

Chapter Twenty-Two

April 28th, 2021

What a week it had been. Andy had spent most of it on set, helping polish and rework scenes so they played better, as he'd been trying not to think about the Men's Protection Act going into law. He and Phil had also been playing phone tag, so he'd been unable to get clarification about what was going on in terms of the weird little short-circuit his body had done to prevent him from being hit in the head with an escrima stick. Phil had been adamant that they only talk in person for a while, as if he no longer fully trusted the communications lines. That had certainly set off a few alarm bells in Andy's head, as had the extremely exhausted tone he'd heard in his friend's voice.

During the last few days, they'd stopped by Em's London apartment and spent the last few days camped there, although Andy learned how much he disliked the paparazzi hanging around all the time, trying to get pictures of him and the rest of The Rooks. At one point, one of them had tried holding a camera up and over a wall and Melody had shattered the lens with a well-thrown rock.

It was good to see some people were starting to be out and about, though, because it meant the whole world was starting to adapt to life under the new normal. He, Ash, Fi, Melody and Lexi had even stopped and had breakfast in a nice little corner pub one morning right before they left.

Andy was happy to back on U.S. soil, though, and it didn't feel like as many eyes were on him. As much as it had pained her, Niko had agreed it was finally time for her not to be part of his regular patrol and security, especially since her due date was a week away. It was probably for the best that she simply start getting ready to be a mother.

The house had gone through several changes, and one of the larger bedrooms had been converted into a nursery. Jade had decided to take on the role of house nanny for the foreseeable future, and she seemed genuinely excited about being up in the middle of the night, making sure the house was fully stocked, especially since Ash's twins were only going to be a few weeks behind Niko's baby. She'd set the nursery right up next to her room and had already started preparing to be up during the nights keeping tabs on the babies.

That was still, hopefully, a week or so away, though, and today, Andy, Fi and Ash were having lunch with Phil, Linda and Violet at a place called Cliff House on the western edge of San Francisco. Andy had been surprised that Phil had wanted them to meet outside of New Eden, but assumed Phil had his reasons. Violet was keeping watch, along with Melody and Alexis.

Cliff House had been operating on the edge of shutdown for years, and the closure due to the epidemics hadn't done them any favors. They had reopened, but the entire place was empty except for the group of them, and Andy wondered if that meant they were still going to have to shut down. They did have one of the best views anywhere around, but the menu certainly wasn't cheap, not that Andy worried about that kind of thing as much as he used to.

"So what are we doing here, Phil?" Andy asked as they sat down at the table. "What's so important that we can't just have lunch in New Eden?"

"I wanted to be out of the office, because things are getting strange the more research I do, and I want you to be an outside objective observer for me, to make sure I'm not jumping to any conclusions that I can't back up," Phil said with a sigh. He looked ragged around the edges. "You said a week ago you had something you wanted to talk to me about regarding the serum?"

"Yeah, I was on the set with Em and Sarah, and they were practicing some fight choreography off to one side to me and—"

“You heard a voice in your head?” Linda asked him, a wry smile on her lips. “Tell me you did. It’ll make me feel *oh so vindicated*.”

Andy looked at her in shock as next to her, Phil was simply shaking his head. “You didn’t... did you, Andy?”

“I... I did,” Andy admitted. “It was like I think the nanobots inside of my bloodstream were speaking directly to me.”

“What did they say?” Phil asked him.

“It was strange... it was like... block or charge,” Andy said. “Like that guy on Twitter always says. But it was very much a question, and it wanted a response.”

“What did you choose?”

“Block,” Andy said. “And as soon as I did, my arm shot up and caught the escrima stick out of the air, like it was nothing, like it was something I could do all the time.”

Phil looked over at Linda. “That sound about right?”

She nodded. “Sounds like about what’s happened to me. The question was phrased differently, but yeah, it seems like the same sort of thing I’ve gone through a couple of times.”

“What the hell was it?” Andy asked them.

“We *think* it’s exactly what you *think* it was... the nanobots making contact, offering you one of two options to help you deal with a matter of self-preservation,” Phil said. “I suspect the other option would’ve been to treat the incoming stick as a threat rather than an accident, and to fling it back at whoever let it fly your way.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad *that* didn’t happen,” Andy said. “Should I expect to be hearing more from our tiny robotic friends? I wasn’t aware they could *do* that. There haven’t been any reports of that sort of thing in the documentation you’ve been providing to Oversight.”

“You can’t just keep every discovery about this serum secret, Phil,” Fiona said.

“Before Andy came forward, I mostly only had Linda’s word for it, and while I believe her, it’s also only happened a few times for her.”

“What’s ‘a few?’” Andy asked.

“Three, each in moments where split second decision making was crucial,” Linda said.

“Each time you or Phil were in danger?”

“Once I was, once Phil was and the last time... well, the last time I think things would’ve gotten dramatically out of hand if I hadn’t acted the way that I did,” Linda sighed, picking up her glass of water. “I’ve tried loads of times since then to try and have conversations with them, tried talking *at* them... all to no avail.”

“If it’s happened to you and it’s happened to me, it’s probably happened to loads of other people,” Andy said.

“Other people, yes,” Phil corrected. “*Loads*, no. There’s a handful of things that we’ve figured out probably contributed towards this, and it’s going to be a lot less likely than you think. First off, we’re certain it *can* only happen in very large teams.”

“Define ‘very large.’”

“Twenty or more.”

“What’re you at these days, anyway, Phil?”

“Twenty-one,” Phil said.

“Slacker,” Andy teased.

“Don’t think that one extra person puts you ahead, my friend,” Phil shot back with a smirk. “As far as we can tell, Teams are factored in terms of 5s, so twenty-one and twenty-two partners are exactly the same, other than one other person’s needs to look after.”

“What, like tiers?”

“Exactly. Tier 1 Teams – 1-5 partners plus core. Tier 2 – 6-10, Tier 3 – 11-15, Tier 4 – 16-20, Tier 5 – 21-25, Tier 6 – 26+. You’re not even top tier,” Phil chuckled. “I’m not either, though, so don’t worry about it. Besides, we’re starting to think Tier 6s may have additional complications to them.”

“...like what?”

“Don’t worry about it for now, at least until I can get more empirical evidence,” Phil said. “I don’t have enough groups with data to feel comfortable drawing conclusions yet. I’m only mentioning it to you because I know you don’t frighten easily, and just in case you were thinking about possibly making your Team bigger...”

“I’m *not* thinking of making my Team *bigger*, Phil,” Andy scoffed. “If anything, I wanted to make sure the Team I have is rock solid. That’s why I asked you for the thing I did. Speaking of which, did you bring it?”

“I did, but we aren’t finished talking about the other thing yet,” Phil replied. “Anyone else in your team reported hearing robotic voices in their heads?”

“I’d have mentioned it to you if they did, Phil, and I’d have told you about it sooner except that you don’t want me discussing sensitive shit over the phone for some reason.”

“I’ve *got* my reasons, Andy, and they’re *good* ones. There’s some strange shit going on right now, and I’m pretty sure I’m being kept out of the loop of some of it.”

“Not trusting the phone lines, though, Phil?” Aisling asked. “That’s some Cold War, black bag super spy shit right there.”

“That’s what you do when people start keeping you out of the loop.”

“What are you talking about, Phil? Why would anyone keep *you* out of the loop on this kind of thing?” Andy said annoyed. “You’re one of the goddamn *inventors* of it. You should be in the know on everything involved with this damn serum.”

“Yeah, that’s how *I* feel about it too, Andy, but it seems like the government has other ideas,” Phil grumbled. “I think they saw the regenerative applications of the serum and thought, ‘Hey, what else can we make the thing do?’ And decided I was ‘too close’ to the issue, or maybe that I was ‘too important to be distracted’ with whatever side gigs they wanted the serum to be applied to. So I’m pretty certain they’ve got a bunch of different teams working on different aspects of the serum, trying to get it to do things other than what it was originally intended for.”

“Like what?”

Linda placed her hand on Phil’s shoulder. “Well, not necessarily beyond what it was *originally* originally intended for, baby,” she said to him. “We’re fairly certain there’s some focus on getting the regeneration aspects of the serum back towards the forefront of the serum’s application, or maybe they’re trying to make a breakaway offshoot of the Quaranteam serum that just focuses on that, but as far as we can tell, nobody’s had any real luck in getting that one aspect out of the serum without it being entangled in everything else.”

“The regeneration aspect,” Phil said, toying with a silver spoon, as Phil constantly seemed to be fidgeting with something in his hands, “it’s definitely got a scaling element to it. It’s not universally consistent, but there’s some definite correlation to Team size. Larger Teams get stronger regenerations, they have stronger protection, and now we’ve got this whole defensive blip contact.”

“Anyone else?”

Phil paused for a moment before he chose his next words carefully. “Do you remember me mentioning the name Isaac Goshier?”

“Isn’t he the record holder for largest Team here in the States?”

“Yeah, twenty-nine women all bonded to him, last we spoke. He’s up to thirty-one now. Might be the record holder for largest Team in the world, but I doubt it. A couple of women in the security aspect of his Team have reported brief blips like you were telling me about, but they’ve got lots of odd reports all the time. Some truly weird oddities, but nothing earth shattering. Yet, anyway.”

“Weird oddities like what?” Andy’s frown intensified as Phil didn’t answer him. “Don’t you think that’s the thing you want to *report* Phil?”

“Three reports are enough for me to start *studying* it, Andy, but the last thing I want to do is keep lobbing hand grenades about how many unexpected side effects our cure has at the President,” Phil sighed. “The woman’s already half a step away from a heart attack, and I just keep on exacerbating things for her every other week.”

“There’s other things we need to be worried about?” Andy asked.

Phil waved his hand. “Like I said, I’ve got a whole lot of little outlier issues that I’m investigating and I’m not going to burden anyone with any of them until I’ve got more conclusive proof than I do right now.”

“Phil, I’m not just the guy from Oversight, okay? We’ve been friends, what, ten, fifteen years?” Andy said. “You can’t carry all this weight on your own.”

“Can and will and you just watch me, Andy,” Phil said, rolling the spoon around a little more. “Don’t worry. When I’ve got something demonstrable, something provable, your name is the first one on my list of people to call. Some of this stuff seems too crazy even for me to believe, so I definitely have to be sure it’s really doing what I *think* it’s doing before I tell anyone else. Otherwise you and everyone else is just going to think I lost my mind somewhere along the way, and none of this shit is going to get studied like it needs to be.”

“Phil,” Fiona said. “We’re family. You can at least give us a clue as to what kinds of things you’re looking into.”

“That sort of intense linkup you felt on your wedding day? That ability for Piper to be able to pick up the scents not only of Andy but anyone in your Team? Sheridan and Tala’s extra sensitive tripwires?”

As soon as Ash and Fi raised their hands to their faces, Andy knew people had been keeping things from him again. “Sheridan and Tala’s whatnow?”

“We... we didn’t think you needed to know, Andy,” Fiona said with a little giggle. “Just because it doesn’t really affect anything.”

“I think *I* should get a say in that, don’t you, ladies?”

“Not *really*,” Ash said with a slight laugh. “We told Phil about it because it seemed like something he should know about, but it wasn’t going to really affect you, so we let the two of them keep it to themselves, although I guess they won’t be *too* mad now that it’s out.”

“What the *hell* are you two talking about?”

“Maybe as a result of them going so long between priming and imprinting, or maybe just because of their genetics, we’re not sure,” Phil said with a slight grin. “It’s *likely* it’s a side effect of the time span spent in between priming and imprinting, since they’re genetically pretty different, but I haven’t found anyone who *wants* to test this for themselves, considering we’re basically done imprinting people here in the States, barring a few holdouts. Sheridan and Tala are what we call ‘hyperorgasmic,’ meaning you can trigger an orgasm in either of their bodies with almost no effort at all, Andy. *Just* you.”

Andy was somewhere between amused and annoyed, the two emotions pushing and

pulling on him in a solid struggle before amusement won out, realizing that Ash was right, and that it didn't actually affect him all that much. "Is *that* why they both always looks so fucking exhausted after we have our sessions?" he finally said. "Or why they tend to come at me as a pair?" The look on his face had both of his partners lost in giggle fits. "How many—"

"Sheridan says she usually loses count around twenty or so, and Tala swears she's been in excess of fifty more than once," Ash said with a smirk. "Honestly, Andy, I think Tala's losing weight because of it. They both practically go comatose after their encounters with you, and we figured you'd notice sooner or later, but then again, you're so overwhelmed with women, it's okay that you haven't."

"They're okay with this?"

"Andy, baby," Ash said, placing her hand on top of Andy's. "If they weren't, we would've said something. But that's why Tala and Sheridan tend to come at you together, and why they'll often try and rope in a third play partner, just to give them an intermission so they can catch their breath. That's all it really means. Neither of them wants you to treat them any different or go easy on them because of it, though, so you best not suddenly adjust how you act around them."

"I won't, I won't," Andy chuckled, rolling his eyes a little. "I thought we all agreed no more secrets in the house, though."

"It was decided this wasn't really a *secret* so much as a condition, and nobody wanted you getting self-conscious about it, especially since it involved Sheridan, and even though she's told you it's water under the bridge, you still have a little hangup about having put her place in the Team at risk," Fiona said. "The last thing *she* wanted especially was another thing getting in your head when it came to spending time with her."

"So you can't let it affect you, Andy," Ash said. "Otherwise I have to hurt you, and nobody wants that."

"I'll call Lexi and Melody to stop you," he chuckled in response.

"Oh, they'll back my play as long as I don't break anything," Ash giggled. "Just don't overthink it, and you'll be fine, baby."

"I'll just try and keep it in mind, in case I can tell they need a breather halfway through," Andy said with a wry smile. "Yeah, okay, I suppose those kinds of things are fine to keep secret to surprise me with later."

"So yes, if anyone else in you Team's going to get brief bits of contact from the nanobots, it's probably going to be those on your security team, so probably wise to let Niko, Lexi and Melody know about it, just so they can be aware if it's happening that it's in their best interests to go along with it rather than fight it," Linda said to Andy. "How's Niko doing anyway?"

"Eager as hell to get our son out of her belly," Andy chuckled. "She's got all the typical weird pregnancy craving combinations – peanut butter and marshmallow, pickles and cheese, onions and chocolate... you name it. Her back hurts on and off."

"Not as much as mine does," Ash grumbled. "But then again, she's only hauling one around, while I've got a pair, so I'm looking forward to them showing just as much as Niko is."

"Anything strange we should expect?"

"If anything, you're at the optimal point to have a kid, Andy," Phil said. "The children who've been born to Quaranteamed parents thusfar have all been *insanely* healthy. Like, beyond the pale, way outside of even statistical anomaly category of healthy. None of them have come prematurely. None of them required turning or C-sections. No birth defects, no birthmarks, nothing outside of the ordinary. Generally even the time spent in labor hasn't been excessive,

with most women reporting between 12 and 16 hours of labor if it's their first child, or as short as 4 to 8 if it's not. We're recommending that women breastfeed for the first six months before starting to introduce outside foods."

"Are they getting nanobots through the breast milk?" Andy asked.

"They *are* but of a different *variety*. They're in much, *much* smaller numbers, but those that are sent in are designed to essentially ensure everything's running smoothly for the child's earliest phases. They don't recycle into the mother – the dead nanobots simply pass out in the child's stool. The craziest thing about Quaranteam babies is that they don't tend to wake up as much during the nights. They sleep train *incredibly* fast. They're completely immune to both DuoHalo and Covid and... shit *and* a lot of other viruses and diseases. But they don't have active nanobots running in their system beyond the handful they get from their mother's milk that are usually flushed out of their system within a day or two of arrival."

"Nothing we should be actually *worried* about, though?"

"Nothing that *we've* found, but keep in mind, that's not the lead focus of my research these days," Phil said. "I'm mostly focused on expanding the Sergei Swerve Solution."

"How's *that* coming?"

"Well, it's being rolled out sparingly across the country, starting last week, under some *very* strict oversight," Phil said. "We've included the rule that the person being reimprinted has to be wearing headphones blasting white noise the whole time. We aren't explaining *why* to anyone, but it's been made mandatory as part of the program, and there is always going to be an overseer in the room until the reassignment's complete. We're claiming that's for 'medical' reasons, but the overseers know what to look for and watch out for, to make sure nobody's trying to say anything to the person being reassigned. It's a known risk, but part of agreeing to be reassigned, a woman signs away any liability if something goes wonky during the reassignment. Best we can do. And it's been working well enough so far. With Eve's help, I've been able to amp up the resistance it provides, so any two people have about a 65-70% resistance, just as a paired couple. And that's any singular couple. Two men. Two women. People who are trans. That's the best progress we've made in months. The resistance is strong enough that DuoHalo might debilitate them some, but it's basically non-fatal in anyone who's gotten any version of the Quaranteam serum. So I'm considering that a big win."

"Any luck in changing the rest of it?"

Phil shook his head. "You'd be amazed at how adaptive the nanobot's programming is at this point. They're iterating each time they go through another cycle. They're constantly changing and morphing on what I expect them to be doing, so there's not a whole lot I can do to them beforehand. I don't know that I'm ever going to be able to break the lock/key system that seems to be hard coded into them. I mean, maybe given a few decades, but at that point, I think people are already going to be so set into their ways that what's the point?"

"It's that ingrained?"

"It's beyond ingrained – it's integral. And worse, the system adapts to reinforce that bit of coding, meaning the further down you are into a Team's numbers, the harder it would be to break it down now. I mean, yes, if we'd had the Sergei Swerve at the start, we could've just used that, and gotten most people up to strong resistance in a single pairing, but that wouldn't have done a damn thing to make up for the huge death tolls we had to men across the board," Phil sighed. "On top of that, non-traditional pairings done with the Swerve have a whole list of complications we have to keep an eye out for, which makes it even more messy."

"Okay, so let me ask a hypothetical example, mostly because I'm pretty sure they

wouldn't take this option even if it was given. If, say, my two staff members Katie and Jenny, wanted to be deassigned from me and reassigned to each other, what sorts of complications would they be looking at?" Andy asked.

Phil gently threw up his hands. "There's a bunch, the biggest of which is that when one of them died, the other would probably die almost immediately after. We don't know how to do a Dead Man's Switch with non-traditional pairings, because what if there aren't any testicles involved? What if there's two sets of testicles? How do we determine which one is the lock and which is the key? This is part of the research I'm still working on, trying to get answers for, but at least I bought some time, and we have passable solutions for gays and trans people. We got Jake, Linda's brother, paired up with his girlfriend, but even paired up as they are, Jake doesn't have functioning testicles, just implants, so at this point, we think the Skene's glands are taking on that duty, but again, without boatloads of research, we're not entirely certain. Jake and his girlfriend agreed to relocate to the Bay, so I can keep them under regular watch, follow the nanobots as best I can. Maybe I'll learn more about them by having a case I can keep under scrutiny, but as I told Jake, it's also possible I'm not going to learn a whole lot. But Linda's happy having him nearby."

Andy opened the folder and started looking through it before he let a soft sigh escape his lips. "Really? C'mon, Phil, don't bullshit a bullshitter."

"The only ones to be concerned about are in the back, and even then, I don't think it's a big deal, but hey, what do I know?" Phil said.

"What are you looking at, hon?" Ash asked him.

"With so many people on our Team having been added by request, I wanted to check everyone against the Oracle results, make sure we didn't have anyone who was a bad match for me," Andy said. "I sort of trusted Phil to tell me if anything was too out of whack, but I wanted to look at all the data for myself, make sure we didn't have any significant outliers. I literally just wanted to make sure everyone was paired in a way that would make them happy." He flipped through and looked at the last two pages and frowned. "Yeah, well, I suppose I guess I could've expected that."

"What's that?" Fiona asked. "Nobody's a horrible match, are they?"

"Well, Taylor's only at 60%, and both Asha and Hannah clock in in the mid-50s, which definitely concerns me."

"Look, Andy, I've explained this to you before, but let me go through it one more time for you – the younger someone is, the fuzzier their Oracle results are," Phil said. "Miguel, the creator of the program, has even said that for people between the ages of 18-24, the results are fuzzy by at least five to ten percentage points, because people that age don't *know* what they want for themselves, and that depending on how they grow, they could grow twenty to thirty points closer to a given man."

Fiona reached over and closed the folder, putting her hand on top of it, looking at Andy with a stern look he knew didn't bode well for him. "Andrew." Oh shit, he thought; if she's using my full name, I'm in deep trouble. "If you allow this to affect your relationship with those girls, that will be entirely on you, and will have *nothing* to do with them. They're happy within our Team. They've told you as much repeatedly. They've told *both me and Ash* the same. Repeatedly. If they change their minds, they will come to one of us, if not you then myself or Ash, and we will deal with that matter then, but until then, you are not going to allow some computer to tell you something that goes against what you already know, and what those girls have promised."

"I'm just trying to do right by them, Fiona," Andy sighed.

“I know you are. Honestly, it’s *sweet* even as pig-headed as it is,” Fiona said with a tight-lipped smile. “But those girls are still figuring out what they want to do with their lives. Of course that means they’re not sure how they fully feel about you. But it’s going to be what it’s going to be.” Fiona pushed the folder back across the table towards Phil. “You can take that back, Phil. We won’t be needing it.”

“If you’re—”

“Phillip,” Fiona scolded. “Don’t make me say it again.”

“Yes ma’am,” Phil replied with a soft laugh. “Now, onto the real reason I brought you here.”

“All the rest of this wasn’t enough?” Andy chuckled in response.

“I need you to do me a favor, Andy, and use your access as part of Oversight to go and pay a visit to our friend LP over in Valhalla Shores,” Phil said. “They won’t let me or any of my people in, but you’re a part of Oversight, meaning they can’t officially say no to you without causing a *huge* fucking stink about it, and even then, it’s probably not worth it for them to cause too many issues for you to go in and inspect what’s going on there. LP hasn’t been able to leave, and they’ve actually turned off all telco services for the place for the time being, and that has me worried.”

Phil Pak, a.k.a. Lesser Phil or LP as he was often referred to for short, had been relocated to a place called Valhalla Shores last fall, and since then, had basically been in a bubble, with the last contact Andy had had with him in January, when he’d called to decline both the bachelor party and the wedding, and had sounded a little rattled, but Andy had had so much on his plate at the time that he hadn’t thought to follow up on it.

“Yeah, I started to get a little worried when he couldn’t come out to the wedding, but he said it had something to do with clearance and some of the projects they were working on over there,” Andy said with a frown. “Whatever they’re cooking up, you’re telling me you haven’t gotten any reports about it?”

“Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. Zero fucking information,” Phil said. “I’m livid, and I went up to the gates of Valhalla Shores a few days ago and demanded to be let in, demanded to see LP and they told me he wasn’t available even to talk, and he hasn’t gotten in contact with me since. I need you to summon up your inner Karen and demand to see that place’s fucking manager, Andy.” Phil patted Andy on the shoulder.

“What do you know about Valhalla Shores?”

“Not much more than you,” Phil said with a grumble. “It was originally a combination of NSA, CIA, FBI and DOD researchers getting rolled up with a handful of ‘disruptive future shock engineers’ and they were going to be conducting some pie-in-the-sky skunkworks research, *none* of which I like the sound of. They might even try and tell you no, but I suspect since you’ve got a line to the President, they’re at least going to feed you some kind of dog and pony show to make you *think* everything they’re working on is on the up and up, but you need to dig deeper than that. Because I’m betting they have three or four separate tiger teams on deck over there that are working on things I haven’t even *imagined* using our serum on, so I want you to go and push until they push back, find out what’s going on even if they try and tell you no. I expect they’re not going to let anyone but you and your security detail in, sorry you two, so if you want me to give them a lift back to New Eden, I can.”

“Wait, you want me to go *now*?” Andy said. “Like, *now now*?”

“The longer this waits, Andy, the more time they’re going to have to bury it, hide it, whatever the fuck it is they’re doing there,” Phil said. “I’ve given you a *lot* of help over the last

year, man, and I try not to ask much in return, because you've always been a good friend and a solid rock to turn to when it comes to looking for moral advice, but this time, I'm coming to you hat in hand, asking you to go in and figure this out for me. And to make sure LP's okay. I don't like him going radio dark. I know he's done work for the alphabet agencies before, but him just not answering his phone... I have a very bad feeling about it all, Andy."

Andy sighed, giving a little shrug. "Ok, I'll go knock on some heads and kick down some doors."

"Don't get yourself *shot*, okay?"

"Is that likely?" Ash asked, concern on her face.

"I sure as fuck *hope not*," Phil sighed. "Otherwise we're *all fucked*."