

Chapter Twenty-Five

May 3rd, 2021

The last several days had been something of a blur for Andy. Thankfully, Ash seemed to be holding to her expected delivery date, and so the twins hadn't yet arrived, although Aisling and Andy had picked out their names – Kayleigh and Riley – and Andy felt a little bit of relief that his son, his first son, Matt, got to experience being the center of attention for at least a little bit on his own.

It also turned out that whatever else the nanobots rushing through Piper's body were doing, they were at least respecting the fact that she was still taking birth control, and while her body may have wanted her to get pregnant, it hadn't affected the birth control she was on, and her intentions of doing one more Olympics before retiring were still going to be on. For now, at least, Piper remained unimpregnated.

Fiona *had* tested positive for pregnancy, and that had delighted her to *no* end, because she'd been expecting it to be something of an uphill battle. Both her and Andy had been considered semi-infertile when they were younger, and now that she was with child, she couldn't be happier.

They'd brought Matt back from the hospital just a couple of days after he'd been born, and the doctors said that he was just shy of 8 pounds. He'd been born with hair a shade of onyx like his mother, hazel eyes like his father, and a strong opinion about when to eat, like both of his parents.

The family had set up a room in the manor which would be the nursery, a place where the newborns and infants could be until they were old enough to get their own room, although Andy had done the math and was already worried that a handful of rooms might turn into dormitories with several children bunking in. But, as he was fond of saying, they'd burn that bridge when they crossed it.

Niko had been wiped out for a few days after getting back, but since then had sprung into being a new protective mother with all the gusto she attacked everything else with. Matt had been doing the rounds, and the entire family had already taken multiple turns holding him.

Also, as expected, Jade had decided to settle into her role as house nanny, and she sprang into that job like she was born for it. In fact, she'd taken to handling Matt when he woke up in the middle of the night so much that Niko had only gotten up once so far to help. Niko had felt a little bad, but Jade had insisted that she be allowed to do her job and tend to Matt when Niko was resting. It was an adjustment to the house rhythm, but it seemed a welcome one, with the Team coming together to show how group parenting was going to work.

But one person that Andy had had trouble cornering was Nicolette, however, as the almost ninja-like housekeeper had taken to avoiding talking to anyone for more than a few moments over the past week. Andy, however, had a plan. He grabbed his laptop and went to sit in the hallway outside of Nicolette's room, and he started to write.

One of the advantages of being a writer was that location didn't matter, and wherever he wanted to write from, he could. So, pulling up a chair and waiting outside of someone's room was definitely an option. An hour or so later, Hannah wandered by and cocked her head, and asked, "What're you doing, Andy?"

"Waiting for Nicolette," he told her, not looking up from his typing.

"I think she's scared of talking to you," Hannah said with a giggle.

"Well, that's ridiculous, so I'm going to wait here until we have a conversation," Andy told her, typing away on the keyboard. "If you see her, you can tell her that."

“Okay, Andy.” And then Hannah continued along her way.

Another hour or so later, he heard the voice he wanted to hear from the end of the hallway near the stairs. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?” Nicolette’s voice asked.

“Nope,” Andy said. “We’re gonna talk about it.”

Nicolette let out an overly dramatic sigh and then walked over towards him, dressed in one of her least slutty French maid outfits, dropping down onto her knees next to him in the chair. “Please don’t make me give it up, Master,” Nicolette said, a single tear running down her cheek.

That was the point where Andy turned and looked at her, a single tear running down his own cheek. “Is that the kind of monster you think I am, Nicolette?” he sighed. “That I would ask you to give up the child you so vehemently insisted you wanted? I’m not going to make you give it up, Nicolette; I swear to you on my son’s life.” She let out a very visible shudder and sigh of relief at that, as if the tension had just left her body. “Why would you think that I would?”

“I.. I’m not sure, Master,” Nicolette said. “With Piper not getting preg—”

“Piper didn’t *want* to be pregnant, Nicolette, not yet.” Andy nodded his head, though, as if he could understand how the information out of context might have made her jump to erroneous conclusions. “That was a decision that *she* made, and I’m supporting her in. That doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“I was worried you might’ve just been telling me I could have a baby so you could get out of the hospital or something,” she sighed. “Whitney got accidentally pregnant with Bill’s baby in 2019, and he forced her to terminate it, which she did without open objection, even though it was fucking killing her. They had a ripped condom, which neither had noticed in the heat of the moment, and when Whitney missed her period, Bill... didn’t take it well.”

“Oh, shit...”

“He flew off the handle and while he didn’t hit her, he was threatening to abandon her, to get rid of her because he didn’t want a child that badly. He did the worst thing he could possibly do to a person who gets off on total submission – he refused to tell her to do anything else until she’d had the abortion. It... it was the worst I’d ever seen her, Master. She was crying all the time, almost nonverbal, and despite the fact that she was trying very hard to put on a brave face, that was the break in their relationship from which they never recovered from. Rationally, I know you wouldn’t ask me to do that, Andy, but the idea of losing this child... I was scared that maybe you’d agreed to it in a spur-of-the-moment thing, and that when you weren’t under the pressure of your first child about to be born, maybe you’d reconsider, because I’m not one of your wives. It sounds really fucking stupid when I say it out loud, I know. But just because it was important to *me* doesn’t mean it would have to be important to *you*, sir. I’m staff. I get th—”

“Okay, Nicolette, knock it off,” he chuckled. “The *staff* designation around here couldn’t mean any less if I *tried* to make it mean less, and Heavens know, I have tried. It’s a way for you women to say you don’t want to be married to me, you’re never *going* to want to be married to me and that I shouldn’t even *consider* trying to ask one of you to join the brides. I get it. I respect it. But I also need all of you to do me a favor.”

“Sir?”

“I need you to stop treating me like an idiot,” he said with a grin. “If you or any other woman in the house wants a child, I’m *going to say yes*. You just need to talk to me about it first, let me know that it’s something you’ve thought about, given weight to all the ramifications, and then let me know that you’re *trying* for it. I think the only reason I was even slightly annoyed at the hospital was because you were springing it on me out of nowhere. Because it was hard to tell

if it was you or the nanites speaking. And then when you started ducking me at home—”

“To be fair, Master, it wasn’t just you. I was scared *anyone* would try and talk me out of it. Or that maybe one of the wives would get jealous. Fi can be a little scary and territorial when she wants to be, but you know that.”

“—I assumed it was because you *didn’t* want to keep it, now that you’d come to your senses, and didn’t know how to tell me. I’d been trying to find you to tell you that if you didn’t *want* the baby, you could terminate it, but if you wanted to keep it, that was fine, too. I’d support whatever decision you’d made. I’m never going to make you do anything you don’t want to.”

Nicolette threw her arms around his midsection and leaned her head against his chest. “Aren’t we a perfect pair of idiots? I’m avoiding you because I’m afraid you’ll make me give it up, and you’re hunting for me, because you want to tell me that whatever I want to do is okay,” she laughed in between sobs. “You want to write an O. Henry story? I think we’ve got a free one for you.”

“God no,” Andy laughed. “Those stories were always depressing as fuck. Let me tell more entertaining stories about how a phoenix wants to bone a minotaur or something. Now, whether you like it or not, you’re sort of the de facto leader of everyone who considers themselves *staff*. I want you to go about conveying a message for me – anyone in the house on staff who wants to have a kid with me is allowed to, provided they talk to me in advance about it. No, not *allowed* to... that’s the wrong word. If someone wants to have a kid with me, I’m encouraging it. But we talk first, before that moment happens. I’m trying *really* hard here to be as supportive to everyone as I can, but every so often, one of you girls thinks the worst of me for whatever reason. No more springing it on me in the heat of the moment. I just need a few minutes to wrap my head around the idea, but I promise not to tell anyone no, okay?”

“Even if it’s Whitney?” she asked him.

“Even if it’s *Katie*, although that may be a slightly *longer* conversation,” he said with a slight chuckle. “Not that I would expect it to happen.”

“You should,” Nicolette said.

“I should what?”

“You should expect it to happen,” Nicolette said. “Katie and Jenny have been talking about it for the last couple of months, and one, if not both of them, are going to ask you for permission to get pregnant with your child, although they’ll want their children to keep their last name and not take yours, assuming you’re okay with that. I’d like the same thing, actually.”

“Of course that’s fine, Nicolette,” he told her. “Do I strike you as the kind of man who cares about putting his name on everything that came from him? Shit, I don’t even write *books* under my *own* name,” he said with a smirk. “You could give the kid the last name Conrad for all I care, so you can tell everyone they’re Blake Conrad’s kid instead of Andy Rook’s.”

“How about I give them the last name Sexton, after Dale and Charlotte?”

“Then you’re just asking for trouble, but that one’s not on me,” he smiled. “You’ve read some of the books; you know how cursed the Sexton family is.”

“And expect Whitney to be scared shitless when she comes to you to talk to you about this, because the fear of Bill’s still hanging in her mind like an unexploded German bomb in the streets of London post Blitz.” She tilted her head up and pressed her lips against Andy’s, both of her hands reaching to hold onto the back of his head, keeping him in the tender embrace for a long moment. “Thank you for being a good man, Andy. I didn’t really know how much I wanted to be a mother until I had the option in front of me and then... then I realized I would do anything to prevent someone from taking it away from me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her. “The child will still be welcome as family, but they’ll be your child, and you’ll be the driving force in their life.” He stood up and she stood up with him. “Don’t make me have to park a chair here again, young lady,” he teased. “You should know by now I’m not above following George Carlin’s advice.”

“Which advice was that?”

“When someone approaches me and says ‘Lead, follow or get out of the way... I *obstruct*,’” he said with a smirk. He gathered up his laptop and headed back downstairs to his office, finding Fiona working away at her laptop. “How’s the book coming along?”

“I’m starting to think I’m going to have to separate it into several series detailing all sorts of aspects of the whole DuoHalo crisis,” she said, sighing as she glanced over at the white board she kept in his office. Her, Ash and Andy had sort of split the major office in the concealed basement into thirds and each had a whiteboard they used for different things. Andy’s kept track of which projects were in which stages. Ash’s had been used to start figuring out how to begin her own graphic design consultancy firm. Fiona’s was now divided into ‘Rook family,’ ‘Marcos family,’ ‘history of New Eden,’ ‘history of DuoHalo,’ and ‘big picture connective tissue’ with file names listed beneath each of them, parts that Andy suspected were either interview, transcripts or written observations. “Maybe do one book up front that’s focused on some individual aspect and then break it out after that? Jesus, the deadline for a first draft book out of me about all of this should’ve been like a month or so ago, but I need to get something out there soon, otherwise someone else is going to beat me to it.”

“You’re very smart, love,” Andy told her. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. I’d offer to help but I’ve still got to get final script notes and edits back to Maya before she starts filming next month.”

“It’s going to be way more useful to have you there whenever she needs you, you know?”

“Oh, I get it,” Andy laughed. “And I’m sure I’ll spend plenty of time on set, if for no other reason than to say, ‘I was there and got to watch as they made a movie from *my* story.’”

“It doesn’t hurt that you have a man crush on Ewan McGregor, now, does it?” she teased.

“Not in the slightest,” Andy laughed. “It’s just easier, though, to be able to offer thoughts and suggestions when you have a partner working from the top, rather than as one of the pieces on the inside. I love working with Sarah and Em, don’t get me wrong, but here, Maya’s the shotcaller, which means what she says, goes, and I’m going to try and stay out of her way as much as possible.”

“You’re not going to back seat direct her, are you?”

“*God no*,” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “She knows infinitely more about movie making than I’ll *ever* learn, but I also know the story she’s working from, so if I have a question about why something’s different from my story than it is as they’re filming it, I can get that answered without ruffling any feathers or pissing people off.”

“You *really* need to talk to Phil about what you saw over at Valhalla Shores, though,” Fiona told him as he moved to lean against her desk. “That was some seriously dicey shit going on over there, and the last thing you want to do is leave LP hanging.”

“I know, and I agree, but Phil’s been radio dark since before Niko gave birth, which means there must be some serious shit going down that needs his full attention,” he said. “That’s why I haven’t been bothering or pressuring him. I know that things are pretty wildly out of hand and he’s trying to stuff some genie back in the bottle, otherwise he would’ve loved to come over and see little Matty.” He felt his phone start buzzing in his pocket and pulled it out, seeing it had Whitney’s smiling face on it. “Hey Whit, what’s up?”

“Dr. Marcos is here to see you and says it’s urgent,” Whitney said to him.

“Speak the devil’s name, and he was already on your doorstep,” Fiona chuckled.

“I just buzzed them in through the gate, so they should be at the front door in just a minute or two. I’m on my way to greet them now. Would you like to meet them in one of the living rooms?”

“Sure, let’s meet up in Amber. I’m in the lair, so I’ll be up in just a minute or two.”

“Very good, sir. We’ll see you momentarily. Would you like me to let Niko know so she can bring Matthew for Phil to meet?”

“Good idea. Be there shortly.” Andy hung up the phone, leaning down to kiss Fiona on the cheek. “You want to come up and see Phil, or you want to stay here and keep working?”

Fiona waved her hand at him. “You boys go trade your spy stories. I’ve got plenty here to keep me occupied. I’ll come up later.”

“Fair enough, I’ll tell Phil you’re too good to waste your time on him,” he joked.

“I have a wealth of embarrassing stories on you from our college days, Mr. Rook, don’t you dare forget.”

“I will not, Mrs. Rook,” he grinned as he made his way to the door. “Of that you can be certain.” Because the living rooms needed some sort of differentiator, each of them had been named after places in fantasy or science-fiction. The main living room in the center of the lower floor of the house was nicknamed Amber, for Roger Zelazny’s realm which connected to all others. When he made his way there, he saw Niko had beaten him to it, and Phil was holding Andy’s son trepidatiously. “Don’t worry – at some point I’ll probably have another son and I can name *that one* Phil,” Andy said with a wry smile.

Phil looked *awful*, having clearly not shaved in a week, but because of his Filipino heritage, he didn’t grow facial hair very well, and so it was a little spotty and ratty. There were bags under his eyes and after a few seconds, Andy realized that Phil was wearing the exact same clothes he’d been wearing when Andy had seen him last, on the 28th. “He’s adorable, Andy,” Phil said with a weary smile. “You did good, kid.”

“You, on the other hand, look like *shit*, Phil,” Andy said with a hint of concern as Phil moved to hand Matty over to Linda.

“That’s what I keep telling him, but apparently he’s been working on something vitally important, that he didn’t want to talk about,” Linda grumbled, annoyance writ large in her voice. “Whatever it is he’s worried about, he only wants to talk to you about it, Rook, so…”

“That’s only part of the reason we’re here, Linda,” Phil said, grabbing one of Andy’s remotes, turning on the largest television in the room. Phil pulled his phone from his pocket and streamcast a video file. “Watch this.”

A recorded bit of CNN news from what looked like maybe early this morning began to play. The anchor looked a little surprised. “This morning, we have word from southern Russia, from a town close to the Black Sea called Krasnodar, not far from the borders of Georgia and Ukraine. That town’s vice-mayor has apparently declared independence from Russia, in a stunning speech given just a few hours ago. Here’s video footage from that speech,” the anchor said, before transitioning to footage that looked like it had been shot with a handheld camera trying to stand in for a professional shot, although the sort of down-to-earth look of the footage only seemed to enhance the credibility of it.

“For those who don’t know me – I’m Danila Koval, vice-mayor of Krasnodar,” the weary but defiant looking man said into the camera. “I did not prepare a fancy official speech for you today, so let me just tell you where we’re at and what it has come to.”

Andy looked over at Phil with surprise in his eyes. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Seems like. First domino in the Russian Empire looks like it just fell and we’re only expecting more, keep watching.”

The man on the television continued. “For months, we knew Moscow had abandoned us as people, but as empires go, it didn’t want to let go of this land – *our* land. When we asked for the vaccine against DuoHalo, they told us no vaccine exists, but still demanded total loyalty of us. When we didn’t bend the knee blindly and obediently, they sent assassins to remove your legitimately elected government. When that didn’t work, they tried to smother us by stealing our salaries, pensions and welfare payments, but we were already prepared. Then they turned to the famous Moscow diplomacy. Yeah, that’s right – *debily, blyat*, that one. We kicked them out.”

For the next couple of minutes, the camera panned to show tank wreckage, as well as damaged buildings and cars strewn about the general area, before the man hopped down off the tank wreckage and moved to stand with his comrades in arms as he detailed how they had defeated the invaders sent to put down their uprising, and how those invaders would be tried for war crimes.

“Two weeks from now, on May 16th, Kuban will have an independence referendum.” The footage moved to zoom in close on his face, framing tight for maximum effect. “I am now addressing all the enslaved peoples of the Russian Empire. Raise your voices. Break your chains. Join us. Become free.”

The footage cut back to the anchor. “Extraordinary footage from southern Russia. Early reports are that several other regions of Russia are in the process of following suit and calling for independence referendums for their own districts. Obviously, we’ll be keeping you up to date on this story as more breaks, but let’s go to one of our Russian exper—”

Phil turned off the video. “Whole world’s coming loose at the seams. We got a report about China that I need to give to you as well, although if it were any vaguer, it might as well have included a weather report for a specific day next year.”

“Any news is more than what we have now, Phil, so spill.”

“It sounds like everyone in China is in one of four conditions right now. There’s the very small splinter of members of the Communist Party that apparently were able to hijack a shipment of the German Quaranteam serum variant and get a small portion of their leadership covered. There’s a much larger faction of women survivors who are apparently attempting to overthrow the Communist Party. They’re called the Empty Wives, and they’ve been trying to liaison with us to get QT serum to help them bolster their numbers. There’s also the incredibly high number of casualties they’ve had, with men being decimated, and I wish I meant that in the literal sense of the word, but it’s the opposite, and they only have between five and ten percent of their men left alive. And then there’s the last group, which are the bigger problem. They’ve got something the Chinese are calling the sleeping plague – it’s a variant of DuoHalo except that during the latter stages, the brain is in a comatose state, but the body is still moving around, like it’s sleepwalking, infecting as many others as it can. The sleeping plague portion of the DuoHalo infection seems to affect them for about 3 days, and then dehydration cripples and immobilizes them before they just expire. We haven’t gotten a chance to see what QT’s effect is on one of the sleeping plague, but our current guesses are that either a sleeping plague person would make a full recovery, or they’d just drop down dead. The Air Force right now is prepping a recon mission to see if they can snag and pair someone with sleeping plague, and hopefully we’ll know more about that by this time next week.”

“Jesus, Phil,” Andy chuckled. “You’ve been fucking busy.”

“No no, this is all shit that doesn’t have anything to do with me,” Phil said. “This is just me getting the news.” Phil started looking around the room a bit. “Is there someplace the two of us can go and talk without being disturbed?”

“Phil, you know I don’t like this,” Linda said, edged eyes glaring his way. “We agreed, no more secrets unless they were absolutely, positively necessary.”

“Linda, within a couple of weeks, I’ll tell you everything and you’ll understand why I waited, because Andy’s going to wish I *hadn’t* told him any of them,” Phil said before turning back to Andy. “Maybe we can go up to that hidden room upstairs?”

“Yeah, okay,” Andy said, turning to Niko. “Phil and I are going to head up to the Birdcage. Can you make sure nobody comes in while we’re up there? I’ll lock the door, but you know as well as I do that somehow both Nicolette and Whitney know how to get into there anyway.”

“I’d like to go on record that I’m with Linda about the danger of keeping secrets, Andrew,” Fiona told him, but the look in her eyes said she clearly empathized with whatever self-flagellation Phil had been going through over this. “But I’ll tell them.”

“C’mon,” Andy said to Phil. “Let’s go talk about what’s so damn important.”

As they started to walk up the stairs, Andy tried to get Phil to talk about whatever was troubling him, but his friend was so concerned that he shushed Andy several times until they were at the bookcase that doubled as a secret door to a third-floor study. As soon as the door opened, Phil practically sprinted past Andy and headed up the stairs. Andy stepped into the narrow stairwell, pulling the bookcase door shut and flipping the latch into place to lock the door behind them, then started walking up the stairs after his friend.

When Andy reached the top, he saw that Phil had already poured two glasses of scotch, much fuller than he normally would, and held one out to Andy. “You’re going to need to drink this,” Phil said, and for the first time, Andy noticed that Phil’s hands were shaking a little. “Trust me on this one.”

Andy took the glass from Phil, having a sip from it as he sat down in one of the chairs while Phil sat down on the couch, slumping like all the fight had just gone out of him. “Phil, talk to me, man. What the fuck is going on?”

“Andy, I...” Phil started then stopped. He looked down at his glass of scotch, took another long draw from it, swallowed it and then looked back up at Andy, steeling himself to get through it. “A couple of weeks ago, I started researching the impact that the higher Tiers were having on the individuals within Teams at those Tiers. And I came across...” Phil sighed. “Fuck it, I don’t even know what to *do* with this information, Andy... and I can’t sit on it too long, because I know somebody’s going to figure out it sooner or later, probably much sooner than I want them to...”

“Phil! Spit it out, man.”

“Right! Right. Right... okay, so let me give you a piece of information that *isn’t* in any of the reports, because I didn’t know what to do with it – higher Tier teams? Their nanobots exchange information via a radio antenna they’ve grafted onto bone of your right forearm. You can’t really feel it, but it’s there, trust me. Now, what they’re exchanging, I’m still not entirely sure. I think it’s mostly just best practices, but it might also be experimental self-modifications the nanobots have made that have been beneficial, so they can be incorporated into other Teams.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Yeah, but this remains between us.”

“Of course, man,” Andy assured him.

“Piper’s ability to track you via scent? Linda developed that ability recently with regards to me. My theory is that the nanobots recognized it was a skillset that your Team had that we didn’t, and so they moved to incorporate it into the person who most wanted it,” Phil said. “How far that ability extends, I don’t know, but it’s tangential to the real thing I’m here to talk to you about. Because... because *fuck* if I don’t tell *somebody* I’m going to go out of my fucking mind...”

“Phil, brother, just *say* it...”

Phil turned to look at him and then Andy could see that last bit of resistance collapse, as he began to tell Andy the most insane piece of information he would ever hear. “I told you the nanobots are always doing some level of regeneration on anyone they’re implanted it, but lately, it’s started to become a bit more obvious they’re taking things a bit further than that.” Andy was about to jump in with a question, but Phil raised his hand, asking him to remain quiet as he continued to talk. “The larger the Team, the higher Tier you’re in; the higher Tier you’re in, the stronger this low-level constant regeneration is. And it’s affecting one thing that nobody’s noticed yet, but eventually everyone will. Those in the higher Tiers are aging a lot slower than the rest of world. In a Tier 1 Team, for every two months an unserumed person ages, a person in a Tier 1 team ages only one month. At Tier 2, it’s one month for every three months. At Tier 3, it’s one month for every four months. And anyone in Tier 4 or higher? We’re only aging a couple of months every year.”

The information hung in the air for a very long moment before either of them spoke, Phil not sure what to say next and Andy unsure how to make sense of any of it. But eventually someone had to break the silence and Andy’s voice cut through the air.

“So you’re saying—”

“Yes.”

“And it’s just people inside of Teams?”

“Yes.”

“So, assuming I was going to live another 40 years or so before, I’m now going to—”

“Live approximately two hundred and forty years, yes.”

“And so is everyone else in my Team.”

“Barring death by non-natural causes, yes.”

“That’s—wait. It doesn’t affect anyone *outside* of the Team?”

“No,” Phil said, lifting his glass up towards his lips. “Now you’re catching on.”

“I’m—we’re going to outlive our kids?” Andy said, completely aghast.

“And probably our kids’ kids. And maybe even their kids’ kids. I’m saying that on your son’s 18th birthday, you’re only going to look 3 years older than you do right now.”

“Phil what the ever-loving *fuck*?!”

“I know! How the fuck do I tell a mother that she’s almost definitely going to outlive the child she just gave birth to?”

“Phil!”

“Andy, what the fuck are we going to do?”

“...I haven’t got a fucking clue, Phil...”

(special thanks to 32inch for giving me a flash forward from his story that I could use to link continuities and show where the bigger world at large is headed)