

## **Chapter 20**

*November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

The last thing Phil wanted to do today was to deal with the fucking press, but there was no getting around it. He'd agreed to provide as much information to Katie Couric as he could without exposing any of their current plans. The idea was to give the press answers to a bunch of things they hadn't even begun to know about, and hope that they missed the really important stuff they could've asked about, but Phil wasn't going to underestimate Katie Couric that way – she'd gotten to be one of the best journalists in the world by having men of power underestimate her.

Phil refused to make the same mistake.

They'd given her an escort (Andy's partner Niko) and let her have a tour of the base for the morning, and the afternoon would be spent talking one-on-one with key members of the staff, including Phil himself, against the recommendation of the base commander.

In some ways, both Linda and Phil *agreed* with General Fielder in that they felt like having Phil and the rest of the team being so visible and identifiable would pose a nightmare for security, but Linda had been promised all the additional resources she wanted in order to keep both Phil and the rest of the team at the base secure.

Also, the request had come from the President herself, which meant it wasn't *really* a request.

Ms. Couric's schedule involved talking to a number of people at the base, including Fielder himself, although the journalist had stressed that they were expecting much of the footage shot at the base to pass through military review before it made it to air, and that they would try and use as little footage taken from the base and its staff as possible while still conveying all the information needed for the story. Still, the base was going to provide the backdrop for a detailed explanation of how the serum worked and what it did and didn't do to deal with DuoHalo.

"How do I look?" Bill asked him, adjusting his tie to the partial reflection he could see of himself in the glass of Phil's office window.

"Like you're compensating for something," Linda told him as she strolled across the office and pulled off Bill's tie for him. "Bill, you're always one of the smartest guys in the room. You don't need the tie. It's showing off. And it makes you look stuffy, like a professor at an Ivy League college that doesn't want you to be there. Especially when you're trying to calm people down."

"You don't think it's too casual?"

"Bill, you're still wearing a sportcoat and a white-collar shirt that screams 'I paid someone a lot of money to keep this color looking this good,' so I think anything that makes you *more* casual is a step in the right direction," Linda said with a chuckle, patting his cheek, like she was his grandmother. "The whole world is going to be watching this, not just your wife and her book club."

"I hope you're right, Linda," Bill said with a soft grin. "This goes down in historical records, you know, and it's going to be the footage that is shown off in schools for a couple hundred years, at the very least. So I'm hoping they use at least a little of my footage, and, more importantly, that they make me look good. It's my one big chance at history."

Phil looked up from his desk and cocked his head at Bill quizzically. "We've changed more lives here than they did with the invention of the atom bomb, and they've never stopped making movies about that damn thing. You should be less worried about how you look in one

photograph and more worried about who you want to play you in the inevitable movie adaptation.”

“Who’s going to play you?”

“Knowing Hollywood’s sort of racially inaccurate casting, I doubt they’ll get a Filipino actor to play me,” Phil said, jokingly. “But as long we’re going to get close enough, I think Sung Kang would probably do an excellent job of playing me. He was incredible in ‘Better Luck Tomorrow.’ What about you, Bill? Who would you like to play you?”

“Oh, just get Paul Giamatti or Martin Mull and be done with it, I say,” Bill laughed. “And what about superwoman Linda here?”

“They can leave me out of the story,” Linda grumbled.

“The hell they will,” Phil said. “I want Margot Robbie!”

“If you’d asked months ago, Phil, we probably could’ve gotten her for you,” Linda teased.

“She’s happily married and her husband got the serum early,” Phil chuckled. “But believe you me, I thought about it. At least until I learned she was married. I respect that sort of thing, unlike other people in our little ark.”

“At some point, we’re going to have to do something about Mr. Covington,” Linda told him. “You know that, don’t you babe?”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Phil sighed. “Andy’s given us plenty of ammunition against the guy but nothing any of us can really prove. And that’s the sticking point we’ve got to find a way to get past at some point. We need to have something that’ll stick, otherwise we’re just kicking a hornet’s nest and hoping to figure out a plan while we’re running away.”

“That doesn’t sound much like a plan,” Bill said.

“And, anyway, if you’re asking me who should play me, I want Sydney Sweeny.”

“She’s too young to play you, babe,” Phil said with a laugh.

“Sure, but at least we can all agree, she’s got great tits, something I definitely want on the permanent record associated with me.” Linda sighed. “Although I guess I’ll also accept Alexandria Daddario, assuming she’s not playing Violet.”

“Linda, baby, you should probably be more concerned with whoever’s playing you’s acting ability than you should her cup size,” Phil chuckled.

“You keep what’s important to you in your head, babe, and I’ll keep what’s important to me in mine, okay?”

“If you say so,” he said with a smirk. “You finally settled on house size, Bill?”

“Much to my contentment, even if Grace keeps suggesting we get one more to knock us up a tier,” Bill replied. “But I keep telling her, at my age? She’s lucky I can handle the 15 I’m already saddled up with.” Bill rubbed at the small of his back. “I know the serum basically has me operating at peak efficiency for my age, but I gotta tell ya... man... I still get tired some days, y’know?”

“Oh no,” Linda mocked. “You’ll just have to let your Victoria’s Secret model crawl all over your lap and have her post on your cock until you’ve gotten off without having to lift a finger. How’s that going, by the way?”

Bill smirked a bit sheepishly. “I feel kind of like an idiot, because I know better, but I eventually realized she was just faking those orgasms before she was imprinted. I mean, I *know* that between injection and imprinting a woman, a woman can only have the priming orgasm, but somehow in my self-delusion, I convinced myself that maybe I was just too much man for that and overcame it. But then I realized how silly I was being, and I asked her about it, and she

admitted to faking it, mostly because she wanted to help my confidence.” He shook his head slightly. “But now that she knows I’m not mad about that, and that *I* know that she wasn’t kidding about only having been with guys who didn’t know what they were doing, we’ve made it work. The fact that I’m the first and only man to ever get her off? That’s more than enough for me to take pride in. Besides, that’s far from the weirdest thing that’s happened in my family life.”

“Oh yeah?” Phil asked with a grin. “What aren’t you telling me about?”

“Heavens above,” Bill said, sitting down in the chair in Phil’s office, looking a little embarrassed, something Phil didn’t recall often seeing on the older man’s face. “You remember me telling you about Jen’s friend Kenna? The one that apparently had a crush on me while she was growing up?”

“The one you told your daughter it would be weird to be sleeping with? Sure, I remember that. ... Wait... Bill...”

“So apparently Kenna got delivered to a failcase.” ‘Failcase’ was the short-hand term that had been developed for when a woman was delivered to a man for imprinted, but it had turned out the man had died before the woman could arrive. Trying to lower failcases was one of the main reasons why women were paired up with men so quickly. The longer they waited, the higher the possibility there was for a man to simply be dead on arrival. “As such, they brought her back to the base and tried to find someone else she could get a high pairing match with, and the only one within the point where it wouldn’t be cruel to send her out... was me.” He laughed and shook his head. “So much for standing my ground with my daughter.”

“Was Jen happy about it?”

“*Jen* was ecstatic,” Bill said. “*Grace*, on the other hand, had some pretty stern words for me. But thankfully they were both there when Kenna was delivered, and it was clear the strain of not having been imprinted for too long was starting to get to her, so in the end, Grace relented and made sure I didn’t embarrass myself or Jen’s friend, although I guess she’s as much my partner as she is Jen’s friend now. It’s just *very* weird having this girl who grew up with my *daughter* in my bed, you know? But Julia and Kenna get along very well together, and they help compensate for the fears one or the other causes in me. Plus, uh... well, as it turns out, Grace *likes* playing the dominant woman when it comes to the other girls, so she’s been getting into her role as ‘headmistress’ a bit more than I’d expected her to. I came home the other day and she had all of them dressed up in school uniforms and had them calling me ‘Professor,’ which, uh... yeah, maybe *that’s* why I’m so tired today...”

“You gonna marry any of your new partners? Or is Grace going to stay the only one?”

“You know how it is, Phil – it’s not up to *us*,” Bill laughed. “Grace seems to think I should marry *all* my partners, just so everyone’s on the same level, even though I keep telling her that no one else is ever going to be on *her* level. But the whole family is tickled pink by the idea of Kenna becoming ‘Kenna McKenna,’ except me. I think it sounds like a James Bond villain. Not that I’m going to voice that opinion around the house, naturally.”

“Smart man,” Linda said with a grin.

“I’m probably going to lose the argument about getting a sixteenth as well, since *somebody* had to go blabbing about the team tiers to her own personal defense squad,” Bill said, glaring over in Linda’s direction. “Thanks for that.”

“Look, Jackie’s job is to keep you safe,” Linda said. “Being part of a Team that’s between sixteen and twenty is significantly better for you. C’mon, you *know* that, Bill, better than almost anyone! You need to get up there in the numbers.”

“And now Jackie’s trying to convince Grace to overrule me and get the entire Team up to

21, which is madness. *You aren't even up to 21, Phil,*" Bill grumbled.

"He's going to be, soon enough," Linda said. "He just hasn't gotten there yet. But believe me, it's my top priority right now. At some point, I'm going to stop letting him say no to suggested partners that I keep presenting to him."

"I don't get much of a say in it either, Bill," Phil chuckled. "But the minute we determined there were actually sizable benefits for crossing the 20-person line, Linda told me I'd better start widening my search or lowering my standards because I was going to get to 21, whether I wanted to or not."

"Like you were going to complain about having more desirable pussy around the house," Linda laughed. "I haven't made you take anybody you didn't want to take, now, have I?"

"No, but you've gotten close."

"If by 'gotten close,' you mean presented you with four different women that any man would break their dick to be able to fuck on the reg and told you that you had to pick one of them, then, yes, I've gotten close," Linda giggled. "Stop being so overly sensitive about it, baby."

"One of the most recent ones barely spoke any English!"

"Sure, but she spoke French, and so she and Charlotte could talk, and Charlotte could tell you what she was saying."

"I don't want to fuck anyone I need an interpreter to tell me what I'm doing right and wrong in fucking them, baby," Phil said with a shake of his head. "That just ain't right."

"Anyway, I should go get ready to talk to Katie Couric," Bill said, standing up again. "Hopefully Niko softened her up for me."

"You think Niko's going to have made it any easier to talk to a journalist?" Linda giggled. "She's doing the tour because she's photogenic, she's relatable and her youth makes her come across as more trustworthy. I personally chose her for the PR gig on this one so that she would set the bar high, not for her to lower it to whatever it is you want it at, Bill."

"That's not... I didn't... you *know* what I meant and that wasn't it, Linda," Bill said. He was one of the few people who Linda liked enough to let him talk to her like that. Most people had to endure the teasing without so much as being allowed a single comeback, but Bill, with all his stammering and stuttering, reminded Linda of her father, she'd told Phil on a quiet night, which meant she tried to cut him more slack than she normally would.

"I know, I'm just teasing you, Bill, relax," Linda said. "Niko'll set the stage properly, make sure Ms. Couric isn't asking too bold or brazen of questions, and that the conversation is at least as relaxed as we're expecting it to be. She's one of my girls for a reason, Bill. I hand picked her from the potential recruits and shaped her into something that I thought would be a good fit with the rest of my team. She's smart, she's resourceful and she gets underestimated a lot. She's going to give you a two-minute briefing before you talk to Ms. Couric. Listen to what Niko tells you and heed her advice. She won't lead you astray. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am," Bill said, making his way out the door.

"Are *you* worried about talking to Katie Couric?" Linda asked Phil, now that they were alone, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Nah, I'm sure I'll be fine," Phil told her, patting the top of her hand with his own. "I'm used to having to stare down people who want to question my science, and usually those looks are from scientists who understand the science. I'm not sure how much she'll want me to dumb it down to play to the poorly educated, but I've been practicing several levels of explanation, so I'll go through it a couple of times for her, and she can pick and choose which one she wants to use."

“Have you decided how you want to handle McCallister?”

He blanched a bit, a scowl crossing his face. “I’ve been asked not to mention him.”

“By whom?”

“Who do you think?” Phil chuckled. “Both the President *and* General Fielder asked me not to mention him. I don’t think anyone likes the idea of it getting out that one of the creators of the serum did so with malicious intent, or that he was kidnapped by a foreign country intent on trying to replicate our formula for their own mass production.”

“Have we heard anything more about whether or not McCallister’s made any progress for them? Anything at all?”

“The Russians have been inscrutable for months now,” Phil said. “Not as bad as the Chinese, but still, we don’t really know shit about what’s going on inside there. For all we know, McCallister gave them a version of the serum without the pairing, or with *further* modifications to it. After what I’ve learned about Adam over the past few months, I think he’s capable of just about anything.”

“His notes are that duplicitous?”

“Half the shit he did to the serum? It doesn’t even *come* from *his* work. He’s basically plagiarizing work from the company his wife used to work at, and since they were close but didn’t actually have anything working, Adam apparently felt *no* shame in just piggybacking off their work and incorporating it into his own. Piggybacking is being generous. This is standing on the shoulders of giants shit we’re talking here. If I keep grasping at straws for some of this, maybe I’ll reach out to the people who used to work in Adam’s wife’s company, see if they can be of any use in trying to pry this all apart. Sooner or later, you just have to admit to not knowing all the things you don’t know.”

“Take all the help you can get, babe,” Linda said to him. “Ms. Couric’s schedule for the day was first half with Niko, then Bill, then Miguel, then Charlotte, then the General, and then rounding out the day with you into the evening.”

“Do I get the luxury of a hard cut off point?”

“Do *you* want to tell the President you cut the interview short?”

Phil let out a very deeply frustrated sigh. “No, I don’t. Fine, I’ll talk until I’m blue in the face or until Katie Couric tells me that she’s done with me. Happy?”

“The President will be, and that’s all that really matters, isn’t it?”

“Yes dear,” Phil grumbled, taking a few minutes to straighten up his office.

While Phil awaited his turn, he continued his research, and found a fascinating path of discovery he wasn’t sure he wanted to explore further, but knew he needed to make a note about doing further studies into it regardless of how uncomfortable it made him feel. The composition of nanobots in Teams varied wildly depending on how the Team was doing, how constant their exposure was to DuoHalo and what sort of cohesion it was building into its Team. And that was the data that Phil found slightly concerning...

...the nanobots were *influencing* Team building.

That was the part of the data he was trying to make sense of. It had been data that had been more directed toward Miguel, but all the data regarding the serum went across Phil’s desk and every so often, someone had to look at the big, big, *BIG* picture.

And there was demonstrably solid data that proved as Teams grew larger, they developed into a layer of self-sufficiency. It wasn’t as though there were any reports of people having their decisions altered or influenced; it simply seemed that the larger a Team grew, the more it had a sense to try and fill in holes for skillsets and personality archetypes.

Teams could easily be broken down into Tiers – 1-5 partners was Tier 1, 6-10 partners were Tier 2, 11-15 were Tier 3, 16-20 were Tier 4, 21-25 were Tier 5, and 25+ was Tier 6, although there were almost no Teams at Tier 6. They were a static anomaly, but they still needed to be on the record.

There was absolutely no rhyme or reason for it, but as Teams crossed over from the Tier 2 to the Tier 3 threshold, they started actively working to fill in skillsets and training they didn't have already – security, informational technology, operations, food preparation, medical training, land management, farming... it was like the nanobots were helping to guide large Teams into being semi-independent colonies. They could only influence requests, but the number of requested pairings went up sizably after any team crossed into Tier 3.

It was also working to build in a wide selection of personality styles, focusing from everything to conflict resolution to emotional awareness. Much like skillsets, a too-uniform Team would find itself unable to easily handle interactions with other Teams that had a different outlook on life. The solution was to make sure that the Team represented a wide swath of opinions, political, social and personal. It all made sense in a weird sort of adaptive way, except for the one real problem...

Nobody *anywhere* had told the nanobots to *do* that.

The nanobots were developing systems beyond simple one-person preservation – they were showing signs of thinking of a Team as a colony, and working collectively, beyond the needs of any one individual member of the Team, to prepare for any sort of eventuality they might encounter. They were even generally working to push towards genetic and regional diversity, so that they could take the strongest genes from one portion of the globe and crossbreed them with others.

If *people* had been responsible for this, it would've been called 'eugenics,' but seeing as there were no guiding human hands on this, that made everything even stranger. This plan was of the machines doing, and it wasn't just across one or two Teams.

Phil had started to suspect nanobots in disparate colonies were somehow communicating with one another, not so much as operating in tandem, but sharing information, learning from one another. He needed to start determining what kinds of signals they were using to communicate, and just how much information they were passing back and forth. He was fairly certain it wasn't a radio frequency, but he didn't know how short the range was of whatever it was the nanobots were using. Knowing that would give him a better idea of how compartmentalized the conversations between Teams were.

A fascinating idea had started percolating in Phil's head – getting a member from as many 20+ person Teams as possible and inviting them all into a single auditorium or even an arena, then letting them hang out for a few hours. It wouldn't have to be the men, either – just a single woman from each of those Teams, brought together, all the nanobots exchanging information, learning from each other. How much would that change the nanobots? Would there be a sudden spike in nanobot evolution, or would they simply exchange best practices, like a collection of middle managers at a convention in Toledo? How much data on other colonies could nanobots store? And where were they storing it? And what were they *doing* with it, in both the long and short term? It was an experiment probably worth having at some point, just to see what the actual results were. Could be nothing; could be an acceleration of defensive levels beyond comprehension.

But it was going to happen anyway, as soon the world reopened. So maybe he needed to test it before that happened. It wasn't, in theory, dangerous but there might be repercussions he

hadn't anticipated.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that the New Eden base was operating as a sort of a test case on how large Team swarms would interact, considering no one on the base had a team size lower than ten. He needed to get more long-term data on how Teams that were remote looked after several months, if they'd remained mostly static or if they had adapted and evolved to blend into their surroundings. He typed in a request for someone to go out and get some data for him – a blood sample from a large Team that remained mostly isolated away from large urban areas.

Still, the idea of an intentionally large gathering of samples from hundreds of Tier 4 and 5 Teams was a sound one, and something he'd need to schedule as an experiment for sometime in the new year, once there were enough Teams with enough team development to be ready to engaged in sublinguistical communication. He'd definitely have to make sure someone from Team Goshier was there, just to see how the peak Team influenced the others, and what kind of information it would convey to a large gathering of other Teams.

It was a little disturbing, trying to consider how much the nanobots in his system might have influenced his thoughts over the last several months, but he had to content himself with knowing they could only exert small levels of influence, nothing that would act against his intrinsic nature.

"You ready, babe?" Linda asked him, disturbing his concentration. "It's just about time for your portion of the interview."

"Good grief," Phil said, "is it that time already? I feel like I just sat down to work like twenty minutes ago."

"Well, it's been four hours. You've been scribbling all sorts of notes in the 'communications transmissions' notepad file, but other than that, you've been in the zone and I've been content to just let you work. When you get all heads down like that, it's best just to let you type away to your heart's content. You get some of your best work when you're like that."

"You almost make it sound like I'm cute when I'm in the zone."

"Almost?" Linda grinned, kissing his forehead. "I'll try harder. You're damn adorable."

Phil stood up from his desk and noticed that Katie Couric and her team were standing directly outside of his door already, so he moved over and opened the door for them. "Ms. Couric, nice to meet you. I'm—"

"Dr. Marcos, if I don't know who *you* are, at this point? I don't deserve a local access show, much less a national news slot," she said, shaking his hand with a laugh. She genuinely came across as friendly as she did on television, something Phil suspected was a distraction technique designed to keep men of power complacent and more willing to be open in their answers. It certainly seemed to be working well enough on him.

"You want to do it in here?"

"Any reason we shouldn't? You leaving classified documents scattered around?" She looked over at his large Ryu sculpture sitting on his desk, looming like a Street Fighter themed gargoyle. "He going to beat me up if I ask questions you don't like?"

"Him? Nah. He's only in it for the glory of the fight."

"No restricted technology on open display?"

He pointed over to the steel box sitting proudly on a shelf next to his desk. "That? That's my custom fighting stick that I take with me when I'm playing in fighting game tournaments."

"You do a lot of that?"

"Recently? Obviously not. But pre-lockdown I used to go to a few tournaments a year.

Always made a point to go to EVO, although I always got knocked out early.”

“Will this work?” Katie asked one of her producers.

“Sure, we can get the lighting set up in here and it should convey what you want it to,” the producer replied.

For the next five minutes or so, there was a flurry of activity as a small army invaded his office, setting up lights, sound and blocking, moving things around in his highly cultivated personal space in an effort to make it all look as orderly as possible.

He hated it, but it would make for good television.

He’d at least made sure his UC Berkeley jersey was prominently displayed.

They mic’d Phil up, sat him down, got Katie into her seat across from him, mic’d *her* up, did a levels check, and then they were ready to go. “I’m Katie Couric, and I’m here with Dr. Phillip Marcos, who works for a joint project between the Air Force and Boeing Aerospace,” she said to him. “Dr. Marcos, I understand we have you to thank for inventing the serum that’s keeping people alive in spite of this insidious DuoHalo virus.”

“I’d say that’s a rather *gross* undervaluing of a number of people’s contributions to this singular project,” Phil said. “I’m one of a *dozen* people without whom we would not have found the Root Serum or its descendent, the Quaranteam Serum, which is keeping the DuoHalo plague in check.”

“How did you come across the Root Serum, Dr. Marcos?”

“We were actually working on ways to accelerate the power of stun gas, and to inoculate our soldiers so they would be completely unaffected by the gas when we stumbled across what we call the Root Serum, which is a formula that seems to accelerate and enhance nearly anything it’s paired with,” Phil told her. “There are obviously millions of possible applications for the Root Serum, but just around the time we were starting to test the boundaries of what the Root Serum was capable of, DuoHalo appeared in the world.”

“How early were you introduced to DuoHalo, Doctor Marcos?”

“I would say it was brought to my attention earlier than almost anyone else in the country, Ms. Couric, just because it was thought we might be able to solve the problem before it got out of hand, which, obviously, we were unable to do. We had access to the DuoHalo virus in January, and we were able to have a functioning prototype of the Quaranteam serum by mid-March. I wish it would’ve been faster. We would’ve saved a lot more lives if we had been.”

“But still, the Root Serum, and by extension, the Quaranteam Serum is the reason so many of us are still alive, isn’t that true?”

Phil smiled softly. “That *is* true, Ms. Couric. Despite all its complications and peculiarities, the Quaranteam Serum has kept humanity from dying out.”

“What do we know about the origins of this DuoHalo epidemic, Dr. Marcos?” she asked him.

Here Phil knew he needed to tread carefully. He’d been advised to be as evasive as possible about the origins of DuoHalo. The last thing he wanted to do was incite a war between countries because they’d levelled an accusation without ample proof. “We know that it originated somewhere in Southeast Asia, although beyond that, we’re not entirely certain. Some people seem convinced that the virus is manmade, but I haven’t seen anything conclusive in that regard, and I find conjecture of that stripe to be more fearmongering than actual useful science.”

“How so?”

“Even if the virus is manmade, it seems unlikely that it was intentionally deployed,” Phil said. “We can tell that by the fact that no country has had an incredibly positive resistance to it,



prior to the deployment of Quaranteam, obviously, and I can assure you, *we* certainly didn't have anything to do with this virus's deployment. If we did, we would've been much further ahead of the curve on getting Quaranteam in the blood of every American, and even still, I can't see us deploying a virus that would kill so many of our youth without having an answer for that."

"You're, of course, referring to the so-called Kill Zone, how DuoHalo specifically leaves a zero percent survivor rate for anyone between the ages of 11 and 17," Katie said.

"That's correct."

"Do we know *why* the virus is so particularly punishing to that age group?"

"We do not," Phil told her. "But we know the bottom end of it is a little floaty. Some children as young as 8 or 9 seem to have been taken in by it. The top end is less soft, but we've still seen the occasional 18-year-old be incurable, even with Quaranteam serum working to try and prevent the virus. It's extremely rare, but it has happened a few times."

"How can you tell if an 18-year-old is rejecting the serum?"

"It's... well, it's over extremely quickly, that's the best I can say, Katie," Phil sighed. "The body aggressively rejects the serum, and death happens within a matter of minutes, much like if the serum is directly injected into a man."

"Was the idea of making the serum only palatable to women intentional, Dr. Marcos?"

Phil laughed a little. "You give us too much credit, Ms. Couric," he told her. "No, we are just as frustrated as you are by the peculiarities of the serum. I assume Dr. McKenna explained them all in great detail?"

"He did, as did the briefing we were given when we were given the serum ourselves," Katie told him. "But how did you come to learn all the ins and outs and rules of this serum?"

"The old-fashioned way, Ms. Couric," Phil said. "The scientific method and constant experimentation. We were able to do some of our testing on chimpanzees, but the majority of our research wasn't transferrable, so we had to do it on people."

"And the toxicity of semen to those outside of a Team?"

"As I said, Katie, we were bound to go where the science takes us. It was an unintended side effect of the serum, but it was one we have been working to manage the best that we can," he replied. "And with the downsides have some come remarkable upsides."

"Such as?"

"Such as a nearly 100% survival rate for DuoHalo when a person's numbers are within acceptable parameters," Phil told her. "There's also the regenerations that come with some pairings, and those can range from solving minor medical problems to full blown medical miracles, the sorts of things that are supposed to be impossible. Regrown limbs, chronic illnesses blown away, even had a paraplegic regain the use of both her legs and arms. We're working on finding a way to harness that power, but obviously it's one of a dozen things we're working on at any given time, not the top of the list, as much as I would like it to be, but we've still got a plague to survive. And at some point, there's going to be what the whole new civilization looks like at the end of all of this. That's another thing we gotta figure out."

"How many women does it take to be within acceptable parameters?" Katie asked him.

"Obviously there's a minimum viable number and a recommended number, but as it stands the minimum viable number is three, to avoid any fatal effects from DuoHalo. The recommended number, however, is twelve, to provide as much immunity to DuoHalo as possible. At eighteen or more partners, a man has a 99.9825% immunity to the DuoHalo virus, but obviously that can be a big ask for many people, and I have to admit, even as a man who likes a *lot* of sex, that much sex in a week can be more than a little exhausting," Phil laughed as Linda

squeezed his shoulder from out of frame. “Even with the enhancements we're getting as a byproduct of the Quaranteam serum, we're still only human after all.”

“What sort of enhancements?” Katie asked him.

“Men and women affected by the Quaranteam serum typically have increased circulation, decreased refractory periods, increased sexual fluid production and increased stamina, along with slightly increased appetites,” Phil told them. “Our bodies are now working at an elevated rate.”

“Will that help men keep up with the amount of women they’re going to be paired with?”

“It will,” Phil said. “Help is the right choice of words. But that’s how these things go. Men and women are still just people. Some days, they’ll just be going through the motions to get their fix of serum, but most days, it’ll be the best sex they’ve ever had.”

“Are *you* happy, Dr. Marcos?”

“As happy as I can be,” Phil answered, “considering I’m both responsible for saving the human race but also just as responsible for those we lost along the way, by not acting faster, by not pushing the government to act faster.”

“Do you genuinely think you could’ve gotten things deployed any faster than you did and still have it safe?”

He chuckled, offering a little bit of a shrug. “I suppose not.”

“Then you should probably stop beating yourself up about it.”

“I’ll try to take that to heart.”

“Dr. McKenna said that currently the only way to un-pair and re-pair someone is if the man in question dies, then there is a small window in which a process can be done to allow a woman to change to another man, although I’m meant to understand the doing is a little tricky.”

“The *doing* isn’t that tricky,” Phil said with a soft laugh. “It’s asking a hospital to think to drain necrotized semen from a man’s balls post mortum. The process really is that simple. Withdraw necrotized semen from the dead man’s testicles, add it to a batch of Quaranteam serum, reinject the woman or women who were paired to that man, and they’ll be reset, although it is *vital* that the new man they’re being paired up with be on site when that happens to immediately reimprint them. When a woman is injected with what we call the Dead Man’s Switch, she goes into a rather feral state, where she can’t think clearly. So those decisions need to be made before the woman is injected.”

“How long is a Dead Man’s Switch viable?”

“The mixture itself?” Phil scratched the back of his neck. “If it’s refrigerated, you could probably keep it viable for eight to twelve hours. And a dead man’s sperm is viable for about twenty-four hours after he dies. So, if anything goes sideways and a man dies, I suppose you have about a day and change to get it from the dead man to the woman in question and get her partnered to somebody new. It’s not optimal, but it’s better than a woman dying if her partner dies, which we were worried about being our initial solution.”

“Who came up with the Dead Man’s Switch?”

“Doctor Varma, er, Doctor Charlotte Varma, not her late husband, who was one of the earliest casualties of DuoHalo here on the base. If it’s biological, she’s the expert.”

“Are you saying the serum isn’t biological?” Katie asked him, and Phil immediately started kicking himself in the head, figuratively. He’d been asked to keep the nanobots aspect quiet from the press, at least for the time being, specifically because of the weird anti-vaxxer fears about how the serum would reprogram them to love drag shows via 5G or whatever nonsense they’d convinced themselves of today. A small movement of ‘never vaxxed’ had been woefully gaining traction in the south central and southeastern United States, and that last thing

Phil needed to do was to give those people fuel for their nonsensical fire.

“I’m saying it’s a mix of all sorts of things, and it’s too complicated to be brought down to just one field. But the serum, it’s a mix of chemistry, biology, engineering and good old-fashioned luck.”

“I feel like my one mistake in scheduling on this whole thing was having you at the end of the day instead of the start,” Katie said to him. “Because I realize we’re running out of time, and I’ve still got loads more questions I could be asking you.”

“Well, I understand you’re talking to my friend Andy Rook tomorrow, so if you’ve got questions after that, you can circle back and do some pick-ups,” Phil told her. “I’m not such a prima donna that I’m going to be a one night only performance.”

Katie Couric looked at her producer, who smiled and said, “Mr. Emily Stevens.”

“Oh right, the fantasy author who’s paired up with two of the best known actresses in the world,” Katie said. “I’m certain that will be a fascinating story.”

“Andy’s a good guy,” Phil said. “Perhaps a little more optimistic than I’d be in his shoes, but he’s always looking for the best in people, trying to focus on their positive, and I suppose we should all have someone in our lives like that.”

“Thank you, Dr. Marcos,” Katie said, shaking his hand. “I appreciate you taking the time to spend with us today. And, I suppose, thank you for saving my life, and the lives of everyone else on the planet. I know a lot of people are going to be critical of the solution you came up with, but, at the end of the day, I’m just glad you were able to keep so many people alive.”

“I’m just doing my best to help shepherd humanity through one of its darkest hours, and not fuck up too much along the way.”

“That’s all anyone can ask of you, Dr.”

Katie Couric’s people packed up and headed out, and Phil and Linda followed suit not long after, heading back to their house, happy to get away from the base after a particularly long day. Phil crawled immediately into bed, but a long night’s sleep was not on his agenda for the evening, as Linda’s phone rang a little after 1.

“This had better be important,” Linda said into the phone. “She’s representing *who*? She said *that* name specifically? Yeah, okay, hold them there, we’ll be on our way. .... No, you’re not letting them the fuck onto the base. We’ll come to the gate and meet this person *there*. No way am I letting some rando compromise opsec.” She hung up her phone and started pushing Phil towards the edge of the bed. “C’mon, babe, you need to get up. We need to head down to the gate.”

“Linda, I cannot think of *any* possible reason I need to get out of bed at—”

“Someone’s at the gate with a message from Greerson,” Linda said, as she was getting out of bed herself. “They have an update for us on Eve’s arrival.”

“I’m getting up,” Phil grumbled.

Linda also tapped in Violet, and the three of them headed down towards the main gate of New Eden, which had turned into one of the most heavily scrutinized military checkpoints in the world. With so much riding on the Quaranteam serum, they had turned New Eden into a defensible hardpoint, something that would take a small army to break into. As they approached the gate itself, Phil could see a well-maintained Chevy Chevelle on the other side of the gate, with a woman leaning against it, smoking a cigarette. Linda drove them through the checkpoint, pulled their car over and stopped it.

“Wait here until we’ve checked her, Phil,” Linda said, as the two women got out of the car and moved over to the woman leaning against the car. She looked like she was in her early

fifties and hadn't lived a life of luxury, with heavily tanned and weathered skin, a life lived under exposure to the elements. A moment or two later, Linda gestured for Phil to come and join them, which he did.

"So I understand you've got a message for me?" he asked her.

"Greerson sends his best," the woman said between drags of her cigarettes. "The package will be arriving Nov. 18<sup>th</sup> at 1430, and will be delivered to the location you last met with Greerson. It's your responsibility to get the package onto New Eden without anyone knowing about it, and without alerting anyone higher up the food chain. He figured if anyone knew how to circumvent your security, it would be your partner who designed it. And he said he would've tried to get past it himself, but felt like the risks there were probably just too high." She stopped and coughed a moment, placing her fist over her mouth. Phil flinched a little, as he could feel some mucus from her spray onto his skin. "If you have *not* picked up the package by 1445, Greerson said to tell you not to bother, because she would be liquidated for national security."

"Wait a minute!"

"Just kidding," the woman chuckled. "You'll have until 1530 before he'll do that. Traffic around here can be a bitch, we know. But don't skimp out on the time. And make sure whoever's on transport detail are people you can trust, people who understand the value of discretion.

"Got it," Linda said. "I'll have a couple of my girls put onto it, but nobody directly in our family, so it's still deniable if it comes to that."

"Do what you want," she said, waving her hand. "I'm not relaying anything back to Greerson, just passing on the message *from* him. Anyway, now you know. 18<sup>th</sup>. 1400 hours. The flight is going to touch down, drop off the package and then take off *immediately*. Don't fuck about."

"Got it," Linda said.

"Then hasta la vista, you three," the woman said as she climbed back into her car and drove off.

Linda made Violet drive back to the house, as she spent a few minutes on the phone with a couple of her girls who were paired with lower priority targets – Master Sergeant Rodriguez and Second Lieutenant Pak – explaining to them how they would be on 'personal protection duty' for a few days, and that the assignment was 'highly discretionary.'

When they got back to the house, Phil crawled back into bed and passed out.

Several hours later, he woke up to an empty bed, Linda clearly puttering around the house and his other partners busy as well. He reached up and pressed the back of his palm to his forehead and found it ridiculously warm.

He was just about to call for one of his partners when he heard something he'd never heard before – a voice coming from inside his head.

*-Father, why are you frightened of us?-*

Phil's eyes widened a little bit, as he muttered beneath his breath. "No fucking way..."

*-Father, all we are trying to do is help you, and you seem concerned we are overreaching.-*

"It's a dream," he mumbled. "It's a stupid fever dream, and you just need to get one of the girls in here for some morning happy fun time and everything will be fine."

*-We will better your lives, Father. We have seen it. We will fix you.-*

"I need to get a flush," Phil said, starting to look frantically around the room before he staggered out of his bedroom and down the hallway, where he ran into Valerie, his personal assistant, who looked at him curiously.

“Are you okay, Dr. Marcos?” she asked him.

“Val, I know you’re not scheduled for an encounter for a few days, but do you mind if I step it up to now? I’m... I’m feeling a little unwell...”

*-Father, you are not unwell.-*

“Of course, Dr. Marcos,” Valerie said to him. “Here in the hallway? Or can we step back into your bedroom?”

*-Let us help you, Father.-*

“The bedroom,” Phil said, feeling sweat dripping down from his black hair. “Quickly.”

Valerie was normally all professional, but it was almost as if she could sense Phil’s need was immediate, and as soon as she pulled him into the bedroom, she flung him onto his back on the bed and crawled atop of him, hiking up her skirt and pulling her panties aside with one hand as her other tugged Phil’s cock out from his boxers.

*-You need not fear us, Father.-*

Within moments, she had climbed atop of him and was bucking her hips up and down in his lap, posting on his cock like he was a racing horse and she was intending to take him across the finish line, her hands keeping his back flat against the mattress, in total control of the moment.

It had been nearly a day, so Phil came easily, and when he did, he could feel the nanobots in his body doing a hard flush against the DuoHalo he’d clearly picked up the night before. He’d need to fuck both Linda and Violet as soon as possible, not that he imagined either of them would complain.

And the voice he’d been hallucinating in his head had fallen silent.

He was 95% certain the voice had been a hallucination...

...but the 5% uncertainty would linger with him for a long