

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 rejuvenating. 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 use 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, 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 month 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 July 1st, they began injecting hundreds of beautiful women with the serum, and Phil knew the world would never be the same.