

Chapter 36

Half an hour later, his phone rang and Andy glanced down to see it was Phil calling, a picture of him with the words “Phil The Elder” superimposed over part of it. The poker group actually had two Phils in it – Phil Marcos and Phil Pak. The two men were dramatically different from one another, but also remarkably similar in others. They shared the same first name, so the group had given them nicknames when they were talking about them it could've been either of them.

Phil Marcos a.k.a. Phil The Elder a.k.a. Greater Phil was 34, Filipino and worked for Boeing with the Air Force at a base in the East Bay, and was certainly the closer friend to Andy. They'd met at a local comic book store just after Andy had moved out to the West Coast, and had hit it off immediately. When Andy had started his poker group up a few years later, Phil was one of the first people Andy had called.

Phil Pak, a.k.a. Phil The Younger a.k.a. Lesser Phil was 32, Korean and worked for the NSA out of San Francisco, and not someone they'd seen as often as they liked. For the last couple of years, Lesser Phil had been trying to convince Andy to come work as a data analyst for the NSA in terms of interpretation and extrapolation.

Lesser Phil had been a college friend of Eric's, and had been introduced to Andy only a few months after he'd met Greater Phil. While Andy still typically thought of them as Greater and Lesser Phil, he tried not to call them that out loud, and had them as Phil The Elder and Phil The Younger in his phone. Andy asked if it was a common name, and Eric remarked that he knew at least a couple more Phils but none he knew that well. Andy told him he'd had a similar problem with Jennys in high school.

“Talk to me, Phil,” Andy said to his friend. “You heard the recording. Should I be worried?”

“Concerned, yes. Worried, no,” Phil sighed. He sounded exhausted on the other end of the line, but as of late, Phil had always sounded exhausted. Whatever he was doing over at the base, it was certainly taking a toll on his friend. “So the good news is that in the long run, it shouldn't make too much of a difference. But that reaction means that Lexi had been infected with the Orange Variant of the DuoHalo virus before we introduced the serum to her body.”

“The 'Orange Variant?’”

“We started naming them after colors, working our way through the spectrum. The Red Variant was first but it died off very quickly, so this is the second one,” he grumbled. “But she isn't our first exposure to it, so we know how the serum's going to generally react to it, and what it's going to do to her. There are only two real major differences you're going to need to worry about.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I told you, in the long run, it shouldn't make too much of a difference. The two differences you need to pay attention to are this – first, her margin of error for recursion is far less forgiving. That means don't ever make her go more than a week without getting some Rook juice, if you know what I mean, otherwise she see temporary cognitive decline set in pretty fast, and she'll be ripping your clothes off no matter where you are, so keep that in mind.”

“Every seven days minimum,” Andy repeated, writing it down on a notepad in his writing office. “What's the other major difference I need to worry about?”

“It *shouldn't* even be a concern, but you should still know about it. You know how other men's semen will typically make an imprinted woman ill?”

“Sure?”

“Those who've been exposed to the Orange Variant, if they come in contact with the semen of a man other than those they're imprinted with, they go into a violent fit of rage, attacking anyone other than their imprinted man on sight. Those rage fits tend to be relatively short-lived – only a hour at most – but they're still incredibly dangerous and not the kind of thing you want sprung on you as a surprise.”

“And this is my bodyguard who has this,” Andy sighed.

“Oh it's fine,” Phil chuckled. “She won't harm you, and you know how to protect your family better than anyone. I think anyone who tried to use it as a weakness against Lexi would probably not live to regret it. She'll also be imprinting for longer than normal, so if she's sleeping for like a day and a half, don't worry about it. That's to be expected.”

“You doing okay, Phil?” Andy asked. “You look like shit, and I'm more worried about you now than I am Lexi.”

Phil sighed then laughed a little bit. “You know me. I'll sleep when I'm dead. Lots of long days in the office turning into long nights, and on top of that, Audrey and Linda are making sure that I have several partners as well, so that my immunity to DuoHalo continues to be strong. We're not entirely sure of the science of it yet, but it looks like the more people inside a particular polypod, the stronger the internal herd immunity the male at the center get is. Once we knew that for certain, my two queens made sure I had a good litter of partners in our household. So I'm up to eleven myself now.”

“I still can't believe I'm a level five and you're not, Phil,” Andy said, deliberately testing a theory by trying to bait it out of his friend.

“Okay, Andy, you got me,” Phil said with amusement. “I'm *also* a level five. I was lying to you earlier, for security reasons. In fact, I think technically I was one of the first level fives. I've also technically *had* DuoHalo, but I can't really get into the details of that all that much. Let's just say that when we're finally through this whole pandemic, I'm going to have a bunch of stories to tell you that will blow your mind. I probably have to get clearance for you so that I can tell you some of them, but it'll be worth it.”

“I've always known you were up to something over there, Phil,” Andy laughed. “I just couldn't figure out what it was.”

“Greater Phil, International Man of Mystery. It's got a nice ring to it.”

“Speaking of Mystery. Poker, this week. Let's do it.”

“Yeah, sure,” Phil said. “I could use a break, so you call everyone else, and I'll make a point of coming over with as much of the family as I can convince to come out, although it has that weird side effect of making every poker night feel like a giant party where we're all hiding from our wives. Maybe we should see if there's enough interest to set up a second table and we can mix-and-match, so you can spend a bit more time meeting my partners and vice versa.”

“Well, you see Niko all the time, what with her being at your work, so you probably know her about as well as I do.”

“That girl's got secrets upon secrets, Andy.”

That caught him a little off guard. He wasn't bothered by it, but he was amused at the idea of her trying to hide something from him. “Niko? *My* Niko? I can't see it. She's open and transparent about everything with me.”

“Sure, okay. Didn't you feel that way about Erin?”

“That was different?”

“Was it though?” Phil said in a tone that immediately conjured the Smug Thor meme to his mind. “I mean, sure, Niko's secrets are probably being kept from you for the right reasons, as opposed to Erin's, but secrets are secrets.”

“The last thing I need is you making me *more* paranoid, Phil.”

“Forget I said anything. Oh, one last bit of news for you. Maya won't be there until tomorrow midday. Turns out she's also got the Orange Variant, so we're making sure the serum is getting a good foothold before we send her over to you. It's all just safety precautions, but it'll be over soon enough.”

“Great. We can do poker night on the 20th, so we can all watch the President's speech and the 60 Minutes story together.”

“Sounds like fun,” Phil agreed. “Hopefully Katie Couric's team caught my good side. See you on Friday.”

As Andy hung up the phone, he noticed that Whitney was lingering in the doorway. She was dressed impeccably in a white buttonup shirt and a black pencil skirt with black pantyhose on beneath, and the shirt was just barely thin enough that he could see hints of her red bra on underneath. “Have you got a moment, sir?”

“Sure thing, Whitney, what's up?”

“Just wanted to go over the set up work I've done for the house so you know what's going on, and to ask you a few questions so I can start the process of replacing your laptop for you,” she said, her hands folded together in front of her, her eyes mostly lowered.

“Sounds great, but Whitney, you don't have to look down all the time. I know you're more used to a stern hand than I am, and I'll do my best to be what you like when we're intimate, but when you're acting in your duties as the house IT manager, you need to relax a little more and try to fit in.”

Whitney smirked a little bit, those dark red lips perked up as she lifted her head, nodding at him with a little smile. “Oh, I know, sir. I think I mostly just wanted to see if you would notice. Shall we?”

For the next half an hour, Whitney explained to him in good detail all the changes she'd gone about to the house in the last day, getting all the rooms configured to work within the house's larger intranet.

As it turned out, there were multiple LAN ports in the walls of every room in the house, it seemed like, and once again, Andy found himself wondering who this house had been built for originally. In addition to making sure all the ports were working, Whitney had also set up wireless hubs and repeaters all throughout the house, enough so that no matter where a person was in the house, they should always have a good signal to the internet.

The house's security systems ran on an entirely separate network, one with minimal external connectivity, and Whitney said that she would work with Lexi to make sure the system was up to whatever standards his new head of security had in mind.

They walked while they talked, and outside in the back, Andy could see Katie astride her riding lawn mower, zipping in lines across the monstrous amount of green grass in his back yard, making sure to get all of it cut even and levelly. He could also see Tala hauling things into the back house with the help of Nicolette, who had ditched the maid outfit for the time being for a more practical set of blue jeans and a baggy t-shirt covered in paint splotches.

All of the changes, Whitney assured him, had been done with minimal disruption to anyone's work in the house, and she'd been trying to get as much of it today, as it was a Sunday.

The last thing they talked about was his replacement laptop, something that Andy was remarkably picky about. Oh, he didn't care about the things most people cared about – when it came to processors and memory, Andy insisted none of that mattered to him – but the thing he was adamant about was that the keyboard feel as close to the one on the laptop he was currently using, an eight year old IBM ThinkPad. Too many keyboards were difficult to use for long periods at a time, and considering how many words Andy found himself putting into his laptop on a daily basis, if the keyboard was unwieldy, the laptop might as well be non-existent.

Whitney made a special note that “keyboard feel” was of the utmost import, and she insisted to him, she would do her best to get him a good replacement within a week or so. She had already begun backing up all the files from his existing laptop to the house's master network, as well as to a backup kept in a fire safe, so that even if disaster struck, he would still have his work in a safe location.

Andy did tell her that she didn't have to work full-time on the weekends, and that she should make a point of getting settled into her own room, and spending some time catching up with her friend Nicolette who had brought her here. Whitney had smiled at that, and agreed to go get changed so she could help Tala move in, and then they could all help Whitney get moved in afterwards.

He was starting to walk back towards his office when he ran into Lauren, clearly just back from a jog around the neighborhood, sweaty and out of breath, a big smile on her face. “Hey there, fella, just the bloke I was lookin' to have a moment with. Got a snip?”

He grinned, leaning against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "Sure, what's up?"

"I've been thinking, and I think maybe we should let Taylor off the hook now," she said, looking down at her feet for a second. "I know, I know, I was the one who set the whole month punishment in place but, strewth, seeing her walking around naked all the time is starting to make me feel bad. I'm thinking she's learned her lesson, and she knows she's got lots of trust to earn back from me, so I'm only keeping her from getting to spend time learning more about all the other amazing sheilas you have in this house, and that's not fair of me."

"I agree," Andy chuckled, "but I didn't want to be the one to tell you, seeing how fire and brimstone you were about the whole thing when you set the rules in place."

"Strewth," she muttered. "Was it really that much a dunnybrook?"

"I was a little worried the heavens were going to part and you were going to call down lightning bolts from the skies," he said, the smile wide on his face. "Real wrath of god type shit."

"Bugger. Anyway, you should tell'er that you've talked me down, and that you laid down the law, and you decided, and eventually I relented, that she is done with that punishment and should just join the family like all the other birds. Make it clear *you* decided, not me, so I still get to keep a bit of that big scary reputation."

Andy rolled his eyes but nodded. "Sure sure, you'll look mean. You'll look really scary. Anyway, I'll go find her and tell her while you're hopping into the shower."

"Stink that bad, do I?"

"Your sweatstains have got sweatstains, Lauren," he said with a laugh as he was backing away from her, while she mimed punching motions in his direction.

He wasn't certain where he'd find Taylor in the house, so he decided just to go wandering the halls and see where he stumbled into her. He found her in Hannah's room, where she, Asha and Hannah were sitting on the bed, gossiping. Asha and Hannah hadn't bothered to change out of their pajamas, enjoying a lazy Sunday, while Taylor sat nude with her back against the wall. One of his two cats, Muninn, the Russian blue, was sitting on the bed near Asha, who was petting him idly.

All three girls tensed a little bit when he entered the room – Taylor wasn't supposed to be sitting up on furniture unless Lauren or himself had told her to do so, but Andy hadn't really followed the rules at all, and had made it clear multiple times that Taylor's 'punishment,' such as it was, was mostly for Lauren's mollification, and that if Taylor slipped on the rules from time to time while she wasn't around, he didn't particularly care.

"No no, don't get up, Taylor, it's fine," he said, coming into the room. "In fact, it's what I came to talk to you about."

"You need to get Nicolette to turn up the house furnace, babe," Asha said to him. "If I'd ta walk around all day in me skivvies, I know I'd be freezin'."

"Totally, Daddy," Hannah said. He'd repeatedly told her that she didn't have to call him that (in fact, going so far as to hint that it made him a little uncomfortable when she did) but she had repeatedly answered that she liked calling him that, so she wasn't going to stop any time soon. At least she knew enough not to do it when other people were around the house. "We're just talkin' anyway, so I told her to hop up here, so if you gotta punish someone, it should be me."

"You look *far* too eager when you suggest that, Hannah," he told the Asian teenager. "Anyway, I had a talk with Lauren just a little bit ago. I told her this is my house, and I'm in charge, and that I've decided you've served this part of your punishment long enough. You're free to get dressed, wear clothes around the house, sleep wherever you want, sit wherever you want. You can get your phone back, and you can start working with Lauren at the 49ers camp whenever you feel like you're ready. You're a full member of the household now, and there's no reason for this silly punishment to go on any further. And you can certainly take off that ridiculous dog collar."

Taylor's bright blue eyes had been focused on him the entire time he'd been talking, and she slipped off the bed quickly to throw her arms around him, pressing those impressive breasts of hers

against his chest as she hugged him very tightly, clinging to him, even as he could hear her sniffing back some tears. "Thank you, Andy," she said quietly. "I know Lauren's still mad at me, but this has been really hard, being made to feel like less than a person."

He wrapped his arms around her, patting her bare back. "I know, and I get that, but you also have to realize that cheating on her hurt her in a way she'd never been hurt before, and that won't go away fully for a long long time. Just because you're done with all of this doesn't mean you're done with all of that. I know you know that, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded that you're going to be repairing that damage between you two for years to come. You screwed up, but there's a way back from that, as long as you're willing to put in the work and learn from your mistakes."

Taylor pulled back, looking at him as something just dawned on her. "So, wait, all the rules have been lifted? Like *all* of them?"

He tilted his head a little. "Yyyyes? Why, is there one in particular you're asking about?"

"So, like, next time, y'know, when me and you, then we can..."

He bit back a smile and nodded. "Yes, yes we can. And if you want to masturbate again, you're welcome to start doing that too."

She shook her head over-dramatically once then leaned in to kiss him. "After we've had our first time together, our first *real* time together, then I will, but I want the first thing inside of my cunt after all this time to be *your* cock. If that's okay," she said, biting her lip nervously.

"Of course it's okay. I think your next day in the rotation was going to be the 20th, but if you want, we can try and find some time before then instead. It can even be just the two of us, without Lauren around, if that's what you want."

She pouted again for a moment. "Anything I want?"

"Well, within my usual limits, but sure."

She slipped her arms away from him, and turned back to look at Asha and Hannah, extending a hand to each of them. "I want the four of us together, for my first time normally with you, Andy," she said, as Asha took one hand and Hannah took the other.

"Oh rrrreally?" Asha said, dragging the sound out, her London accent dripping through the word. "All four of us together? Sounds like a spot of fun. I'm game if you are, Whiskers," she said, looking over at Hannah with a smile.

"Anything *you* can throw at me, *I* can totally handle, Goldfish," Hannah shot back at her friend. Clearly the girls had developed nicknames for each other when he wasn't around. "I was supposed to have tomorrow night, Daddy, so instead of it just being me, it'll be all three of us, if that's totally cool and shit."

"Yeah, that's, ahem, totally cool. And shit." He leaned in to give Taylor a quick kiss, but she kissed him back harder than expected, and it lasted longer than he'd planned, not that he minded. "And you, young lady, should get some clothes on, and maybe unpack your stuff, whether that's in your own room or in Lauren's room, that's up to you."

"Oh it totally all goes in with Lauren," Taylor said. "I don't even want my own room. Either i'm in her bed or yours. You want to come help me move in, girls?"

"You couldn't stop us, love," Asha said.

"Last one there has a smelly pussy!" Hannah said as she bolted towards the door, Asha and Taylor just a step or two behind her.

"Y'know," Andy said to himself and the cat, "I feel like I should've yelled that there's no running in the house after them, but I just know it wouldn't have done any good."

"Meow," Muninn said to him in response.

"Oh hush," Andy said. "What the hell do you know?"

"Meow," Muninn agreed.

"Damn straight."

After leaving Hannah's room, he was halfway down the hall when he ran into Sarah, who was

wearing one of his t-shirts, one for a band called Stereophonics, and sweatpants beneath it, her hair done up in the least stylish ponytail he'd ever seen from her, as if she'd just put her red mane up to get it out of the way for a while. "Hey you," she said, her pearly white smile beaming at him. "Maya should be here any minute, and I know you're just gonna love her."

"I actually spoke to Phil a little bit ago, and she's not going to be here until tomorrow, but she's still coming, don't you worry." He explained the Orange Variant to her, and while she was a little disappointed that her friend's arrival would be delayed, she understood that Maya's health was the most important thing, and the base didn't want to let her out of their sight until she was ready. "What've you been up to today?"

She rolled her oceanic blue eyes at him with a big harumph. "Reading screenplays that my agent sent over, trying to pick my next project. It's looking like everyone's going to want to do serialized television right now, because they can get more content out of smaller budgets, but so many of these stories are just so boring," she groaned. "It's like my agent's only sending me the same stuff."

"Well," he said, taking her hand in his as they walked down the hallway, "tell your agent what you want then, whether that's more drama, more action, more comedy, more whatever it is you want more of. They only know what you want when you tell them. I had to learn the same lesson with my literary agent early on."

She squeezed his hand thankfully. "My agent really should know better, but you're right. I can get her on the hunt for the kinds of things I want to be doing. You know there aren't really any good spy stories on television right now? I should see if she can get me something like that. I'll give her a call tomorrow, see if maybe she can reach out to the production companies, see who's already got projects winding up I can try and piggyback onto."

They walked past the door of Emily and Sarah's workspace, and Andy noticed it was closed. He pointed with his other hand at the closed door as they kept on walking. "Em in some kind of meeting?"

Sarah nodded. "London based production company wanted to reach out to her, so she's taking the call today, but she should be out in an hour or so." The doorbell rang, and Sarah arched an eyebrow in surprise. "I thought you said Maya wouldn't be here until tomorrow."

"That's what Phil told me," he said, as the two of them started to head downstairs, although Andy could hear someone answering the door, followed by a loud squeal of recognition.

When they came down the stairs, Andy could see it was Piper who'd answered the door, and she had her arms wrapped around a short blonde girl, hugging her tightly. "Andy! Sarah! Brooke's here!" Piper said to them, swinging the shorter girl around a bit.

"That's great, but I thought she was—"

"Surprise, man!" Xander said as he stepped in through the doorway. Andy let go of Sarah's hand and rushed down the rest of the stairs, suddenly stopping about six feet away from the door.

"Are you...?"

"Paired with three people this morning, so I'm 100% safe as houses," his tattooed friend said.

Once he'd gotten the word 'paired' out, Andy had continued rushing his best friend, wrapping his arms around the burly guy, giving him a hell of a hug. "Oh Jesus, it's good to know you're safe, man," Phil sighed. "And it's so fucking good to see you. I know we hung out last December, but fuck, these eleven months have felt like five fucking years..."

"Glad to see my mouth's rubbing off on you," Sarah laughed, closing the distance to meet them.

"Xander, these are my partners Piper Brown and Sarah Washington, both of whom you've talked to a bit through FaceTime. Piper, Sarah, this is my best and oldest friend, Xander Baker, whom I've known since we were both, like, what, 6?"

Xander laughed, nodding. "6, 7, something like that. However old we were in kindergarten."

"Not very," Andy said.

"Not enough!" Xander replied. "Anyway, Andy, Sarah, this is my soon-to-be partner Brooke Maloney, whom I have your partner Piper to thank for."

“Well,” Piper laughed, “I'd originally pitched her to come here and be Andy's partner, but he realized she'd be a much better fit for you, considering how much you both love classic cars, although really, I think it was just so he didn't have to hear her singing Vince Gill songs around the house all the time, 'cause she does that a *lot*, and I hope they warned you about that, Xander.”

“She can be singing Vince Gill while I'm singing Wu-Tang Clan, and somewhere in the middle, over the engine of a Dodge Charger, I think we can make it work,” Xander said.

“Honestly, Pipes,” Brooke said to her, “the only reason he said soon-to-be is because I wanted to come over and say thank you to y'all, and let Xander have a bit of time with his friend before we got to bumpin' uglies. But all the other gals in his house have just been so sweet, y'all, I can't wait for you to meet'em.”

“Why don't Piper and I give you a tour of the place, Brooke,” Sarah said, “and the boys can do a little bit of catching up. You want me to have Jenny bring drinks to you out on the patio, hun?”

“Yeah,” Andy said, “I'll take a pina colada. Xander?”

“Just a Corona.”

Sarah nodded. “Drinks coming up! This way ladies!” she said, marching them down towards the kitchen first.

“Jesus Andy,” Xander said quietly. “You really bagged Sarah Washington. I mean, I know I've talked to her vidchat, but seeing her in person like this...”

“Seriously, I don't deserve this much luck,” Andy said with a chuckle as he started to lead his best friend towards the back patio.

“Oh fuck you,” Xander teased. “You deserve *exactly* this much luck. Our entire lives, I've been watching you do good things for people left and right and never asking for so much as a thank you in return, and this is what karma has brought you, dude, so live a little. Enjoy it.” As they moved out onto the patio, Xander shook his head. “I *will* say, however, that my house isn't quite as big as yours is. Don't get me wrong, it's still a fucking palace compared to that one bedroom shithole I lived in back in Ohio, but I'm just saying...”

Andy rolled his eyes with a smirk. “You know I didn't pick the places myself, right jackass?”

“I guess so,” Xander said, as the two men moved to sit down on deck chairs near the pool. It was cool for November but not so cold that either man felt like they needed to add layers, both having grown up in the Midwest, where California winters would be considered nice spring days. “God, I'm really here. It's wild, man.”

“It's great having you out here, Xander. Jesus, the stories I have to tell you. You're here early, though. I didn't expect you out here for at least a few more days.”

“Turns out these DuoHalo Variants are pretty intense,” Xander sighed, “and since they were pairing me up with someone in the military, they wanted to make sure I got hooked into the system as quickly as they could, so everything got very rush rush rush. When you told me to be ready to go at a moment's notice, you weren't kidding. As soon as we finished up that conversation, I started packing, and just barely got done before they showed up to cart me away. They're even taking care of selling my house for me, although I suspect it's just going to become government housing or something.”

“Yeah, that wouldn't surprise me,” Andy agreed. “God, it's good to have you here, man.”

“Well if it isn't my favorite hoodrat,” Fiona said, carrying out a tray with three drinks on it, setting it down on a table as Xander immediately got up and hugged him hard. “How you been, lunkhead?”

“Better now that I know you made it here okay, muckraker,” he teased back. “How the hell you been Fi?”

“Better now that I know *you* ditched that crazy ex of yours,” she laughed. “Can I say it?”

“Oh I think you've earned it.”

“I *told* you that girl was no good.”

“You did indeed tell me that,” Xander agreed, taking his bottle of Corona from the drinks tray,

as Andy grabbed his pina colada and Fi grabbed a tall glass of wine.

“Hey hey hey, the gang's all back,” Fi said with a smile. “To old friends and new flames.”

“To life, liberty and us getting through this fucking plague together,” Xander toasted.

“To family,” Andy corrected.

“To family!” they all toasted together, clinking glasses.