

Chapter Twenty-One

April 19th, 2021

He hadn't expected to be waking up just a short hop, skip and a jump away from Pinewood Studios, but sometimes the machinery that surrounded his life was just that much bigger and meaner than he was, and he had no choice but to acquiesce to its demands.

Hollywood being what it was, the amount of shooting time needed in London had been expanded, and the key members of Team Rook had shown up a week or two later than originally planned, but Andy didn't mind, as the news of the delay in shooting had come in during the middle of their honeymoon, which had involved a week in Hawaii, a week in Mexico, a week in Jamaica and a week in Cuba, with regular stops back at the manor in between.

He felt Melody's hand on his shoulder, a smile on her lips, which meant she'd already sent her text message a while ago. "You need to get up, boss," she said to him. "They need you on set in case they need any revisions done on the fly."

"What time is it?"

"Just a little after ten. Em and Sarah have been on set since five, but neither of them wanted to wake you, since they got to sleep earlier than you did last night. Em also has that interview with that UK journalist today, Farah Hassan, so she wanted to have a little bit of extra time to give her while she was in costume and make up. Em felt it was good to give the home press a bone, and liked what she'd seen of Hassan when she'd been back home visiting. The two took Ash, Piper and Niko with them, and Mo and Fi are in New York having their meeting with Fi's publisher. They're probably still asleep, since I don't even think it's daybreak over there yet, so I wouldn't call them for a bit. You were really out of it, so everyone thought it best if you get caught up on sleep."

"Yeah, well, I had to have that video call with the Senator, and so I needed to function on D.C. time, not London time, for at least a few hours," Andy sighed as he sat up. He curled a finger at Melody and she leaned down. He tilted his head up and gave her a soft kiss, partially because he wanted to but mostly because it made the tough-as-nails woman blush each and every time, and he enjoyed that. "Thanks for letting me sleep in, Mel."

"I think you'd have ignored me if I'd tried to get you up any earlier, boss," Melody chuckled. "But if you want to say thanks to your girl, maybe she could suck you off during the morning shower? I feel a little self-conscious shouting about how I love you fucking me when we're in such a high-end hotel on the movie studio's dime."

"This kind of hotel?" Andy laughed. "I'm sure they've heard much much worse, but sure, I don't mind."

Maybe they took a little bit longer in the shower than he needed, but Melody looked extremely satisfied when they were both drying off, licking the remaining jism from her lips, her skin a little tingly in the post-glow of the serum-induced orgasm. "I'm sure you already probably know this, Andy, but it really is much better with you than it was with Covington. Not just the way you treat me, but the sex itself. He made me feel more like an object than a person, but you go out of your way to make sure I'm having a good time, even when you know you don't have to. I'm just an employee and yet, you're still taking time to cuddle me post orgasm, like that long hug you gave me in the shower. I want you to know that means a lot to me."

"You're not just an employee, Melody," Andy said to her. "I get that you *think* you are, but every employee is still family on one level or another. And you made a mistake throwing in your lot with Covington. You can't let that color the rest of your life. What's that quote from the movie? 'Life's simple. You make choices and you don't look back.' You were given a second

chance, and you're making the most of it. Anyone who doesn't respect that is out of their mind."

"I think Piper might still be a little overly cautious around me."

"Well, that's to be expected," Andy chuckled. It still felt strange not having to put on his glasses after he got up or got out of the shower. Twenty years of constantly putting them on meant he felt like he was forgetting something every time he didn't, but the regeneration had left him with better eyesight than he'd had even when he was younger. "She still wishes Covington would've gotten something more retribution oriented instead of just life in prison, but they need men alive, one way or another, so they weren't going to kill him off. Shit, they aren't even killing off Brian Morrison and he killed someone directly."

"Well, he did do that on Covington's orders."

"So he claimed," Andy sighed, "but it's his word against Covington's, and the jury didn't know who to believe, no matter what any of us said in testimony. Either way, both him and Covington get to spend the rest of their lives in jail, working as human sperm banks. That's just the way it is. The death penalty's a thing of the past, at least for the time being, at least for men. We can't afford any more lives to be lost."

"Can I ask what you and the Senator were talking about last night?" Melody asked him, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. She'd found out that Andy preferred longer hair on women not long after she'd joined the family and had started growing it out without so much as a suggestion from him, according to what Niko had told him a few days ago.

"Sure," Andy said, grinning as he waited for the joke to sink in.

A few seconds later, Melody rolled her eyes and flashed him her most embarrassed grin. "What were you and the Senator talking about last night, oh keeper of the dad jokes?"

"Some last-minute tweaks they're trying to jam into the Male Protection Act," Andy grumbled. "The Senators sort of like to use me as a testing ground, to see just how much of a shitstorm I'll throw up if they try and chip away at our freedoms just a little bit more."

"How bad is it?"

He tossed his hands up. "I think it might just be the most damned piece of legislation since the original Prohibition, but that's also just me speaking from my point of view, and men aren't exactly the largest of voting blocs anymore."

"What are they trying to add?"

"A clause that will let them regulate a man's diet if he weighs too much during any checkup," he sighed. "I told them trying anything diet related would cause the whole thing to be unconstitutional no matter how they try and portray it, and that they'd just end up having to jail most men, which isn't the intended point."

"I can't understand why they're worried about it anyway," Melody told him. "Most of the men I've seen, what with all the sex you're having to have, all of you are probably in the best shape of your lives. Not getting fit wasn't really an option. You're all doing the equivalent of a two-mile jog each day in the equivalent calories burned fucking. Maybe more."

"They seem to feel like there may be some exceptions down at the lower end of the scale, those with a small number of partners," Andy said. "But I keep pointing out that those men are getting saddled with more and more partners as the desire to start ramping up human production increases."

"You have a weird way of saying 'making babies,' boss."

Andy chuckled, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah, that's fair. After looking at numbers and spreadsheets for so long, you start thinking of them *just* as numbers and forget they're people. The folks in Congress are doing everything they can to get America pregnant, even if that

includes women who weren't American just a few months ago."

"How's the acceptance rate for Operation: Funnel Cake anyway?" Melody asked as she moved to strap her weapon's holster back into place, pulling on her jacket over it to keep it concealed. Andy had gotten quite appreciative of how well she, Niko and Alexis kept their weapons out of sight, so that he knew they were there, but he wasn't constantly thinking about them.

"I haven't been able to get acceptance and satisfaction rates for outbound, but inbound, it seems like we've made a lot of women very happy at least in the short term," Andy said with relief, pulling on his clothes. He grabbed a Buckethead t-shirt from his suitcase, tugging it on last. "It's the Friends & Family benefit that's really helped, I think, because everyone brings a slice of home with them, and nobody's run aground in a new country without some of their support system with them. It's definitely going to change the makeup of this country, though, let me tell you. The melting pot just turned into a blender set to puree. I understand why they're making all the new women wait a year before giving them voting rights, though, just so that the fall election isn't affected by them too much."

"How soon is Congress going to vote on the MPA?"

"Within the next day or two, I think," Andy grumbled. "There's still a whole bunch in there that I think is going to go over like a lead balloon, but hey, why would anyone listen to me, right? I'm just one of the men who'd be affected by the whole damn thing, and there aren't a whole lot of those left in Congress anymore."

"What part of it do you think is going to go over the worst?" she asked him as they headed out of their hotel room towards the elevator. Lexi was downstairs, waiting for them outside of the car with the driver the studio had hired for them. It felt a little odd, moving around with so few people with him, but there was something refreshing about it, like he wasn't quite as constricted as he normally was.

"The phasing out of all men from combat/line-of-fire positions in the military across the board. They're still wrestling with whether they can apply that to law enforcement, but I kept telling them if they did it for all police, the bill would be *completely* DOA, because I can't imagine all the cops agreeing to follow it. You'd have thousands of men refusing to turn in their badges and their weapons. Shit, I think trying to do it for the military alone is going to be hard enough, but you can understand where they're coming from there," Andy said, stopping to give Lexi a kiss on the cheek as she scowled at him before quietly laughing. "Even if it's just military and doesn't include cops, I think that's going to be the biggest bone of contention in the bill." Andy climbed in the back of the car and Melody scooted in next to him as Lexi moved to sit in the front passenger seat, next to the driver, whose name was Tulip.

"You think most of the bill is fine?"

"I think most of it is common *sense* at this point," Andy said as the driver started up the e-tron car and drove out from the underground parking area. "Not letting men smoke? Not letting them be firefighters or engage in high-end, risky behavior? That's all just sensible from a practical point of view. But there's limits to what you can dictate that people can and can't do. They struck the 'no foreign travel' clause, thank God, because otherwise we'd be the most isolationist country ever, with women being unable to go abroad for longer than a week or so. I'm not real keen on the 'required kids' clause, but that number seems to keep changing, and if it settles at just 1-2 kids a year, then *maybe* I can understand that, but at one point they were talking 3-5 kids a year per Team, regardless of size, and that's just insane. Nobody's ready for that kind of sudden pressure in their lives yet. Nor do we as a species need that much to recover."

“The system needs shaking up, boss,” Lexi said from the front seat. “We’re going to need to repopulate the planet, and right now, with the small enough percentage of men we have, we’re still far closer to extinction than anybody would like.”

Andy scoffed a little bit. “I know the casualties are hard for any of us to wrap our minds around, but let’s do it in cold hard numbers. According to our estimates, we lost about a billion people in the Kill Zone. That leaves around 7 billion people on the planet before we start clipping off casualties. About another billion of that are people aged ten and younger, who are immune to the effects of DuoHalo. That leaves us with a starting point of 6 billion. Half of that 6 billion, give or take, were men. The ballpark estimate is that 80% of the planet’s men have been killed, give or take 7%. That means there are somewhere in the range of three to seven hundred million men left alive on the planet. Compared to the 2.4 to 2.8 billion women left alive. Yeah, it’s a cataclysmic event, but life will carry on. It’s not like there’s only ten thousand men left in the world. If we were looking at those kinds of numbers, then yeah, I get it, every man is basically a semen bank you keep locked away. But the planet was looking at overpopulation before all of this, so there’s some benefits to it all as well. Trying to lock a generation of men in an ivory tower ain’t the way to go about solving this problem, though.”

“I’d sleep sounder knowing you weren’t constantly in harm’s way, boss,” Lexi told him. “But I get that you don’t want to be kept under glass either. I’m glad they took some of my feedback and incorporated that as well, otherwise we would’ve been intentionally in violation of a lot of those rules on day one. No way in hell I’m letting anyone lo-jack you.”

“What’s on my schedule today?” Andy asked. “Anyone know?”

“First few hours they’re going to show you some of the footage shot spliced together. It’s too early to call it a rough cut, but they want to make sure you think it’s falling in line with how you see it translating from page to screen, and then you’ll meet with the producer to give any of your notes,” Melody told him. “After that, it’s dinner with the director and the producer together, then a few hours on set, letting you have the chance to tweak any of the dialogue that actors are having trouble with. You’ll ride back with Em and Sarah tonight after they’re done shooting.”

“Right, right,” Andy nodded. “So, a week here, then everybody’s back to the Bay so the movie can do its two weeks of on-location shooting for stuff they can’t or won’t fake with CG, although I imagine they won’t need Sarah for much, if any of that, and even Em’s stuff shouldn’t be too long. And then the Oversight meeting in mid-May.”

Melody laughed a little bit. “Plus, y’know, Niko probably giving birth first week of May, and Ash probably giving birth late May.”

Andy chuckled, nodding. “Y’know, the little things.” He looked out the window and muttered a single word beneath his breath. “T’oel. Maybe that’ll work.”

“What’s that, boss?” Melody asked him.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” he said as the car pulled up to the gate at Pinewood Studios. The guard checked their ID, did a quick sweep of the car and then passed them through, letting them head towards the buildings. “Where are they filming today?”

“Some second unit stuff is being done on the main stage, and the main shooting is over at the Underwater Stage, so you don’t have to worry about onset dialogue fixing today.”

“Good,” Andy said. “It’ll be nice to see what they’ve shot so far and get a handle on how the movie’s coming together before I have to sit down and talk with anybody about it.”

The film’s choice of director had been something of a controversial one – the man’s name was Alex Proyas, an Australian director with a very uneven track record. His most recent film, 2016’s “Gods Of Egypt,” had tanked at the box office, but Andy was a *big* fan of one of the

director's earlier movies, a film called "Dark City," which he felt showed a good understanding of the sort of vibe and atmosphere the Druid Gunslinger books had always fallen under. Andy had been willing to accept Proyas as director on the movie, as long as there was an understanding that he would strongly stick to the script, and not try to add or remove too much from screenplay draft that Andy had okayed shortly after Christmas. The studio had insisted that Proyas had plenty of green screen experience, and that he could bring the production in under budget, even if he took a little bit of extra time shooting it.

For Andy, the quality of the thing was all that mattered.

The director's lead assistant brought them into the screening room and sat them down before turning on the footage, which was definitely still far too early to be called a 'rough cut' but was far enough along to let Andy see how the film was developing.

Andy had his laptop out to let him take notes, but for the most part, Proyas was on the right track. The pacing felt right, Chris Kane was *perfect* in his interpretation of Dale Sexton and the director had always chosen angles to heighten the mood of the shot, not to detract from it. In fact, he only really had three major notes they would need to talk about. It was the most relaxed Andy had felt in months, as if a giant weight had been lifted off his head.

From there, the producer's assistant brought the three of them out of the viewing room to meet in a private lounge, and this was the meeting Andy was most nervous about. "So, Andy, what do you think?" Dana Goldberg asked him as he came to sit down at the table with her for lunch.

Goldberg was the Chief Creative Officer of Skydance and had the sort of powerful track record of success that made him a little nervous, from giant mega-hits like the Mission: Impossible movies to highly successful TV like *Altered Carbon* or *Condor*.

"Well, all the key points are in place, so I think you're most of the way there," Andy said, shaking hands as he got comfortable. "In fact, I've really only got three major notes to talk about. Most of the rest of it is minor quibble stuff."

"You're the father of this whole story, so let me hear your concerns," she said. "I had them prepare lunch for us in advance, so I hope a chicken cheesesteak's okay."

"I certainly won't say no to that," Andy laughed, as a waiter brought out a can of Mezzo Mix, setting it down for him. "Wow, you've really done your homework on me."

"We didn't want you to be disappointed. Now, concerns. You have them; I want to fix them."

"Sure, the first one's just sort of a tonal question – I noticed you haven't done any of the sort of flashback stuff that's peppered through the story. And I understand most them, but I feel like if you don't include the scene of young Dale and Charlotte being told who's going to be the Gunslinger, it's going to muddy up the relationship they have to the audience who isn't familiar with the books," Andy said. "And I realize, the more into the books you get, the more complicated that relationship gets, but the last thing you want to do is start them off on a semi-adversarial relationship. They antagonize each other, but that's brothers and sisters for you."

"You're absolutely right, and I agree with you, it's a scene we *will* be shooting – we just need to find the right cast for the younger version of the Sexton kids, and the right actor to play their father. Any thoughts? Who'd you see in the role?"

"He's too big for this sort of thing, but Colin Farrell."

"Are you kidding? This is the sort of thing Colin *loves* to do – come in for a small cameo that he can really sink his teeth into. And, even more importantly, he's still alive. I'll make some calls. What else? What's next?"

“The second is that I notice you haven’t shot either of the scenes with Seymour in them, and they don’t seem to be on the shooting schedule for on location shooting.”

“Alex doesn’t seem to think we need them.”

Andy frowned a little bit, shaking his head. “Okay, this hill I’ll die on. Seymour’s only in two scenes in the first book, but those two scenes are pivotal, because the first one starts Dale down the path, and the second one leads into the resolution of the whole damn story! You can’t cut them out of the script, otherwise it’s going to feel like the audience is missing steps to make the mystery work.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, so we can talk those out with Alex over dinner,” Dana told him. “What’s the last one?”

Andy smirked a little bit. “Well, the last is that the ending of your movie implies you’re going to roll on into making ‘The Trouble With Werebears’ next.”

“What’s the problem there?”

“The problem’s threefold,” Andy chuckled. “First and foremost, it’s probably my worst book, and while it’s got some defenders, even I think it’s something of a mess structurally. I’m not sure what the hell I was doing with all the constant flashbacks to Dale’s childhood. Padding for content, probably.”

“It’ll give us a chance to bring back Colin for an even bigger part, and we can likely fix the book in the screenplay phase,” Dana said. “What’s the second part of the problem?”

“The second part of the problem is that while Trouble is the next book in the story chronologically, it was published much later, and the next book published was one of the better ones, even though it’s down a ways in Dale’s timeline.”

“We decided it’s best to adapt them in the order they appear as stories, although we might just skip ‘The Wraith’s Lexicon’ since it’s sort of all over the place in terms of the story’s timeline. Trust us, we’ve got market research to back this up. What’s the last thing bothering you?”

He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. “Well, the *biggest* problem is that you don’t currently have the rights to anything other than the first book in the series,” he smirked. “You folks never optioned anything past that.”

“Does someone else hold the options?”

“No no,” Andy said, “I still do.”

“Good, because I’ve sent an offer letter to your agent, telling her we want to acquire the rights for all the books in the Druid Gunslinger series, including the prequel novella and the next few we know you’re writing, in exchange for both the cash offer and the percentage on the back end for each of the movies. So if they do well, you do well. If they don’t do so well, you still got paid some for each one we tried.”

“That’s... a rather large vote of confidence,” Andy said.

“We think this is the beginning of a big franchise for us,” she told him, “And it doesn’t hurt that you’ve got more female characters in these books than you do male, which will make casting significantly easier. Take your time. Talk the contract over with your agent. I think it’s in everyone’s best interests, and you still retain creative control over the project, although not final cut. If you don’t agree to the deal, it’ll just be a nod to the fact that there’s more books in the series, but c’mon... this is good business for everyone involved.”

“Same director for the next one?”

“Well, that’s the thing – we’ve had a screenwriter working on adapting the second book already, and so we’re thinking we could move into production on the second one while the first is

in post and f/x, just to get a head start on it.”

“I guess if you’ve already got people for the young Dale and Charlotte, you could probably start in with all of that first, since I think Emily’s booked up for a bit with the television show she’s going to be working on in the summer and early fall.”

Dana waved her hand. “We can make all the schedules work, don’t worry about that. So it sounds like in principle we’re agreed?”

“No closing handshake until I’ve heard from Trish, but yeah, in principle, I can get behind that.”

“Great. We’ll work out the particulars between agents and make sure everybody’s happy in the long run.”

A little while later, the director came in to join them, and Andy made his case for including the two scenes with Seymour the omniseXual unicorn, and the director argued that they were already worried about length, but Andy had a number of places where he was happy to suggest trimming his own material if that was the concern. At the end of the day, the two scenes would be filmed and included in the movie. Andy had even suggested they get Patton Oswalt to do the voice, although Dana suggested they contact Tilda Swinton.

After that was the part he was most looking forward to, as he walked onto a movie set for the first time, a little surprised how sort of small it felt in scale, despite the scene being depicted being rather huge. Much of the backdrop was a green screen that would be filled in later, simply because they hadn’t been able to find a suitable location to double as Sexton Manor anywhere, so they were creating one out of whole cloth, parts of the foreground a set but the general structure itself living nowhere except inside the author’s head and the audience’s mind.

Still, he was here, and there was even a chair with his name on the back. “Blake Conrad, creator” it read, boldly.

He sat down in it and took a minute to marvel that he was there.

“Mr. Conrad?” a voice from behind him said. “Hey there. Just wanted to introduce myself while I had a second. I’m—”

“Christian Kane,” Andy laughed. “I know exactly who you are, man. You were my first and pretty much *only* choice to play Dale Sexton, so I’m very glad you took care of yourself.”

“Thank you kindly, sir. What do I call you? Mr. Conrad? Mr. Rook?”

“Jesus, Chris, call me Andy,” he said with a laugh. “I was a huge fan of you in *Leverage*, so I don’t know what we would’ve done if you hadn’t been interested in the part.”

“I’d heard talk that you were interested in me as an actor from a friend of mine who’d read all your books, and she sent me the series, as well as a video of you from that convention you were at where you said you could see me playing him,” Kane said to him. “I hope what we’ve done honors the very complicated character you’ve put onto the page, and that you enjoy my performance.”

“I watched a few hours of the footage earlier today, Chris, and now more than ever, I’m convinced we’ve got our Gunslinger.”

“I appreciate the hell out of that, Andy,” Kane laughed, patting him on the back. “If you and your Team have got time before you leave, I’d love to share a meal with you and pick your brain about what’s not on the page.”

“That sounds great, Chris,” Andy replied. “Not tonight bu—”

Andy was mid-sentence when the whole world slowed down suddenly, like everything was being put at 10% speed, and while Andy couldn’t move, still in the middle of saying that he couldn’t tonight when a metallic, disembodied voice flashed inside of his head, offering him a

choice with no other relevant information.

query:blockorcharge?

‘What?’ Andy thought to himself. ‘I don’t understand.’

priorityquery:blockorcharge?

‘Uh, block, I guess.’

Andy’s right hand snapped up and into the air and his fingers curled around an escrima stick that was flying towards his head, catching it, even while he continued his sentence. “—t we should be able to make time sometime this week,” he finished, even as he wondered what the hell had just happened.

“I’m *so* sorry about that, Mr. Conrad,” a fight coordinator said, running over towards them. “We were sparring to get ready for the next scene and it just slid out of my hand!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Andy said, still not entirely sure what his body had just done, turning to glance at the escrima stick in his hand, just as surprised as everyone else was.

“How the hell did you do that, Andy?” Kane laughed. “I barely even saw it coming!”

“If I said ‘magic,’ would you believe me?” Andy said, his own voice filled with uncertainty.

“I just might, Andy! I just might!”

“Then let’s go with that for the time being…”

‘I *really* gotta call Phil,’ Andy thought to himself. ‘What the actual *fuck* was that?’

Sarah came bounding over towards him, dressed in the costume of the Barbarian Queen of the West Coast Elves, looking ridiculously gorgeous, even if he thought the hairstyle was a little overblown for what he’d imagined the Queen to have. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him off his chair a bit suddenly. “What the hell just happened, Andy?”

“Not entirely sure myself, Sarah,” Andy said. “I just felt my arm moving up on its own.” No need to mention the voice in his head, he figured. “Some kind of reflex defense system, maybe? Haven’t got a clue what the hell that was.”

“That would’ve really fucking hurt!” she whimpered. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too,” he said, pulling back only enough for him to tilt his head up and kiss the tallest of his brides. “How’s shooting been?”

She burst into giggles, shaking her head. “Only *you* could nearly be clubbed in the fucking head and then want to know how shooting was,” she teased. “It’s fine. It’s much fucking better now that you’re here, but it’s fine.”

Lexi and Melody sprinted over, shaking their heads. “That was a freak fucking accident,” Lexi said, “but I should’ve been—”

“What, standing on top of me?” Andy laughed. “I’m *fine*, Lex. Nobody panic.”

“Reflexes like that, you could be on the stunt team,” Kane laughed.

“I’m surprised they’re even letting you *do* your own stunts at this point,” Andy sighed. “Although I guess there’s not a ton of hand-to-hand combat in the first book, and the spell slinging and gunfighting will all be CG.”

“Oh yeah,” Kane said. “The guns *themselves* are going to be CGI’d in later. They’re just solid green props the general *shape* of the guns, because we can’t bring anything that was at any point an operational gun onto the set. New safety regulations, otherwise, we couldn’t get insured. It’s going to be a weird wild world working on films from now. Television too.”

Emily came over to join them, a darker skinned woman in tow with a digital recorder in one hand, the interview clearly still going on. Emily was dressed in the Charlotte Sexton costume, and it was the first time he’d seen her in character, and he knew this new role of hers

was going to break hearts of tons of men all across the world all over again, those who had finally gotten over their crush of Dahlia Hairtrigger, only to find she'd grown up into even more of a bad ass. He was glad to see they'd taken the note about her not wearing a skirt most days because her outfits typically focused on practical over appearance. "How do I look?" she said, giving him a twirl.

"Radiant as ever," Andy said, moving over to give her a kiss, one he was a little surprised that Emily held onto as long as she did. "How's Pinewood? Just how you remember it?"

"Honestly, Andrew, something has *changed* about the people here," Emily said, her arms still around his neck, grinning that she'd gotten a bit of makeup on his face. "It's almost as if this Gemivax version of Phil's serum has removed a collective stick out of everyone's ass."

"Maybe they're all like you, Em, and have had something else jammed up there instead," Sarah teased. "You've certainly taken quite a liking to it."

Emily glowered at Sarah for a second before glancing over at Farah. "Please do not include any of that in your story, please."

"Are you sure? It makes you a lot more relatable, Mrs. Rook, trust me. The first time I..." Farah said with a grin before noticing Emily's slightly agitated glare. "Sorry. I forget how easy it is now to overshare. If you insist."

"Ignore her," Andy said with a chuckle. "You write your story and include whatever you think makes her most relatable to your audience. And if you think that her enjoying a bit of back door action humanizes her—"

"Andrew!" Em giggled, blushing a deep shade of red. "It most certainly does not!"

"Let the journalist do her job, Em. She's not out to do a hit piece on you." Andy turned to look at Farah with a slight smirk. "And if she is, well, I'm sure she'll rethink that lest she imagine your rabid fandom dismantling her bit by bit."

"I'm just here to do a profile piece on Emily, and a bit of a preview about the movie," Farah said. "And also talk a bit about how with filming starting back up at Pinewood how life is starting to get back to whatever the new normal is. I won't put her in a bad light. The only thing she's got to worry about is me maybe being a little too flirtatious..."

Andy had to trust his instinct, but he felt like Hassan was telling the truth, but he supposed all they could do was wait and see. Ash and Niko had been sitting off to the side, staring at an iPad, but they sighed and turned to look at him. "You'd better look at this, babe," Ash said as she turned the tablet to show what they'd been looking at.

The headline was all he needed to see.

"Men's Protection Act Passed Overwhelmingly In Congress."

"Well, *shit*."