," Violet said. The busty airman typically liked to remain a little removed from conversations, but the last few weeks, she'd started coming out of her shell and interacting with all of the rest of the women in Phil's Team more, as if it had finally sunk in that they were all going to be part of her life for the foreseeable future. "Just don't push yourself when you don't have to."

The Humvees exited the highway close to the Bay, just on the outskirts of Oakland. There had been a number of mini high-rise complexes along the waterfront, but the entire aesthetic had certainly

changed. Phil knew that many of the buildings had been filled with bodies months ago, but the National Guard had been mobilized to do sweep and purges for corpses. Many of the buildings had been completely emptied out.

“We’re going to stop here and take a look at one of these buildings, Phil,” Linda told him. “The bosses want you to see if the way they’re structuring these places will work, or if there’s something they aren’t thinking about.”

The four Humvees split, two and two, one pair in front of different buildings. The other person wasn’t someone Phil recognized, as the two groups moved into the lobby, where they were met by a member of the building refinement team, an armed soldier from the National Guard operating as his bodyguard. “Hey there. I’m Joe Raynor, renovation site manager. This is Corporal Hensen, my, uh, partner and protector,” Joe said to them. He was the sort of guy who looked like he was in way over his head, struggling to keep himself sane by just focusing on the project and not looking much at the world around him. Hensen, by contrast, looked like she was making it her job to keep eyes on everything else, and as such, her and Linda met eyes immediately, nodding in respect of each other. “Let’s take an elevator up a couple of floors, and I can show you how the building is put together.”

The other group with Phil’s was made up of two people in suits, a man and a woman, and two women in camo, holding weapons. Clearly the couple were the VIPs, but Phil didn’t recognize either of them and didn’t want to tip his hand that he didn’t know who they were or why they were there.

Once in the elevator, Joe waved a keycard in front of the elevator at which point the box seemed to unlock. He pushed 4, seeming to pick a floor at random, although Phil had been through enough of these surprise inspections to know that it was carefully planned and would be the floor they had in the best shape in the building.

When the elevator hit 4, the doors opened and the three groups of people stepped out into a small lobby. The area around the elevator was mostly circular, and there were a few bare couches against the walls, indicating it could be used as some sort of waiting area.

“So these buildings were big enough that even if a man’s Team got to be rather big, giving them a whole floor to themselves would be excessive,” Joe told them, leading them over towards one of the four doors. “Each of these four doors opens to its own quadrant of the building, which we’ve done our best to convert into a stand-alone area for each Team. That means 14 converted and retrofitted apartments transformed into one large unit with about 20 bedrooms for men and women and a dozen or so rooms that can start as nurseries and be converted into rooms for kids as Teams start the hard work of repopulating the country.”

He opened the door and led them all through it. Phil could see signs of the old structure still there – it was impossible to remove the central hallway that ran down the length of the building, although in many cases, the front doors or even the front walls of many of the apartments had been removed, leaving it open and exposed to the long main hallway. “I imagine you had a lot of excess wasted space, once you considered all this space for one family,” Phil said as they moved down the long hallway.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Some of it was easy to reclaim and do other things with, but some of it was an utter bitch to figure out how to deal with, like the kitchen space in all the units. We ended up converting one entire apartment into a master kitchen for the whole unit, and left a couple of the further units with functioning kitchens, but for most of them, we just expanded the main room so that the living room, dining room and kitchen just became one big open space for each Team to use as they see fit. We left most of the excess power lines in there but had to cap off loads of water lines and the like. And we’ve got a shitload of relatively brand-new fridges and stoves that we don’t really need. I think someone said they’re going to be reclaimed, but at this point, I imagine we’ve got way too much stuff for way too few people across the board.”

Phil nodded. “Wouldn’t surprise me one bit.”

They stepped down towards the far end of the hallway, and Joe led them into one of the exposed

converted units. As soon as they set foot in it, Phil could see what the man meant about converting the space. The kitchen had been extended to take over what used to be someone's entire condo, tile having replaced carpet, a large prep station out in the living room, a number of fridges lining the wall, as well as a couple of large-scale freezers. "This was one of the one-bedroom units, and the bedroom itself has been converted into a pantry, so the Team can be stocked up on supplies just in case this whole DuoHalo thing goes further south on us."

"We're hoping it won't," Phil said.

"Hope in one hand, shit in the other," the man in the suit said to Phil snidely. "See which fills up first."

"I'm sorry, you are?"

The woman reached her hand forward, pushing the man back just a little bit. "Sorry Doctor Marcos," she said. "We should've introduced ourselves. I'm Senator Caroline Giancola from the great state of Kansas, and this is my husband Colin. We're here getting a tour of what everything's going to look like once we move past all the death and destruction. Obviously, we don't have as many metropolitan areas in Kansas as you folks have out here in California, which makes it even more important that we get them right and don't screw the pooch during our consolidations."

"Hell," Phil said, "I think the Bay Area alone has about twice the population as your whole state does, Senator. But I suspected that considering how much farmland you have out there that your casualty rates would be significantly lower."

"*Somewhat* lower, but certainly not massively lower," the Senator sighed. "The distribution of people and lack of urban centers meant it was easier for many people to respect quarantine, but I think some of that was traded off by other people who thought it was nothing but a hoax and that they could ignore it with impunity. Kansas had about 1.4 million men in it last year; now, we think that number's closer to two or three hundred thousand. We're doing what we can, but the transmission rate on this damn virus is off the charts, and almost a quarter of the population of our state is under 18, so you can imagine how the loss of so many children has eaten into our resilience."

Phil frowned, nodding in understanding. "I wasn't trying to make light of your problems, Senator, simply point out that they're an entirely different set of problems than ours. I wouldn't think hubs like we're putting together out here would be necessary for your state."

"I want to see how you're doing it all so we can decide how we want to approach restructuring cities like Wichita and Kansas City," she sighed. "We can't afford to just abandon our urban centers, but we're going to have so much unoccupied real estate, it's going to be disturbing."

He sighed. "Yeah, I'm trying not to think too much about that myself, just because the last thing I want to do is imagine how empty San Francisco's going to be after all of this. It used to be a giant commuter city, but now, it's going to be a lot more like a ghost town. The last thing I want is for it to basically be given up on, which is why we're doing things the way we are. The concept is to make new village centers clustered around several of these buildings, giving everyone new neighborhoods, even if it is for rather large and unwieldy family units."

"I suspect Kansas is just going to need to expand a lot of farmhouses to include a lot more rooms," the Senator chuckled. "But it might also be a boom in terms of construction for new homes as we struggle to keep up with it."

"I heard there was some talk about deploying the Corps of Engineers to try and build almost templated large-scale houses across the country, but you'd know far more about that than I would, Senator. I'm mostly focused on the medicine and trying to keep people alive."

"How's that going, by the way?" she asked as their guide took them from the converted unit that had been transformed into a large kitchen/dining room into the end corner unit, which had basically been stripped and converted into one massively giant bedroom with many walk-in closets sort of lining the main room. It also had a gloriously large view looking out over Alameda and onto the Bay itself, with windows that Phil suspected were reflective on the outside, so people couldn't spy inward.

“The faster we can get everyone spun up on taking Quaranteam, the better I’ll feel,” he said. “I think all of the states have come around now, so it’s just a question of getting it out and in front of people. I understand the need for trying to keep the casualties quiet, but at some point, you’re going to have to come clean about how bad the losses are.”

“I’m well aware, Doctor Marcos, and many of us have been pressuring the new President to be transparent about such things, but she’s overwhelmed by so much to have to pick up so suddenly, and the losses, well, they’re enough to send pretty much anyone into fits of despair.”

“I get that, but inaction’s going to lead us to more problems.”

“The current plan is go public with everything by the end of next month, at which point we should have a pretty good sense of what needs doing and what’s just going to be impossible for us to get caught up on.”

“Giving up on anything seems like a dangerous proposition.”

“I hope that you’re right,” she said. “We should be moving on to the next location, though. We have three more sites to see today.”

They all headed back to the elevator and then into their Humvee and drove across the Bay Bridge into San Francisco itself. The next building they were taken to was the prestigious 181 Fremont tower, and the place was under all sorts of work still, but the plan was that each floor would be its own self-contained unit, and that each floor would have access cards to let people in and out, although the top floor penthouse would be incorporated into the floor below it for a particularly large Team to be moved into. The site’s foreman described how they were in talks to organize some kind of lottery in terms of placement, as each floor represented about 7,000 square feet, so the top floor itself would definitely be a prestigious placement.

From there, the Humvees headed southwest to Pacifica, a sleepy little coastal town southwest of San Francisco proper, right along the coast. As it turned out, a number of mini towers had been built with almost lightning speed, each somewhere between five and ten stories tall, a cluster of them near Skyline College, and they were already having people moved in. This, Phil was told, was going to be a sort of special place where those with particular clearances would be allowed to live and work, a combination of tech developers and those in the military and intelligence services. They were calling it Valhalla Shores. In addition to the towers, they’d also started building quick McMansions in places where a lot of charming houses had once stood. They were also in the process of gating off the whole community, much like they’d done with New Eden. It would all be its own private gated community.

It was on the tour of one of the Valhalla Shores towers that Linda pulled Phil away from the group for a few minutes, leading him up onto the roof, where he saw a familiar face he’d never really been able to have much time talking with – Miguel Cunningham.

The man was a slightly portly Hispanic man in his early 50s, with a scruffy five o’clock shadow that was far too thick to just be whiskers but not long enough to be considered a beard. He was wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt, red and white floral patterns, and he was nervously pacing, his partner and handler, a Latina Air Force Captain with a name bar that read Diaz. “Thank Christ you’re here, Phil,” Miguel said to him as Linda closed the door behind them, the four of them standing isolated on the roof in a nice little nook, out of sight of anyone and anything. “Your partner said you’re the one who found the back door into my code?”

“Well, indirectly,” he admitted. “You didn’t know about it?”

“*Know about it?*” Miguel spat, anger fuming from every pore he had. “It’s not supposed to be fucking *possible*. The system’s supposed to have a dozen safeguards to prevent this kind of thing! I mean, if people want to pair up and not use the system, shit man, have at it, but giving false reports? Ignoring actual pairing data? I thought I built the system better than that.”

“I think it was done by someone intentionally so they can just get paired with anyone they want to,” Phil said. “How many people would have access to be able to get down to the root level of access you’d need to work on your code in that way?”

“Five, ten *tops*. Most of whom are people I thought I could trust,” Miguel said, still pacing. “If they’re fucking with this, though, who’s to say they aren’t fucking with everything? Your formula, the pairings, fucking *everything* man!”

“Miguel, calm down,” Phil said, grabbing the man’s shoulder to get him to hold still. “We need to look into it, I agree, but we’ve got to do it together and we’ve got to do it quietly. I need to know who we can trust and who we can’t, because I’m pretty sure the Major General has to be in the loop, and that means we’re going to need to find a way to go above him to make sure this gets fixed.”

Miguel nodded frantically. “Right. Right. *Right*. Learn everything we can before anyone knows we’re onto them. Measure twice; cut once. How do we keep swapping messages without anyone knowing? I feel like our phones and offices are probably tapped.”

“We keep it lo-fi and old school,” Phil told him. “Handwritten notes in an altoids tin wrapped in plastic stashed in the reservoir of the toilet in the 1950s diner in New Eden. I know it sounds weird but...”

“But we don’t know who we can trust,” Miguel agreed. “Good. Yes.” He looked down and then looked up, smiling a little bit. “I’m glad you’re on the side of the angels, Phil.”

“You and me, amigo, we’re in this together...”

Chapter 14

October 31st, 2020

It wouldn’t be Halloween without Andy throwing a costume party, and it was the perfect excuse for everyone to cut loose and relax a little bit. They didn’t have a lot of time to put costumes together because in typical Andy fashion, he’d been so distracted that he didn’t think about putting the party together until almost the last minute. But Phil and his family were more than ready for it and decided to even go along with a theme – Street Fighter.

Phil had done the Ryu costume a couple of times, but he’d always done it by himself, and the idea of having an entire team of fighters with him felt great. Audrey was dressed up as Chun Li, the outfit a little tight on her, but Phil could tell she liked it that way. Linda, on the other hand, was *killing it* as Cammy, her hair braided in two long tails, the red beret atop that, long red fingerless gloves on her forearms and the classic olive-green leotard exposing almost all her legs and ass cheeks. She’d even added green camo paint, just to make sure it was clear who she was. Phil had told her that if she wanted to go in Cammy’s updated costume, he wouldn’t have minded, but Linda’s only response had been, “If you’ve got it, *flaunt it*.” Tamika had found herself a bright magenta wig, and the rest of Poison’s costume hadn’t been that hard to acquire, being that it was really just a ripped white muscle t-shirt and the shortest jean shorts she could find. She had the whip, too, though, and seemed to be enjoying practicing with it. Yuko was going to introduce herself to the Rooks dressed up as Sakura, and she seemed to be looking forward to it.

Paloma wasn’t quite ready to meet everyone yet and decided that the party really needed someone watching the walls anyway, so she was going to get out just before they arrived at the party and would be patrolling the exterior of it, as well as sort of vetting any parents and children who might come by trick or treating. She wasn’t going to go and shake them down, but it was easy enough to do a quick cursory scan over them to make sure they weren’t providing cover for an attack or anything.

Being inside of Andy’s new house, most of Andy’s partners were still getting ready when Phil and his family arrived, so the decision was made for the three of them to go and sit down to play some poker, one of their favorite past times, and one they’d been super lax about, what with the quarantine in effect. But now that Phil, Eric and Andy could all move about New Eden freely, they needed to go about setting up a regular night of the week for poker again.

One of the things Phil had sent over for Andy’s place was a designated poker table with green felt, along with a long metal case full of actual clay chips. He’d thought about buying Andy a Shufflemaster, but it felt like maybe that would’ve been going a bit too far. Besides, they all enjoyed

taking turns shuffling. Phil, in particular, shuffled for long periods of time in between hands, but it was because he was something of a fidgeter, so during the rest of the time, he was often rifling his chips together in and out of stacks. He'd had the fidgeting habit since he was a teenager, and no matter what he tried to do, he'd never been able to fully shake it.

They never liked to play for big money but having at least a few dollars in the game gave it some sense of meaning, so it didn't feel like they were just dicking around for no reason at all. It was also a chance for them to just catch up with one another and have some face time. One of the things that they'd all realized years ago was that if they weren't scheduling regular times to hang out, inevitably they'd just overstuff their schedules until they were constantly busy. Phil fully expected some of the ladies to start rotating into the poker game at some point, but he didn't want to volunteer anybody until the host stepped forward and asked them to join the original trio. He knew Linda was eager to get a turn in the game but wasn't going to be rude about it.

They were only a couple of hands in it when Andy got his first ring at the doorbell, and he was off to answer it himself, leaving just him and Eric at the table, which was good. It gave the two of them a chance to exchange information on the sly.

"You get access to the same report I got this morning, Phil?" Eric said.

"The one about where it's from?" Phil responded. "Yeah, although even with all their corroborating data, it's still so fucking hard to believe someone *built* the fucking thing intentionally."

"You think *that's* the most shocking thing from that report?"

Phil chuckled, offering a little shrug. "I've always thought the Kiwis were too nice to be trusted. They're like Polynesian Canadians – that level of civility *has* to be hiding something. Anything on *your* end that isn't in the report?"

"Well, they didn't *deliberately* release the damn thing. Based on what intel we've been able to piece together, a sample of it was being transported from a lab in Wellington to a lab in Hong Kong through Sydney in mid-January. We don't have video footage of it to confirm this was accidental, but all circumstantial evidence points towards the bag having fallen off a conveyor belt between flights and down on top of an air duct intake vent, where the ruptured cannister leaked and filled the air for almost two weeks before anyone noticed it. Odorless. Colorless. Completely undetected. And because of how the cannister ruptured, each time a drop of the virus came out of the container and fell into the vents, that single drop was viable for twenty-four hours, infecting tens of thousands of people. It turns out literally *all* the earliest cases of DuoHalo can be tracked back to exposure in Sydney airport, but after a couple of days, the damage was already too far along to be rolled back," Eric sighed. "And it went *two weeks* before anyone found the bag."

"So why the hell did the Aussies send people to try and kidnap me?"

"It wasn't just you," Eric chuckled. "We think they also tried making a pass at McCallister at some point, trying to snag him from the Russians. They went in quarantine *hard* very early on, and we figured they might have had some inside information, but we didn't know it was that they were basically ground zero for where the damn thing was accidentally released."

"Why not share that with us in the first place, y'know?"

"Intercepted communique say they were worried we would think they'd made the virus, even though it's interesting to note that New Zealand went into lockdown the actual *day* the bag spilled in Sydney Airport. We don't *think* it was intentional, but we figure that once the bag didn't get to where it was supposed to go, they panicked as well, and just locked everyone out. That's why they have a zero percent DuoHalo infection rate in New Zealand."

"Wait, they didn't get it? *At all*?"

"They've still got fucking teenagers *alive*, Phil. *ALL OF THEM*. Like, half a million boys and girls between the ages of ten and nineteen, almost all of which would be dead *anywhere else*. And that's why the Kiwis are freaking the fuck out. If they get *one* case on their island, it's half a million kids dead within a matter of days. And our serum can't do fuck all to fix that. So they're trying to figure out

what the hell do they do – stay completely isolated from the rest of the planet for a decade? Try and some way to modify our serum? They're scared out of their fucking minds. Their current expectation is they're just going to wade it out, and see if we can come up with some other answer for them in the next few years."

"And Australia?" Phil asked.

"They got hit harder than almost anyone else in the world, barring the Russians and the Chinese, who, we're guessing, just said 'fuck it, let the people die,' rather than come ask us for help. Although whatever McCallister brought over to them has staunched the hemorrhaging for the time being, not that they had all that many more men left to lose," Eric sighed. "Talk about being totally up shit creek without a paddle. We still haven't even been able to establish communications channels with the Chinese government, so we're still only *guessing* about what's happening over there. The Australians tried to quarantine hardcore at first, but you know that place, it's more like a federation of various states than a single proper unified country. So, some people were very good about it, and loads of people said, yeah, fuck it. They're chickens with their heads cut off."

Andy walked back into the room and sat down at the table with a smile, picking up the deck of cards, starting to shuffle it. "That's wild, man. Seeing kids trick or treating."

"How old?"

"Seven or eight, maybe," Andy responded, dealing out individual cards out to each of them, one then another. They usually started with classic Texas Hold'em before they would get into the weird variations they often did as the night went on. "There was something so remarkably... normal about all of it. Kids shouting 'trick or treat,' putting candies in bags... it was like for just a fraction of a second, I forget all about these viruses and all the deaths and could pretend the world was back to normal."

"In your very expensive mansion that's been given to you by the government," Eric joked.

"Look, let me pretend for half a minute, okay?" Andy laughed.

"Check," Phil said after glancing at his cards.

"You can't check, Phil," Eric chuckled. "Either you're calling or you're out."

"Fine, I call then," Phil said, adding some chips into the pot.

A few hands later, the girls wandered into the room to show off their costumes, all the members of Andy's house finally gotten to the point where they were ready to be praised and gazed upon. Niko was dressed as one of the characters from Andy's books, the mortician if Phil remembered correctly, and he saw the unmistakable smile wide on Andy's face as she moved to slide down on his lap, slipping an arm around him. "You like?"

"No, I absolutely hate it," he laughed, sticking his tongue out at her. "You look stunning. You all look stunning."

"Lauren worried she was too tall to pull off the Black Canary, but I told her that in those fishnets, you wouldn't give a fuck."

"You would absolutely be right."

Niko gestured for him to tip up his hole cards so she could look at them, which he did briefly then tipped them back down. "Looks like you're doing well." Phil wasn't entirely sure if she was being honest or just poking fun at how little the chips had moved around.

"Ah, we're mostly playing for fun," Eric said.

Niko winked over in his direction. "Sure. That's why your chip stack is so utterly small." To be fair, Eric had lost big in the first three hands, but if it came down to it, he could always buy back in again. They weren't stingy about that kind of thing.

"Absolutely," Lily said, moving to stand behind Eric. "And it certainly isn't because my man has no poker face whatsoever." Which Phil found hilarious – Eric was *remarkable* at keeping secrets, but literally did *not* have a poker face to save his life. He'd usually taken to trying not to look at people too much when either he had a very bad *or* a very good hand, but it hadn't been helping him enough for him to be in either his or Andy's league if they were taking it seriously, which they generally weren't.

Audrey moved to stand behind him, sliding her hands on his shoulders. She was very demonstrative physically with her affection, something he'd found he really liked. He hadn't thought of himself as a touchy-feely person before this whole thing had started, but physical contact had been the important discovery that had kept his mind focused during the troubled times. "Phil's usually pretty good at poker, though," she said, kissing his cheek. "Although I heard Andy's always been better."

Andy shrugged, playing it off with that polite humility that Phil had to admit he'd always been amazed by. "I'm not bad. I mean, I wouldn't drop ten K of my own money to enter the World Series of Poker, but I usually come out at least a little bit ahead at poker nights." Andy wasn't *always* the biggest winner, but if you looked at it statistically over the long haul, he was definitely the most profitable.

"Go easy on them then I guess, Andy. How high are the stakes?" Niko asked, clearly wiggling her ass in his lap, trying to distract him off his game. "Are we rich yet?"

Andy cocked his head to one side, mocking a frown upon his face. "Have you missed the mansion we now live in?" Phil had to smirk at that, glad that the windfall he'd helped engineer for his friend hadn't gone to his head.

"Sure, but that's not *money* money," she teased. "What're you playing for?"

Eric laughed. "Big, big money." He looked left, looked right, then leaned forward while putting his hand over one side of his mouth and stage whispering to her. "Twenty dollars is the buy in." He widened his eyes and nodded in her direction, like it was his life savings they were talking about.

Niko rolled her eyes, which made Phil chuckle. What had she expected, that they were playing for pink slips? "Forget what I said about going easy on them. Take them for everything they're worth."

"Oh, and the loser has to buy dinner for the next game night," Phil said. "Or, at least, they used to have to, but that was before we all got our own private staff."

"I can't remember the last time Andy bought dinner," Eric grumbled.

"I don't know that he ever has," Phil sighed. "I think it's all the rest of us just passing the buck around."

The doorbell rang, and Niko slid off his lap. "Who else are we expecting?" She'd clearly missed the bell the last time the bell rang with trick or treaters, but it was true they were still expecting at least a couple more attendees for certain.

Phil rolled his eyes upward in thought. "Ari and his family are coming. Jenna's hooked up with some guy named Dale, so they said they'd stop by. Mel told me he couldn't make it this time but would try and catch us for the next get together." Nobody had heard from Lesser Phil, so they'd put him down as a no.

"I'll go see who it is."

Phil and Eric could hear "Trick or treat!" shouted from the door, and multiple of Andy's partners moved to bum rush the door, eager to look in at the tiny smiling faces in costumes, waving politely to the parents who stood out in the driveway.

For the next hour or so, it was either trick or treaters or additional people. Ari's family had grown to a respectable number, and nobody was expecting Jenna to be hooked up with a himbo beefcake like Dale, although to be fair Dale worked for the FBI and certainly seemed a lot smarter than he gave off on his first impression. Lesser Phil even managed to put in an appearance, although he showed up entirely on his own, not bringing any of his partners with him, but Lesser Phil had always been the kind of person to do things differently, and LP said that his partners would be over to meet people eventually, but that they were still dealing with the trauma of having lost so many men in their lives, each of them coming from large families full of brothers all of whom had been taken during the early waves.

It was a great party, though, with loads of people laughing, and Andy, as always, having a wild collection of spooky Halloween music mixed with campy classics like 'The Monster Mash.' At one point when they were changing dealers, Linda gestured for Phil to leave the table for a moment. "A'ight, I'm out the next hand or two, guys. I'll be right back."

“Don’t whip him too hard, Linda!” Andy teased as Phil moved away from the table and over towards a corner of the room away from most of the people.

“What’s up?” he asked her, an odd smile on her face.

“What’s the policy on women hooking up with women outside of the family?” Linda asked him cautiously, her expression giving absolutely nothing away other than perhaps amusement, but Phil’s eyes widened anyway.

“Somebody else’s partner hit on you?” he said, but he found himself smiling along with her. “I mean, I can’t say I blame them, but... can I ask who it is?”

“Andy’s first, Aisling, the smoking hot redhead.”

“Well,” Phil chuckled, “if that description didn’t tip your hand on how you feel about the matter...”

“If you’d rather I don’t do anything, Phil, I won’t. I haven’t yet, but she’s coming on pretty strong, so I figured I’d better at least mention it to you.”

“... do you want to hook up with her?”

“I mean, it could be fun, and it’d be nice to lay down the pretense for at least a little bit with someone outside of the women I see all the damn time. But is it safe?”

“Look, as long as you don’t come into contact with any of Andy’s semen, and she doesn’t come into contact with any of *my* semen, there’s nothing even all that risky about it, so if it’s something you want to do, and, more importantly, all parties involved are cool with it, so that means Andy better know as well...”

“He does, at least Ash says he does.”

“Then I say have at her and have a good time, as long as you’re not catching feelings for her and it’s mostly just girls having fun.”

Linda licked her lips and grinned. “You know, I knew you were a damn fine man from the moment I first looked at your file, but even still, you continue to surprise me, Dr. Marcos. We’ll make sure we slip off into some part of the mansion that’s off the beaten path, so nobody just wanders into us while we’re getting frisky.”

“One other condition though,” Phil said.

“Oh yeah? Wassat?”

“I want at least a vague play-by-play of how it went.”

“You want me to take pictures?” Linda smirked.

“Nah, going *that* far feels like an invasion of privacy,” Phil admitted. “But I wouldn’t mind if I at least got the rundown if Ash has any tricks I can learn from.”

“Yeah, that sounds fair. Do you think I need to ask Andy’s permission as well?”

Phil shrugged. “I’d say that as long as Ash has talked to him about it, you’re probably good to go. Besides, how the *fuck* do you even *begin* that conversation? ‘Hello, Mr. Rook, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind me fucking your partner for just a little bit? I don’t want to keep her; we just want to have a bit of strange, if that’s cool.’ Andy’s head probably exploded when Ash asked him about it.”

“You have *got* to stop underestimating your friend, Phil,” Linda chided. “Nearly everything that’s been thrown at this guy this year has only tripped him up a little bit, and he’s doing the best that he can to deal with the same world-threatening trauma we are, and there he is, still laughing and playing poker with his friends. He may present a cuddly marshmallow surface, but there is rock hard diamond at that man’s core. Niko’s even feeling bad about keeping her relationship with me secret from him, but she understands that orders are orders, and so she’ll follow them to the letter.”

“Maybe in a few months it’ll be okay to let that cat out of the bag, but right now, we’re looking at an escalation of partners, and I’m still trying to think of how to tell Andy he’s going to have to take on at least another handful of women to ensure he’s safe.”

“Give it time, and maybe it’ll work itself out,” Linda said, kissing his cheek. “Anyway, I’m off for my playdate, so stay where either Niko or Violet can see you, got it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good boy.” Linda pulled away from him and crossed the room to where Aisling was standing in a doorway. The diminutive redhead gave him a rather authoritative nod and smile, which he did his best to return, as Linda moved over to her, at which point Ash slid her arm around Linda’s waist, and the two women moved out of the room.

He hoped like hell he’d made the right decision there, but he felt like he wasn’t going to be led astray trusting Linda. Plus, if things continued to shake out like how he expected they were going to, this was an important case study, assuring each other that women could have inter-team pairings as long as they were careful to avoid cross-contamination.

Social structures were getting completely torn to the ground and built back up again, and with many women having to deal with sapphic thoughts they’d never really had in the forefront of their minds, it was entirely expected they might fool around with long term friends who weren’t necessarily in the same pod as them. They were even starting to work on ‘referral priority’ for the Oracle system, where a woman in a current Team could request a friend or colleague come join that Team, and the person in consideration would have priority access to getting their Oracle results crosschecked against the existing Team.

Phil headed back to the poker table and settled in for several more rounds. Around ten o’clock, there was a ring at the door once more, it having been almost twenty minutes since any children had come around, but Andy went to diligently answer the door, and Phil noticed that Niko headed off after him almost immediately, as Phil’s hackles immediately went up as a familiar voice hit the edge of his hearing...

...Covington.

God, Phil hated the prick. The more digging he’d done into the man, the more he suspected he might have been one of the people behind the back door into the Oracle system that they were still investigating. He hadn’t been able to figure out who it was on Cunningham’s team who’d been bought off, but clearly it had been someone, and that person had covered their tracks well.

They were far enough away that Phil couldn’t hear what they were specifically talking about, but there was something odd about the entire conversation, the way that that Andy was standing, looking almost confrontational, with Niko’s hand on his back, her body leaning into him as much as she possibly could.

Phil had made it a point of learning how to read people lately, and it was surprising how nervous Niko seemed. This was a young woman who’d been on hand when the first wave of men had died at New Eden’s base, who’d stared down death more than a handful of times, and yet, she seemed like she was terrified of how Andy was going to react.

After a couple of minutes of talking to Covington, they shut the door and then Niko pulled Andy off down the hall towards Andy’s study, tugging him in, closing the door behind them. Phil wished like hell he could be a fly on the wall for whatever conversation was happening there, but moments later, he was distracted by Aisling and Linda making their return to the living room, giant shit-eating grins on each woman’s face.

Phil stood up from the poker table, since it was clear Andy was going to be a few minutes, so they were taking a break in between hands, and moved over to join Linda. “Don’t you look like the cat that ate the canary?” Phil chuckled, whispering quietly to his partner.

“Phil, I have something vitally important to tell you,” Linda whispered, blushing a bright shade of red. “If we’re hiding military or scientific secrets from Ireland, I regret to inform you I’m probably responsible for whatever leak we had, because I’m pretty sure that woman ensorcelled my fucking mind. Whatever she asked, I would’ve told her.”

“That good?” Phil laughed.

“*Jesus wept, Phil,*” Linda said, her voice still low and quiet. “I don’t know how that man can still be walking *around* with that banshee in his life. She might not be human. It was fucking unreal.

I'm *very* fucking glad she's with Andy and not you, because you'd have been drained dry."

"So... good then?"

"Fucking *great*, but not something I'm going to make a habit of doing," she said. "I don't think I could fucking handle it."

"Never thought I'd see the day when the great Linda Hayes was shaken to her core," Phil said, shaking his head, clearly enjoying himself a great deal.

"Fuck you, man," Linda teased back. "I've seen some shit."

A minute or so later, there was another ring at the door, and Aisling moved over to answer it, a couple of children standing outside yelling 'Trick or Treat!' Ash moved to give them candy, but then stepped back into the foyer for a second. "Hey Phil? Somebody's here to see you."

"Me?" Phil said. He hoofed it across the living room and over to the foyer to see Miguel Cunningham standing behind a couple of children, one dressed as Spider-Man and the other dressed as Wonder Woman. "Hey Miguel, how'd you know I'd be here?"

"I didn't, but I spotted that monster Covington walking away from here just as we were about to get in the car and head home, so I thought I'd better come up here and see who lived here, only to see your car in the parking lot," Miguel said to him. "I know who's responsible for giving back door access to the Oracle. It's that weasel, Ed Decker. I'm pretty sure he's getting paid off by people like Covington to have their requests simply override whatever results the Oracle should be spitting out by giving out junk data. I think I see a way to figure out everyone who's been incorrectly assigned this way without us having to do individual spot checks on every pairing we've done in the last month."

"Finally," Phil sighed. "A bit of *good* news. What've you got?"

"Listen, these people are so fucking lazy, they didn't even bother to randomize or alter the custom outputs each time. It just spits out an 98.7% match each and every fucking time, with no variation or deviation in any way, shape or form. Now, we're going to get some false positives if we just pull up all the matches that were 98.7% matches, but if we run the raw data a second time, the false information's going to pop up, as long as it has a new query number."

"I'm guessing you've already put together a spreadsheet of how many matches we need to rerun?"

"I have. It's about five hundred."

"Jesus, that many?"

"It looks like we're only getting between five and fifteen a day now, so maybe they know we're onto them or maybe they're trying to tamp it down and not get caught. Maybe they've all got full houses now and no desire to add to them further, or maybe they're just waiting for new clients to come in and fork over money and provide a list of names."

"Anyone on the requested list I'd recognize?"

Miguel sighed, nodding. "That's the biggest problem. They're basically *all* names with some level of recognition. Actors, musicians, athletes, models... if you can think of someone who might've ever been on a Maxim Hot 100 list, I bet they're probably on there. A number of them are even here or coming here right now."

"Anyone I'd recognize?"

"A couple of pop princesses, one from the top of the current charts and one from the 90s. More than a few former Playboy Playmates. Some actresses, some I recognize, some I didn't. That one woman from the big sci-fi series is already on her way here. Same for that woman who was in the ballerina films my wife loves. We've gotten lucky in that most of the truly big name celebrities are married or in well-publicized relationships, so they can't be requested without raising a lot of red flags, but the longer this goes, the more we're going to see that kind of excuse fade away, because those women's partners are going to die, and then those women are going to be vulnerable, and if we haven't fixed this fucking problem... that's on us." He looked down at his hands, realizing they were shaking a little, then looked back up at Phil. "Sorry, I sort of went on a tear there."

“Yeah, well, I understand, Miguel,” Phil said, patting him on the shoulder. “Over the next couple of weeks, we need to fix this. Together.”

“I hope you’re right, Phil.”

“Me too.”

Chapter 15

November 2nd, 2020

The Monday following the party, Phil had gotten into the office extremely early, wanting to be around before the majority of people had rolled in. He wasn’t a morning person by any stretch of the imagination, but sometimes he needed to be able to work when the staff was at the minimum. He would’ve *loved* the office to have been entirely empty, but unfortunately those days were long since passed.

The office *always* had some people around now, any time of the day or night.

The work they were doing was too important for the office to ever be completely closed.

So Phil, Linda and Audrey had shown up just early enough to greet the skeletal night shift as they were putting in their final hours for the day, an hour or so before the dawn broke and the morning shift would come rolling in.

It still wasn’t all that quiet, but at least Phil could move around the place without tripping over people running around like the sky was falling. It let him look around the office and study the systems without people constantly asking what he was doing and if it was *really* so important that he shouldn’t be working on something else.

The data Miguel had told him about was spot on – nearly five hundred women whose paths had been altered and redirected to someone other than the person they should’ve been. And Miguel was right – the names on the list had been mostly people he’d either recognized on the spot, or whose names immediately hopped to life the second he Googled them. Lots of celebrities at the high level – actresses, athletes, musicians – but just as many mid-tier names or specialists within a field.

For every Emily Stevens or Piper Brown, there was someone like Alicia Winterson, who on first glance looked like nothing more than a simple ob-gyn, but under further study, it turned out she was one of the leading researchers in the field of troubled fetus development. It was like that for a lot of the names on the list – people who seemed like they could be innocuous but had hidden depths just below the surface.

Phil knew he couldn’t just pull these women from who they’d been assigned to without causing a giant chaos, not without proof. He was going to have to let them all go to their currently assigned partners, but should a way to reassign women come up, he was going to need to go to all the women on the list and offer them a chance to change pairings, to get situated with partners who would be better for them in the long run.

He reran their pairings, and in most cases, the women who had turned up with 98.7% compatibility scores actually resulted in pairings around the 40-50% rate, something so rough that the system shouldn’t even consider offering them the option to *consider* the pairings. The women were going to be *very* unhappy, and frankly, the men would probably *also* be unhappy, unless they were forcing the women to change, something that was supposed to be very much against the policy.

(Unless, of course, they were all underestimating The Daniels Effect, and it really could overcome even large gaps and force social smoothing among nearly any group. Even Daniels himself didn’t think it was *that* strong, but that hadn’t been tested.)

It wasn’t true for all of the forced pairings, however. In some cases, the pairings were in the 70-80% range, certainly not optimal, but not so far that the people involved would have significant resistance to the pairing. And then it dawned on him – that was part of the reason the false pairing results had been set so high, so that the women in question would trust the science over their own judgement. Shit, he probably would’ve made the same mistake himself, if he’d stopped to genuinely

consider some of his partners as they were delivered. Tamika had clocked in at a 68%, but she'd insisted that the proximity made up for all of it, and that she'd happily pair up with Phil, so who was he to say no?

(Linda had reminded him since then more than a few times that he *should* say no if any of the pairings made him feel at all uncomfortable. So far he'd felt like saying no to anyone who'd been brought to him would be bad form, but after having heard about Andy's mess with Lauren's ex-girlfriend Taylor showing up, he had to wonder if any of *his* exes were going to try and look him up. That idea sent shivers down his spine. The last thing he needed was Crazy Katie reestablishing her weird almost borderline psychotic fixation on him again.)

His next step was to graph the data of all the misreported people in the Oracle system. They weren't anywhere near as centralized as he expected them to be, but they certainly were concentrated – some in New York City, some in DC, a handful in Chicago, a handful in Texas, a bunch in Seattle, lots more in LA and the densest conglomeration right there in the Silicon Valley.

Initially he wanted to write it off as nerds all having their own personal 'Weird Science' moment, but then he started graphing the details of the men these women were partnered with and it seemed like all the requesting men were generally in their fifties and sixties. In some cases however they were requesting these particular women on behalf of their early twenty-something sons who just didn't have the impetus or clout to do so themselves. Why take the risk of importing Russian models as trophy wives when you could just point at someone on television and say 'I'll have *her*.'

Almost none of the women in the False Positives had been sent to anyone in the military, interestingly enough, and Phil wondered if that maybe there were too many hurdles preventing that kind of thing. The two exceptions, a former Playboy centerfold now in her early 40s and an adult film star, both went to one place, General Fielder.

That didn't surprise him *one bit*.

To get the sort of casual bypasses needed to circumvent the program would take someone with high level access, and Fielder was the ideal candidate. In addition to whatever cash he'd been taking on the side for rubber stamping all the False Positives, he got a few impossible pairings of his own. He wasn't the only one. Major Peters had been paired up with Mayor Haunton the same way. And, perhaps more troubling, he couldn't find any records at all that Major Peters had ever been screened against Mayor Haunton, even though the two of them were paired together. That by itself gave him a bunch of concerns.

With a bit more digging, he found out lots of the pairings on the base had actually happened *before* the Oracle system was up and running, and that in many cases, they'd been retroactively run through the system, just to avoid further conflicts as New Eden staff teams continued to ramp up. But both General Fielder's earliest partners and Mayor Haunton's had never been run through Oracle. Not before they'd been paired, not after, not never. That, in and of itself, was pretty weird.

The number of False Positive pairings had gone through a dip in recent weeks, although there were already a much higher than normal number of them in processing right now, something Phil wasn't too pleased with. It was hard to predict what had caused the spike – the window for requesting people was obviously going to be narrowing, although there was going to be a massive spike starting in just a few weeks when the President had her speech, as everyone who hadn't been put into a team yet would be given the Oracle exam, as well as a chance to submit requests with the expectation that they might well be turned down.

They were hoping to have a list of all women who'd been paired in the country by the time that rollout happened, so most requests for women already paired would never make it up the ladder. 'Sorry Larry Brookshire of Debuque, IA; you, like everyone else, cannot have Angelina Jolie as a partner.' They might need to limit the number of time that anyone had to file requests, though. Or cap the number of requests that could be sent to any one woman on any given day. Phil was sure there was a team already working on the scaling up, so he just needed to take a look at how their work was coming.

He almost felt like he should try and request a couple of remaining unpaired celebrities to see if they would still fall through the system, or if they were mostly paired up. A *lot* of Hollywood had been taken care of in the Serum Surge of October that had been targeted at the greater Los Angeles area, specifically to try and solve this problem. In fact, most of the early adopters who'd petitioned to get paired up with celebrities had actually resulted in *those* people moving, instead of the celebrity. Actresses needed to be near Hollywood to make movies and television, so sending them off to Pascagoula, MI wouldn't be good for anyone involved. As such, they'd tried to fold Hollywood inward as much as they could, or to get them to stay relatively local. They'd done the same thing with Washington, D.C. and New York City, just in an effort to keep them from overwhelming the system with relocation requests. Better to encourage people to think local than to allow them to dream global.

Phil also realized he'd have a much better chance if he requested an international celebrity, but he *also* knew that because of his position, they were likely going to pressure his requests more than they would some random Schmoie. And he wasn't keen to try requesting, say, some highly prominent Bollywood actress or British television presenter, even as tempting as it might be to file a request to bring Maura Higgins to his house. (While he generally resisted reality television as best as he could, he somehow found himself drawn to a very *specific* brand of trash television, and he couldn't look away from the British version of Love Island, no matter how much he tried. And Maura's Irish accent would certainly send Aisling's into overdrive when the two met up, although maybe that was what kept Phil from taking the request too seriously, the possibility that the two could develop a secret language that would allow the two houses to talk without he or Andy understanding what was being said.)

One thing that definitely *had* surprised him about the Great Hollywood Compression was that many of the beautiful actresses hadn't ended up with other actors. They also hadn't (mostly) ended up with studio heads or powerful executive producers, but instead, a whole hell of a *lot* of them had ended up either with directors or writers. Actors didn't even come in third in the places where gorgeous actresses had been paired. That had fallen to directors of photography, surprisingly enough.

Phil had to get up and walk away from the data for a bit, so he headed down to talk to Bill McKenna. Bill had turned into Phil's closest male confidant inside of the Quaranteam project, and Bill rolled in early in the morning most days, and so Phil wasn't surprised to find him hip deep in research. "Bill, do I even want to know what's got you awake so damn early this morning?"

Bill looked up from his computer screen, furrowed his brow then it dawned on him. "It's morning, isn't it?"

"It *is*. Were you here all night?"

"I *was*," Bill sighed. "I started looking into a couple of the new variants, and I'm getting nervous again."

"Bill, you get nervous at the drop of a hat," Phil sighed. "But, unfortunately, you're generally right when you're getting nervous, so I'm never going to dismiss you out of pocket. What's got you worried enough to keep you up all night?"

Bill took the stylus in his hand and tapped the large screen of his iPad. "This, this is the structure of the first variant, okay?"

"Sure."

"And *this* is the structure of the second."

"Looks almost identical to the first."

"Right?" He tapped the stylus down near the bottom of the screen and pulled up a diagram that looked wildly different. "Well, this is variant twenty-four."

"*Whoa*. That... that's going through a whole mess of changes I wouldn't have expected," Phil sighed. "Is it presenting differently?"

"Oh yeah, very much differently. You've seen how most of the variants just seem to be accelerated versions of the existing core strain – difficulty breathing, depreciated muscle strength, the usual."

“Sure.”

“Well, this one has all of that, but it also seems to be amping up the need to reactivate the Quaranteam serum again and is amplifying that need in its host in quite amplified and elevated fashion, at a sort of strength we’ve really not seen much.”

“How strong are we talking?”

Bill tilted his head and whistled for a second. “Maybe up to last virgin at the class orgy on prom night levels of intensity?”

“Jesus, Bill, really?”

“The first person who was detected with this was out in New York, and she was so desperate to get fucked by her partner that she punched another member of her Team for standing in her way, even for just a few seconds.”

Phil winced. “It’s another tweaked case, isn’t it?”

Bill nodded. “Sure looks that way. If I’m guessing on proximity, maybe the Canadians, as some sort of retaliation for not getting as many doses of Quaranteam as fast as they wanted?”

“There’s only so fucking fast we can produce them, Bill,” Phil grumbled. “Even the Canadians have got to learn to be reasonable about this kind of shit.”

“Maybe this *is* what they consider being reasonable.”

“Fucking hell. And they used to be such nice people.”

“Well,” Bill said, “I also can’t *prove* it was them. It could easily be someone else. And I like to think that even in their moments of greatest darkness, the Canadians aren’t capable of intentionally trying to make all this shit worse.”

“Any other variants I should be scared shitless about?”

“Shitless? No. Pantless? Maybe a couple.”

Phil threw up a hand into the air. “Sure, okay. Go ahead. Why not. Let me have it.”

Bill took his stylus and moved back a few screens. “I call this one the Florida Spring Break variant, because it impairs judgment the way, say, four or five tequila slammers would do, and can also result in blackouts, bad behavior with a high risk of bodily harm.” He swiped back a few more. “You might be familiar with this one – I call it the Waxed All Over – it causes all of a person’s hair to fall out. It starts regrowing immediately upon getting a serum reignition, but it’s *very* strange, especially since it seems to overcompensate for like a month as the serum continues to fight off DuoHalo, which means women are cutting their hair once or twice a week otherwise they’re going to have hair down to their asses.”

“You’re exaggerating, aren’t you?”

“I only wish I was,” he sighed, tapping a collection of images beneath the visualization of the variant. The images hopped up and showed one of Linda’s Girls, Lieutenant Kiki Pak, who’d been assigned to Bill as a partner but was also still doing lots of security work around the base. “Kiki’s had to have her hair cut twice a day since she caught the variant, but we did a week’s worth of just letting it grow to track it, so watch this.”

In the first shot, they showed her completely without hair, including eyebrows. The next shot was timestamped twelve hours later, and her hair was already long enough to be put into a pageboy shaping, down past her chin, her eyebrows fully regrown. Twelve hours past that, and Kiki’s hair was down past her shoulders. A day later, it covered her ass. A day after that, the shots had to back up, to show that it was long enough to actually hang below her feet. From that point out, they’d started cutting it, and just totaling up the length of it. By the end of two weeks, she’d been averaging 18 inches of hair every 12 hours, meaning she’d grown close to fifty feet of hair.

“I have to ask, Bill…”

“She told me to just treat it like it was the seventies all over again,” Bill chuckled. “Thankfully, her arm hair and her eyebrows all basically stop at some point naturally. But she’s just trimming the rest the best she can, and I’m doing my best not to care. If the reports are to be believed, she’ll be back

to normal next week.”

“Until then, you’re tending to Sasquatch, huh?”

“Hey now,” Bill said, frowning. “I won’t have you disparaging one of my partners, okay?”

“I was just joking, Bill.”

“Yeah, well, she’s sensitive about it, so I’m not.”

“Apologies,” Phil said. “I need some levity right now and I was hoping it was okay to joke about it.”

“Give it a few weeks, and it will be, I think, but right now, she’s still all wound up about it, and the constant pressure of having to basically run a hedge trimmer over parts of her body twice a day isn’t helping that much. So I’m just trying to keep a positive attitude for her on her behalf.”

“There are days where I’m going out of my mind here, Bill,” Phil told him. “We’ve got problems in the Oracle system, we’ve got problems with pairing... we’ve got problems on problems on problems.”

“Well, the good news is that the Vitalogium serum is showing promising test results in combating DuoHalo,” Bill said. “I know it’s not us, and so we probably shouldn’t get too excited about it, but hey, it’s progress, and at this point, I’ll take any progress I can get, right?”

“I don’t trust those guys over in Boston,” Phil grumbled. “They have a tendency to try and take as many shortcuts as they can.”

“When we’re trying to save the human race, Phil, sometimes we have to cut corners.”

“Sure, but they make for shitty science, and every time those guys in JanusTech try and push something out to a wider audience, we find it’s more fucked up than the problem we’re trying to solve for in the first place.”

“What’s more fucked up than what *we’re* offering?”

“Stuff that flat out kills men, regardless of how they get it?”

“They’ve been testing it on men for over a week now, and so far, everyone’s just fine.”

“A week’s fucking *nothing* in terms of a long-term curve study, Bill, and you know that!”

Bill sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I *do* know that, and for what it’s worth, I *agree* with you, Phil, that they’re rushing it, and it’s probably going to come back and bite them in the ass, but until it does, we stay the course – giving people the Quaranteam serum where and when we can, and prepping to hand off to the JanusTech guys if their science holds up to more severe scrutiny.”

“I just have this feeling that it’s going to blow up.”

“Well, until it does, try and give people some hope that we might have a different, easier path out of this within the next week or two.”

“And if it doesn’t pan out?”

Bill grinned. “Then, knowing us, we’ll have kept our heads down, kept working on *our* solution, and we’ll look more like the smartest people in the room because we knew we had something workable and didn’t let our foot off the gas until we were sure the other road was better.”

Phil patted Bill on the back. “Y’know, I’m *really* fucking glad you’re here, Bill. You’ve kept me from losing my goddamn mind more times than I can count.”

The much older man chuckled. “Then you can tell me why my request to get Alexandria Daddario was turned down.”

“She was already paired up with some producer, Bill,” Phil laughed. “I can’t work miracles. A woman’s still got a right to say no to anybody she doesn’t want to go with. Besides, don’t you have your hands full enough as it is?”

Bill swatted his hand in the air. “You never watched ‘True Detective,’ you don’t get it. Besides, you’re still being protected by Superwoman over there,” he said, gesturing to Linda, who was standing outside of the office keeping watch. “How’s that going by the way? Her and Audrey still getting along okay with each other?”

“I think they get along just as well without me there as they do when I *am* there, truth be told,

but that's probably for the best. Audrey runs the emotional half of the house; Linda runs the practical half. The two have settled things exactly how it works for them. And me."

"And the sex is still good?"

Phil laughed. "Jesus, Bill, the sex is better than it's ever been, better than it has any right to be, and I'm just along for the ride, so I'm doing everything I can not to fuck it up. The Daniels Effect is in full force among Team Marcos, and I intend to not do anything to disturb it."

"Did you see the collection of insane women we had showing up yesterday for delivery today?"

"I glanced a little bit at it, but didn't take a full gander, why?"

Bill let out a slight whistle. "Three actresses, two musicians, an acrobat, one of the Fortune 500 CEOs, an athlete, a porn star and a couple of strippers, among the more usual collection of beautiful women who are doing well in their field. A bit more fame all at once than I think I'm used to, although I have to admit, the acrobat impressed me a lot more than most of the celebrities, although I'm hard to get star struck any more, considering who we've had come through our gates over the last few months. When we were injecting her, she was showing me how she could bend her leg to put the bottom of her foot on the back of her head, and you *know* that kind of thing's going to be crazy in the sack."

"Did it seem to you like we got a lot more all at once than we normally do?"

"Yeah, the General said it was a double batch. They were even pairing up women to share observation tents because we didn't really have room for it, but Fielder said it was necessary."

"You think it was?"

Bill sighed, gently putting his hands up in the air. "We're not paid to ask those kinds of questions, Phil. I assume maybe there was a scare that the efficacy numbers were getting too low for the resistance reports here in New Eden, and they wanted to shore up all the people here."

"But we generally stagger them in one at a time. Doing a double drop on so many households, even here in New Eden... that strike you as odd?"

"We've had a couple before," Bill pointed out.

"Right, but those were relatively early days. This feels different."

"Well, a *lot* more of these were HPR's."

"HPR's?"

"High Priority Requests," Bill replied. "You know how the people with the money are. They're paying to produce the serum in mass quantities, so they expect it entitles them to a few perks here and there, so maybe they just decided they wanted a double drop this one time."

"How many people are getting new partners in New Eden today?"

"Let's see..." Bill turned back to his actual desktop computer and used the mouse to open up the deployment and pairing reports system, calling up the listings for people who'd been sent to New Eden for processing yesterday. "Huh. That's... odd."

"What's that?"

"It looks like over half of the men in New Eden are scheduled to get two women each today, which is... well, it's an outlier on the averages, to be certain."

"Over half? That include—"

"Yep, your name's on here." Click. Click. "So's mine." Click. Click. "So's both of your friends you had me looking out for."

"That's very strange."

Bill was scanning through the names and then his eyes narrowed. "That *can't* be right..."

"What's that?"

"Look whose name is on the list," he said, tapping the monitor with his stylus.

"That can't be right..." Phil agreed.

"We could go down and see if she's down there."

"Why would she be down there?"

"Why would she be on the list of people being paired today if she wasn't down there?"

“What the fuck?” Phil said, leaning in to look at the monitor closely.

“What am I missing?” Bill said.

“Look at who’s *with* her,” Phil said.

“Now I *know* that can’t be right,” Bill agreed once he finally saw what Phil was looking at. “We need to go and talk to her, and I mean right now. I know we’re not supposed to be in that area because of protocols.”

“Fuck protocols,” Phil said. “I want to know what the fuck is going on, and I want to know now, so I’m going in there.”

Bill nodded, getting up from his chair quickly. “Yeah, fuck it.”

As soon as they stepped out of Bill’s office, Linda looked at Phil with concern. “Something’s wrong,” she immediately said.

“We’re going into the observation area for a few minutes,” Phil told her.

“Baby, it’s *your* rule that men aren’t supposed to be in there.”

“That should tell you how important it is that I’m willing to break it this once.”

Linda scowled. “Yeah, fuck it. Let’s go.”

The trio headed towards the elevator, making their way upstairs before heading over to the small hangar that had been constructed for overnight observation of injected women. The woman guarding the post looked at Linda, looked at Phil, looked at Bill, then back at Phil, before shrugging, opening the door for them. She’d obviously decided that whatever Phil was doing, he must’ve been cleared for it, so she wasn’t going to be the one to get in his way.

Once inside the hangar, they kept their movements as quiet as they could, as most of the women were still sleeping in their cots within their private sealed tents, but Phil knew exactly the number of the tent they were headed for.

They arrived at tent 33 and Phil cut the ziplock tie off the outside and opened the zipper to set foot inside of the small tent, Bill and Linda just a step or two behind him. “Why didn’t you tell me, Charlotte?” Phil sighed, as Dr. Charlotte Varma and her daughter Asha sat upright on their cots, both having still been asleep.

“Tell you what, Phil?” Charlotte asked him.

“That you were ready to get paired with someone.” In his mind, he was already starting to worry that Charlotte had been caught up in the 98.7% debacle, although he realized consciously that he didn’t have any real reason to expect that.

“It’s because I wasn’t ready,” Charlotte said. The blonde French doctor had been part of the team for so long that Phil had just assumed if there were going to be any big changes, she would’ve told them in advance. When her husband had died, she had almost seemed to go on autopilot, but the last few months, it had seemed like she was starting to wake up again. “But yesterday, one of the people I was about to inject bumped into me and I accidentally injected myself with the serum. That, we can agree, sort of took the decision from my hands. So I called Asha to the base, got her injected as well, had our test results run through Oracle as fast as we could and found the closest positive pairing we could get, which turned out to be right here in New Eden, thankfully. I’m a little leery about one man being imprinted to both myself and my daughter, so I’m going to ask him which of us he’d prefer when we get there, and the other of us will come back to the base for reassignment.”

“Who are you paired up with?” Phil said. “I saw your names on the list and didn’t even look to see where you were assigned to.”

“The gentleman associated with the serum’s scaling solution. Arthur Covington the 4th.”

It was Phil’s turn to scowl. “Isn’t he a little old for you, Asha?”

The 18-year-old stuck her tongue out. She was half-French and half-Indian, so she looked exotic and sounded even more so with her thick London accent. “Age is just number, I ain’t bothered.”

“I’m hoping he’ll take me, and we can find my daughter a suitable replacement elsewhere.”

“And if he doesn’t want to let her go?”

Charlotte frowned. “He’ll have to, won’t he?”

“He *should* have to, yes.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Phillip?” Charlotte said.

Phil sighed a long, deep breath. “I don’t trust that guy, Charlotte. I feel like he’s been playing the system for his own advantage from almost the very moment the whole crisis started.”

“Do you think he wouldn’t *let* me leave if I wanted to?”

“I don’t know if he would try, but I won’t let him if he does.”

Charlotte offered him a weary smile. “Bless, Phil, but what will be, will be.”

He took Charlotte’s hand in his own. “I’m telling you, Charlotte. If things seem skeezy, you call me and I’ll figure out how to make it right.”

Charlotte’s weary smile faded and was gone in moments. “My Dev is dead, Phil. I’m just trying to make sense of what’s left.”

Chapter 16

November 3rd, 2020

It was ridiculous how fast the world could go tits up without warning.

The morning had started with some good news – one of the other research teams across the country thought they might have a different solution to the DuoHalo virus, one that wouldn’t involve quite so many quirks and foibles. Initial non-human tests had gone well, and they were starting human tests today. If things went well, they could pivot to this other solution within a matter of weeks, ahead of the President’s upcoming speech where all the facts were going to be laid out for not only the nation, but the world at large.

Phil had mixed feelings about the whole thing – he was hopeful that the other team’s vaccine would work, but untested optimism had gotten them into a lot of the mess they were in now. The virus wouldn’t spread that fast, they’d hoped. It wouldn’t be that deadly to those that caught it, they’d hoped. The virus might have had an aggressive start but would die off after that when somehow humanity had developed herd immunity, they’d hoped. He’d learned not to trust hope, so until he had confirmation that the new vaccine worked without any long-term side effects, he wasn’t going to go relying on it.

They were also approaching 25% of the surviving male population of the United States being partially staffed with imprinted women. The resistance rate varied from the 50s to the high 90s, but over 25% of the living men in the United States now had at least three or more partners pumping life giving Quaranteam serum into their veins. That number felt low, dangerously low, but the ramp up speed was accelerating, and the thought was they’d be at 50% before the end of the month, and in some cases, the ‘stud trading’ was in full effect.

In early September, Project: Funnel Cake had begun with just a handful of target countries: Japan, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Canada and South Korea. The term ‘stud trading’ had been chosen explicitly to spell out what was going on – men of low education were being sent to other countries in exchange for more desirable (usually for education, but occasionally for things like beauty or exceptional physical health) women, often at a somewhat ridiculous exchange rate. This was because in several of these countries, the male survival rates were far worse than they’d been in the US.

South Korea, in particular, had only 10% of the men it had had a year ago, and was in desperate need of stabilization. As such, they were sending women at the rate of nearly twenty in exchange for one man to be sent back. Some of the men sent over to South Korea spoke Korean, but most of them were just being sent over to live lives on something of a stud farm, trying to sleep with and impregnate as many women as possible. Finding one woman to translate for all the others would be easy enough.

The rates varied from country to country, but none of them were anything less than ten to one rate. Poor Canada had had whole portions of it truly kicked in the teeth, but the more remote and disconnected parts were doing better, if it could be described that way. The casualties were astronomical in some areas, Vancouver particularly, but others, like Ontario, had been almost militant

about their lockdowns and were holding on strong.

By early October, several other countries – Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, Italy, Greece, nearly half of Africa and most of South America – were offering blocks of women for ‘stud trades,’ although it was clear the US was no longer the only game in town, as it seemed Germany had somehow gotten their hands on enough of the Quaranteam serum to reverse engineer it and start mass production of their own, much as the UK was doing.

There were suspicions that the Russians might have also been doing some stud trading, although it was difficult to get a read on what their situation looked like, especially since the reports of heavy internal political infighting were clouding the matter.

China continued to be a giant dark void, although Phil had seen some satellite photos digging mass graves, and he suspected it was only going to be a matter of time before the Chinese were going to be asking for help. He’d seen a report floating around that one of the key aspects of giving aide to the Chinese was that Taiwan become a part of the United States, or that their independence would have to be completely and totally guaranteed, which Phil was certain were terms definitely chapping the hides of what little remained of the Chinese government power structure.

And lately, there were reports of Northern Korean women simply walking or driving out of North Korea into South Korea or China, as there were basically no men remaining left to stop them. The current operating intel was that NK might, in fact, be one of the first regions to hit a 0% male survival rate, due to second and third wave infections, but the complete media blackout from that country meant that information was, as of yet, unconfirmed.

With the stud trading going on, Phil and his team had been required to add a small amount of information to their Oracle files – languages that they and their existing Team spoke. Phil spoke English, Tagalog, Japanese and Spanish fluently, Vietnamese and Korean passingly and knew enough French to tell a few bawdy jokes. High profile, high importance members were going to get their numbers up well beyond the recommended number, but if that meant they could take on imports from other countries, the more the merrier. Bill McKenna had joked with the Major General when he’d asked them for the updates if the summer he’d spent studying in Sweden back when he’d been in college oh so long ago meant he was going to be sent members of the Swedish Bikini Team. Neither Phil or Bill had been certain the Major General had been kidding when he’d responded, “Would you like them to?”

Phil had been told in no uncertain terms that he needed to get his numbers up, and if he didn’t, they’d eventually just start telling him he couldn’t say no anymore. He didn’t particularly care for the way they were saying that as of late, but he also knew that he couldn’t decline them forever, so he was letting Audrey and Linda do initial screenings of profiles, and reviewing the ones they and Oracle thought would be good matches for his Team. They wanted him up to at least a dozen by the end of the month and would prefer him to be closing in on 18 by the end of the year, so that he was overly protected. He was too important to be allowed to be down dealing with even the shortest bouts of DuoHalo.

The same applied for poor Bill, but Bill’s wife was thankfully doing the job of turning women down for him, trying to make sure that while some hot young things got through, he was also doing his fair share to take on more age-appropriate women. She knew that Bill was going to be expected to be fathering more kids soon but was okay with those women making up the minority of Team McKenna, considering her and Bill’s only daughter was in her early 20s, and had been paired up early on in the process to her long-term boyfriend.

Phil’s most recent addition had arrived two days ago direct on a flight from Helsinki, Finland. Her name was Ingrid Virtanen, she was 23, she was a physical therapist, and she was a titanic Nordic blonde goddess of a woman, clocking in at 6’8”. Even Linda’s first words to the woman had been, “Damn, I hope you come with a built-in ladder.” She was going to function as his house’s personal doctor, or at least their front-line defense.

That was the good news he’d had over the last few days, however, and now it felt like shitty

news was starting to drop left and right. There had been a lot of folks who'd been reported dead, and most of the time, it was easy to look at them as statistics rather than as individuals, but there were handfuls of people that Phil had a lookout for, people who were on the priority list to get the serum as soon as they could. But priority still meant 'as soon as possible' and in some cases, that just wasn't soon enough.

A couple of days ago, Phil's friend Andy's older brother Matthew Rook, had checked into a hospital with DuoHalo symptoms in full effect. Phil had dispatched a group to get a handful of vaccinated women to the man as quickly as possible, but by the time his life raft had arrived, Matty had already died. Phil had done what he could for most of the direct family of his good friends as he could, but Matty had been very much 'I'll be fine' right up until the very end, and Phil hadn't been quick enough on the draw to see past that. He was going to resolve to stop taking people at their word unless it was absolutely necessary.

As that information was rolling around in Phil's head, while he was decided how he could possibly tell one of his oldest friends that his only brother was dead, the most unexpected thing happened – Andy *called*.

"Hey Phil, sorry to bug you at work," Andy said. "You got a moment?"

"Sure," Phil said, deciding not to bring his brother's death up right at the start. Clearly Andy had called him with a reason in mind. "What's up?"

"Would you be willing to take Doctor Charlotte Varma on as one of your partners?"

That threw Phil completely for a loop. "What the hell are you talking about, Andy? The good doctor was dispatched to join someone's household yesterday."

"She was, and now she's currently with me, and unpaired. Dr. Varma didn't think it would be a good idea for both her and her daughter to be paired to the same man, so her daughter, Asha, is now paired with me."

"Andy, you're not making any sense. What about the man she was supposed to be paired with?"

Andy sighed on the other end of the line. "You're going to be mad at me, Phil, and frankly, you have every right to be, but I have to tell you, I didn't know what the hell to do here..."

"What to do... Andy, give me a straight answer and tell me what the fuck you're going on about, and I mean right now."

"Alright, so I know Niko is working on the Quaranteam project in some way or another, and she found out that Dr. Varma and her daughter were going to be sent to a man neither she or I think is a very good person, Arthur Covington the 4th."

"I already hate where this is going, Andy," Phil sighed, "but continue."

"Covington apparently has a poker game where he and a handful of other men from New Eden gamble with women before their imprinted, allowing them to be reassigned to other men in question."

"*WHAT?!*"

"I know! I know it's horrible, Phil, but the two women that showed up on my doorstep yesterday, one of them seemed great, but the other... the other was Erin."

Phil groaned. "Christ, I *am* slipping. If I'd have known—"

"It's been taken care of, Phil," Andy sighed. "Because Niko refused to let Covington have both Dr. Varma and her daughter, she got me an invite to the poker game—"

"Fuck sake, Andy, you're good at poker but—"

"Yeah, well, good at poker is apparently good enough to clean most of these idiots out, because I won... well, I won a lot of different women, all of whom I'm offering the chance to pair again with other people if they want to. Charlotte's asked if she can be paired with you. I, uh, was going to send Asha your way, but Charlotte says she prefers non-white men, so Asha imprinted herself on me on the way back to the house."

"Okay, sure, I can take in Charlotte, Andy, especially if she's asking me to, but when you say that you 'won a lot of different women,' how many women are we talking here?"

“Uh, seven.”

“*SEVEN?! Jesus, Andy, you didn’t get any diplomats or rock stars I should know about, did you?”*

“Well, no rock stars or diplomats, no, but...”

“But what Andy?”

“Er...”

“But *what* Andy?”

“Piper Brown, the athlete; Emily Stevens and Sarah Washington, the actors.”

Phil couldn’t help but laugh at that. “You fucking dog. I know you’ve had a celebrity crush on Sarah Washington for a while. If I’d have known she was passing through our offices, I might’ve tried to redirect her to you. And none of them refused?”

“Emily and Sarah were more than happy to get imprinted onto me and join my family,” Andy said, “but I have to tell you... I’m not sure Piper really even had a choice, and that’s weighing pretty heavily on me.”

“What do you mean she didn’t have a choice?”

Andy sighed on the other end of the line. “Covington had clearly confined her to quarters since she’d arrived, and it was clear she’d been given the serum some time ago, but hadn’t been imprinted yet, and it had driven her around the bend some. She was nonverbal, uncommunicative. In fact, she basically tackled me as soon as I walked through the door. What’s even worse, it seemed like my first load of cum wasn’t enough to trigger an imprinting.”

“How long had that bastard kept her in there?”

“A week? Maybe longer.”

“*A week?!?*” Phil could feel the vein on the side of his neck throbbing, and maybe the one on his forehead as well. He was going to kill Covington with his own bare hands if given the chance. The man was lucky he wasn’t going to be on trial for murder. Piper Brown had gone longer between injection and imprinting than anyone else, and that by at least double. Around 2 days after injection women started having trouble thinking clearly. Around 4 days, they were basically incapable of logic or reason. When Niko had been brought to Andy, she’d been about 3 days out from injection, and she’d barely been able to put one word in front of the other. Nobody had wanted to push it any further than that. “Is she okay?”

“I checked in on her this morning, and she’s still in the imprinting sleep, but other than that, she seems fine. When we brought her back to the house, I had a few of the girls hose her down, wash her up and put her into some clean clothes, because she was filthy. I think she was covered in piss and shit, because they’d just locked her in a room and hadn’t done anything with her.”

Phil groaned but had to laugh a little bit at the imagery. “I’m a little impressed you could get hard enough to do the deed with her.”

Andy laughed a little himself. “Not going to lie, Phil; it might well have been a fear boner. She was feral and just basically attacked me. I think I got a few scratches on my arms and chest, and it took a second orgasm to get enough semen in her to trigger the imprinting process.”

“If you see any weird skin flaking on her, that’s probably just regeneration happening, Andy,” Phil told him. “There’s no way she went through something that traumatic and didn’t trigger a regeneration. Ask Niko about it, and she can detail the whole thing for you.” He inhaled a long breath then blew it out again. “So you need me to handle getting all the paperwork in getting women assigned to their correct houses in the system?”

“I *think* that’s being taken care of Phil.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed angrily. “You know by who?”

“Niko thinks it’s someone named Doctor Rachel DeMarco, and she said you’d know who that was if I told you.”

“I *do* know who that is. She’s one of Covington’s partners, not so coincidentally enough,

although I bet that doesn't come as a surprise to you."

"No, Phil, it does not. Covington seemed to be able to do whatever the fuck he wanted to without impunity, and frankly, I'm just glad he decided not to renege on the terms he'd set for the game in advance, because I have a feeling that if he wanted to, he could've, and could've made me disappear, and you'd never have known any of this. I wouldn't have even entertained the stupid poker game, but Niko made me promise that I'd try. I was scared as hell that I was going to let down Sheridan, who'd chosen to be here, but I guess I got lucky or skillful."

"What's happening to Erin?"

"She's been sent off to get paired with Nathaniel Watkins and his family."

"The techbro's techbro?"

"The one and only?"

"He was part of Covington's little game?"

Andy clicked his tongue a little bit. "It felt like there were two kinds of people at the game – those who were there eagerly, and those who were there reluctantly, or out of a sense of obligation. I got the impression Watkins was the latter."

"Who was in the former?"

"The mayor, Haunton. Big burly Russian fellow named Vikovic. And some skeezeball named Jacobson. Plus Covington himself, obviously. Vikovic was hard to read, so he might've also been there semi under duress, but Haunton acted like he was some fucking big shot, and Jacobson made my fucking skin crawl."

Phil grumbled. "Yeah, well, Haunton comes as no big shock to me. The man's got the spine of a leech, and the social skills to match. And I know who Jacobson is. Vikovic's going to merit some looking into, though. You remember any of the other names of the women who went to other people?"

"Teresa Kenzington, Jane Flowers? Janice Flowers? Something like that? And something Childs... Elaine Child? Something like that? I remember the last name because I remember wondering if she was related to the guy who writes the Jack Reacher books, but I'm unsure on the first name. Sorry," Andy said as he struggled to recall. "It was a lot of names all being thrown at me at once."

"No no, don't worry about it, Andy," Phil said, scribbling more notes down on the sheet of paper on his desk. "You remembered way fucking more than I would've in your shoes, okay? Besides, you've got so many new women now, I'm amazed you're even conscious right now. How many of them have you got imprinting right now?"

"Uh, let's see... Piper, Asha, Sarah and Emily, so... four? There was apparently some mix up with one of the girls that Watkins was supposed to be bringing over, so someone else is showing up here in a couple of days instead. I told him it wasn't necessary, but he insisted."

"Okay, tell you what – I need to do a few things over here but I'll be over there in about half an hour or so, alright?"

"Sounds good. See you soon. Charlotte said to tell you she's looking forward to it."

Phil hung up the phone and then let out a deep, frustrated groan before banging his fist once on top of the desk, then a second time, which brought Linda in from just outside of his office in.

"Whoa! Easy there, babe, or you'll break your desk," Linda said to him. "What's going on?"

"About a million things all went to shit at once, but at least we have one glimmer of light. You okay with Charlotte, Dr. Varma, joining our family?"

Linda smiled, rolling her eyes at him. "Like I'm gonna say no? She's a sweetheart. I thought she was off to someone else's Team though."

"I have a story to tell you while we're on the way over to Andy's."

During the car ride over, Linda got angrier and angrier as Phil relayed the story Andy had told him just a little bit earlier.

"I swear to god, I'm going to rip her fucking head off, babe," Linda snarled. "I'm going to cut open her throat and shit down her neck."

Phil frowned. “Easy on the defecation in newly created orifices, will you? There’s a good chance she’s been hard compelled by Covington, which is something I can’t believe we didn’t even think of in advance. And I’m going to want to hear her side of the story before we even get into it. Now, tell me, how the hell do I tell Andy about his brother?”

Linda closed her eyes and looked down, shaking her head. “You ... you just have to tell him, Phil. Be honest and give him as much detail as you have, and let the man have his space to grieve.”

Phil punched the inside of the passenger side front door of his Tesla with his fist. “I should’ve been watching out for these things, Linda.”

“Weren’t you literally *just* telling Andy *he* couldn’t save everyone, babe? Take your own advice. It’s going to hurt, but at least he’s hearing it from you.”

When the car pulled up in front of Andy’s house, Phil felt the weight of the whole damn world on his shoulders. “Jesus, Phil, you look like shit,” Aisling said to him.

“Yeah, thanks for that.” Phil glanced over at Charlotte, seeing a warm and welcoming smile on her face, as he walked up to the porch. “Heya, Doc. I hear you’re going to be happier with me, so I hope you don’t end up regretting that.”

“Thank you for agreeing to take me in, Dr. Marcos,” Charlotte said. “Andy’s a sweetheart, but I’m simply not attracted to white men. You, on the other hand,” she said, moving to wrap her arms around him. “I’m going to take you home and gobble you up whole.”

Phil laughed, kissing Charlotte only for a moment, and clearly not for as long as she would have wanted. She’d understand why soon enough. “I need to talk to Andy for a little bit first. I’ll be back in just a little bit.”

“What’s going on, Phil?” Andy asked him.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Charlotte pulled away and started to load her things into the car with Linda’s help.

“Yeah, okay.”

At Phil’s suggestion to move someplace private, Andy brought him up to the den hidden behind the bookcase, which seemed a fitting enough place to break the news to him. “Oh good, you’ve got booze on hand,” Phil said, seeing the bottle Linda had left for the Rooks still there.

“We going to need a drink for this?” Andy asked him.

“Yeah, and don’t be skimping on the pour.”

Andy poured a large glass of the whiskey for Phil, and a smaller glass for himself, holding out the small one to Phil, but his friend reached over and took the lesser glass instead. “You’re going to need the bigger one.”

“I don’t drink that much, Phil.”

“Trust me on this.”

“Okay. Phil, now you’re scaring me. What the hell is going on?”

“So let me give you the good news first, so you know that there’s something to hold onto,” Phil said with a sigh. “They’re pretty sure they’ve developed another vaccine, one that can be transported cheaply and is going into mass production, unlike the one you and I have been getting for some time delivered second hand from our partners. It’s progress, I guess. We’ll be getting shots of that vaccine too, and as long as the population goes and gets vaccinated, the quarantine will start to slowly get lifted in about three- or four-months’ time. At this point, Congress is so desperate to keep people alive that they’re going to do anything they can think of, what’s left of Congress, anyway.”

“That’s great news, Phil! So why are you so glum?”

“They’re going to announce that vaccine next week, and people should start getting shots in about a month, but with that news, they’re going to also release the death tolls, the *actual* death tolls ... and it’s very, very bad.”

“Like, how bad, Phil?”

Phil lifted the glass and drank all the whiskey. It was good whiskey. It needed to be. “Three

million women dead. *Eighty* million men dead.”

Andy poured Phil another glass worth, which Phil appreciated. He was easing Andy towards the real numbers bit by bit. “That's... that's over half the men in America dead. How the hell have they been keeping all this quiet?”

“Lots of suppression at the hospitals, of the media. Anything they can do to prevent a panic. Shit, I know I'd panic. I *am* panicking. Fuck, I panic each and every day. I mean, fuck, we're having to do mass cremations just to prevent the whole fucking system from collapsing. Too many people refused the first vaccine and those people each became a Typhoid Mary, infecting thousands of others. Hell, like a third of Congress is dead, although let's be honest, we won't miss most of the fuckers who died there from their own fucking stupidity. Teach them to say the whole goddamn thing will just *disappear* one day. Fucking morons. Why couldn't they just do their fucking jobs, just fucking tell people to stay the fuck at home, and we could've weathered this whole thing with only a couple of thousand people dead instead of *this SHIT!*”

All of Phil's anger was coming to the forefront, and he wasn't even being completely transparent with Andy yet. This was the politely sanitized and softened version of what was really happening.

“Is it ... is it this bad around the world?” Andy asked him.

Phil shook his head. He needed to give Andy some sense of hope, even if it was going to be yanked away again in a few weeks' time. “Lots of places took this threat more fucking seriously! They hunkered down, bubbled up and took the advice of their fucking doctors! Doctors know more about medicine than braindead politicians! So, in the parts of the world not run by fucking morons, we might be looking at countries losing only about five to ten percent of their male population, although there are a few outliers. India has numbers like ours, UK's got about half our losses per capita, maybe more, and China, well, nobody fucking knows what's going on in China, but the working theory is they're about as fucked as we are, if not even more so. Nobody will fucking tell us anything, though. The phone keeps ringing and ringing at their embassy but nobody's answering, so that's fucking scary as shit...”

“Goddamn, who's going to recognize this fucking country once we're on the other side of this? Hell, how does this fucking planet go on from this?”

“None of this is public information yet, so don't go talking about it to anyone outside of your household. You're still going to probably get a few more girls added to your household before all of this is done, if for no other reason than to start bringing our population numbers back up. A lot of the surviving males in this country are currently under ten. The children, it seems, could handle the virus better than us old farts. The country's going to go through a whole 'Give Birth To A New Generation To Save This One!' campaign soon. It's post WWII on crack. Polyamory's going to be the lay of the land with the announcement late next week, encouraging men to be married to multiple women and to be getting them pregnant as soon as possible. They've already got the rewritten laws ready to be passed as soon as the announcement hits. Our generation, the generation before us and the generation after us are all mostly wiped out. Pretty much anyone we went to high school or college with is probably dead. Sooner or later, the President'll give us all a much clearer picture of what's happening outside of the US, but I'm pretty sure it ain't good either.”

“No wonder it's been impossible to get a hold of people for the last few months,” his friend muttered to him. “There's nobody fucking *out there*.”

“Yeah, all of which brings me to the real reason I'm telling you all of this, Andy,” Phil sighed. He was just going to have to come out and say it. There wasn't any way to soften the blow, so best to just rip the bandage off all at once. “Conner and Samantha are okay, your mom's fine, but Matty died this morning. I'm so sorry man.”

Andy was quiet for a long moment before he took a long draw from his glass of whiskey. “Do you know anything more?”

“Shit, Andy, I shouldn't even be telling you this much. I know it was quick and he didn't suffer.

He was barely in the hospital 48 hours before he passed. They had him on a ventilator for a bit, but his body just couldn't take it. I know you've often told me you guys weren't all that close, but he was still your brother.”

Andy’s expression was so blank that Phil knew his friend was in total shock. “He was nine years older than me, and he went off to college out of state when he was 16. Smartest son of a bitch I ever knew, but that meant I was seven when he left, so we never really bonded like proper brothers.” Andy slumped back in his chair. “He was a good man, though. Always called on Christmas, or my birthday, and always trying to find new things I might like. He always told me he was so proud of chasing my dreams and becoming a writer. He was always a little pissed at himself for staying to the safe route, selling real estate, and not chasing his dream of working for NASA and going into space, but his family was so goddamn important to him. Christ, Conner's only eleven and now he doesn't have a fucking father anymore? Goddamn this fucking virus. Do you know how he caught it?”

“One of his neighbors was trying to get their storm doors shuttered before a lightning storm and he went out to help them. Apparently caught it from them.”

Andy nodded, as if that made things make a little more sense. “Typical fucking Matty. Always willing to help out, never quite thinking it through before he did. I assume Sam knows? And my mom?”

“They've both been told. Your mom's in intensive care herself, but it looks like she's going to come through it relatively okay. She's on a breather, but she's showing steady signs of improvement. That's why I'm here telling you instead of her telling you over the phone. Sam's a total mess and said even talking to you would set her off crying all over again. She and Conner will come out okay on the other side.”

Andy nodded. He didn’t seem capable of much else. “Well, I guess I'm glad the news came from you, then.”

The two sat in silence for a couple of minutes.

“You going to be alright?”

“We weren't close, but he was still my fucking brother, Phil.” Andy threw up his hands, his face bunched up in frustration. “No, I'm not fucking alright. I'm fucked in the head!” He looked like he was ready to collapse under his own weight. “It's a fuckload to take in.”

“I'll come by in a couple of days and make sure you're coping as best you can. We can play poker if you want.” The words got out of his mouth before he even thought about them, and both men had a laugh at the suggestion, awkward as it was.

“Let's take a few weeks off from poker, alright?”

“I mean, you're never going to get a prize like that ever again. You're banging Emily Stevens, which I would love to break your legs over, but I can't say I fault you for.” He’d outgrown his crush on Dahlia Hairtrigger, but it didn’t hurt to overplay it up a little, to make Andy focus on the good a bit to distract him from the darkness.

“Did you know she and Sarah Washington are already a couple?” Andy asked him with a wry grin. “Like, they were together long before they got here?”

“What?!” Phil chuckled, thankful for a bit of good news that he hadn’t had already when he walked in the news. And it was just like Andy to have such mixed luck. “No! And you landed them both!”

“Well, Emily made *sure* I landed Sarah and then was delighted to see she came along for the ride. I'm sure she'll tell you the story at some point, but she had more of a hand manipulating things than I think any of us knew, even Niko, who had her fingers in stirring that pot as well.”

“At least you're going to have plentiful beautiful bodies to drown your misery in.”

“I suppose. Eventually. Right now, I just want to break down crying, and yet I can't feel the tears coming.”

“You're in shock, man,” Phil said as he hugged his friend tightly. “You're just in shock. There's

no one set way to grieve. It'll sneak up on you, or it'll hit you in waves, or it'll just come at you a little bit at a time again and again and again. Nobody can tell you that you're grieving wrong. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and you'll get through it, day by day. And tell the girls. Tell them what's going on, what you're going through. Don't hide any of it from them or try and underplay it. You'll get through it, even if we have to carry you through parts of it. That's what friends are for."

"Thanks man. I'm going to sit and have a think for a bit if that's okay?" Andy looked completely wiped out, like he didn't even want to risk standing, not that Phil could blame him, what with the rollercoaster couple of days his friend had had. "You know the way back?"

"You kidding? Finding your way out of here's got to be easier than finding your way in. You want me to send any of the girls up?"

"Nah, I'll be down soon enough and talk to them then."

"Got it. Sorry to have been the bearer of bad news."

Andy shrugged. "Better you than some stranger."

He even looked like he really meant it.

Phil headed back down the stairs and then opened the bookcase door, closing the door behind him, leaving Andy alone with his thoughts. He'd barely gotten two steps away from the hidden door before running straight into Aisling.

"What's happened, Phil?" the redhead asked him with a look that made it clear not telling her wasn't an option.

Phil took a deep breath and then wrapped his arms around Aisling and gave her a soft hug. "Andy's older brother Matty died yesterday evening," he told her, feeling her start to sob even as the words hit her ears. "He's going to need a little bit to process, so give him a bit of space but when he comes out, you smother him with as much fucking love as you can assault him with. He's going to be a mess for a bit."

"Yeah," Ash said, trying to stem back her own tears. "I was really looking forward to meeting Matty in person. *Fuuuuuuck...*"

"Just look after him, Ash. He's gonna need you and Niko now more than ever, okay?"

Aisling nodded. Phil had always liked her – she complimented Andy in all the best possible ways, and they made up for each other's shortcomings so naturally. "We'll make sure he pulls through and doesn't get too lost in the shadows. What about you?" she asked as she pulled away from the hug. "What're you going to go do?"

"Me and Linda are going to go fucking root out how the hell this whole Covington shit ever fucking happened in the first place..."