

## **Chapter Thirty-Three**

*May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021*

“Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy,” Melody said to him as she woke him up for the morning. She grinned a little bit, smoothing her hand over his chest before patting it. “I didn’t forget about the text message chain. It just... feels more natural to say it in person every so often. It also seems to soothe the compulsion better. Don’t worry, though. I know it’s Lexi’s turn, so I’m just waking you up and she’ll be in within a couple of minutes for her dosing.”

“Where’s Fi and Ming?”

“They both snuck out a little bit ago to get their morning coffee and gossip about you,” Melody joked. “Ming feels she’s got a lot of time to catch up on, and so she’s trying to learn as much about you both *from* you and from those who’ve known you the longest and/or best.”

“Fi’s definitely both of those things,” he said, as Melody leaned down to give him a slow and tender kiss.

“I know I’m compelled to say it, Andy, but it really does mean the world to me that you’re willing to give me a second chance and let me prove to you my loyalty,” she said, stroking her fingertips through the thick thatch of blonde hair on his chest.

“Yeah, well, it’s going to be tested today, I think,” Andy grumbled. “If you don’t want to come in, you’re welcome to stay outside.”

“No no, I want to be there for it,” she said, her hand absentmindedly starting to trail slightly lower towards his stomach. “Nobody gets anywhere running from their fears in life.”

“And this scares you?”

“I’m more scared of what *I’ll* do, honestly,” she sighed, looking down, as her fingers teased against the waistline of his boxers. “I should go. If I stay here too much longer, I’m going to be shouting at the walls about how I want you to fuck me, and it’s Lexi’s turn, not mine.”

“You’re up in a day or two, Melody, so it won’t be that long a wait.”

“Maybe not to you, boss, or for most of the other girls, but some of us, we get the need a little sooner, a little stronger, and it can be hard to focus,” she said with a frown, her fingertips trailing back up towards his chest once more. “But I’m a big girl. I’ll suck it up and deal with it. Far better than the alternative would be.” She patted the tattoo on his chest and moved to slide off the bed. “I’ll send her in if you’re ready.”

“Sure,” Andy said, sitting up, stretching his arms over his head. “We’re not heading over there until after lunch, and Lexi doesn’t like to get *too* athletic, generally.”

“She’s been in a weird mood lately, so you never know what she’s in for,” Melody said with a laugh as she slid off the bed, dragging her fingertips along his skin as she did. “I think she’s starting to come around to me, but she was damn near paranoid of me when I first got here. Not that I suppose I can blame her. I was sort of the wolf asking to be let into the hen house. But I’ve been a good bodyguard so far, haven’t I, Andy?”

“You have, Melody, so I wouldn’t worry,” Andy said. “Lexi’s just a paranoid person by nature. That’s how she’s gotten where she’s gotten in life, and that means her trust has to get earned the hard way – over time.”

“I never heard how she came to trust you so much so fast,” Melody said, starting to head towards the door.

“She and Jenny were roommates in college, practically best friends, and since Jenny trusts me, Lexi felt like she could too,” Andy said. “That, and I’ve always been honest and kept my word, on everything. I don’t make promises I can’t keep; I don’t offer hope I don’t think I

can deliver on, and I never tell people what they want to hear, just for the sake of them hearing it. I've tried making sure the staff is as happy as I can get them, whether that's managing their time off better, raising their salaries, making them feel like more or less part of the family... I just want the people who are entrusted to my care to feel safe and joyous as much as they can, during the sort of tumultuous times we're living in."

Melody sort of blinked at him a few times and then giggled. "You really are just as much of a Don Quixote as they said you were, you know that?"

"Keep me from windmills and we'll be fine, Mel," Andy chuckled.

"You're not a little Dutch boy, Andy." Melody opened the bedroom door and stepped out. "We'll keep you safe."

As soon as Melody walked out, Lexi walked in and shut the bedroom door behind her, dressed only in a pair of night shorts and a green tanktop, and rather surprisingly, she was smiling at him. It wasn't as though Lexi didn't smile often; it just wasn't a natural default expression for her. She'd joked that she had a rare combination of Resting Badass Face and Resting Bitch Face, which meant just casually glancing her way often made people feel a little nervous and intimidated. "Hey boss, before we get started, I've got something I want to run by you," she said as she moved over towards the bed.

"Sure thing," Andy said as he stood up, just wanting to stretch his legs for a moment, knowing he was likely to spend the next ten to fifteen minutes on his back, as Lexi usually preferred to be on top. "What's up? You getting a sensitivity flare up on the regenerated flesh? I know you had some weird sensations associated with—"

"No no, I'm fine," she said, as she sat down on the bed. "I want to talk to you about Melody."

"What about her?"

"...Am I being too paranoid with her?"

"You're my security chief, Lexi. You tell me."

"I feel like she's earned a place of trust but there's some part of me that hasn't gotten past that, that doesn't feel comfortable. Like... like..."

"Like you don't think she's fully shed Covington's stench?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Lexi said. "But I have to give her a second chance, don't I?"

"You don't *have* to, no."

"But *you* did, boss, and how can I be fair if I'm not willing to take the same risks you are?"

Both Lexi and Melody had taken to calling him 'boss,' 'bossman' or 'sir,' most of the time. They rarely felt comfortable calling him 'Andy' and he rarely felt comfortable with them calling him 'Master,' so the general compromise was made.

"I have the luxury of being optimistic," Andy said. "But I want you to be cautious if you think you have to be."

"I think it's time for me to stop being paranoid of her," Lexi said. "And with that, I want to make an odd request of you. I know when I first showed up, I said I didn't want to share my time with you with anyone else. I'd like to ask if it's okay to change that."

"You know that it is, Lexi."

"It doesn't hurt to ask these things, Andy," she said with a nervous smile, something he wasn't accustomed to seeing on his Latina chief of security's face. "Anyway, I want to bring Melody in here for this, to share this experience with her."

"Melody?" Andy asked, tilting his head to one side. The idea of Lexi moving into a

shared experience wasn't a total surprise to Andy – that had been happening with basically all his partners the longer their time together went on. Threesomes and foursomes were more the default than the exception at this point, and Lexi had sort of been the last hold out, so he'd expected her to want to try and experiment with an additional partner, but Melody was certainly not the one he would've predicted it be with. "The one you were *literally* just telling me about having trust issues with?"

"This'll be a way to help get over that trust issue, boss," she said, moving off the bed once more, heading back to the door, pushing it open. "Hey Mel, get in here."

Melody came moving back into the room once more, with Alexis closing the door behind her. "Shouldn't one of us be keeping watch of the front door?"

Lexi rolled her eyes with a smile. "We're in one of the most secure hotels in the world, and Secret Service is crawling all over this building. We wouldn't even be a third this safe at home."

"Oh. Okay," she said. "Then what's up? Am I getting reprimanded or something?"

"Why would you think that?" Andy asked her.

"I don't know! I've never been called into a room with the two of you without knowing what it's about!" Melody said with a nervous laugh. "It's like going in front of the teacher without your presentation ready!"

"So I know haven't been the most... welcoming of you, Melody," Lexi started. "And while I know *you* understand my reservations, it's been long enough now that I need to better, do better. So c'mon, get naked." Lexi reached down and grabbed the bottom of her tank top, pulling it up and over her head, tossing it onto the bed, exposing her pert breasts capped with deep tan nipples. "We're going to share the bossman this morning."

Melody immediately started peeling off her clothes. "Don't have to tell me twice, but I thought you were the kind of girl who decided she didn't want to split her time with the boss," his Asian bodyguard said, getting her bra off quickly as well, her nipples more fudge-colored than tan. Andy still admired the spot on her back where once Covington had left his mark on her that she'd gotten removed. Once the skin had healed up, she'd added a giant tattoo of a rook chess piece, the exact same design his brides had all gotten on their ankles but in a larger size. He hadn't asked her to do it, but Melody had insisted multiple times that he'd saved her life by bringing her in, so why shouldn't he have a mark on her? It wasn't what *he* wanted, but what *she* wanted, and so he didn't object.

"I need to start playing well with others, and while I know I could have this time to myself," Lexi said, "and I want to keep my time split among the professional girls. I may try sharing him with Jenny next, but you're here now and so I guess you'll have to do." Lexi winked at Melody as she scooted out of her panties in about the same time it took Melody to shed her pants and panties as well.

Andy slipped out of his boxers as well, his cock already starting to stiffen up at the two beauties before him, even though they seemed to be sizing each other up a bit instead of focusing on him. "Whatever you say, chief," Melody said. "I'll follow your lead."

"Y'know, I didn't *use* to find women attractive, but..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean there, Lex," Melody agreed. "And I've been imprinted longer than you have by a couple of months. Not to Andy, I mean, just total imprinted time."

"Oh yeah?" Lexi asked, stepping in to slide a hand along Melody's hip, pulling the Asian woman closer to her own body. "You think we get more open minded to being bisexual the longer we're imprinted?"

“I’d say it certainly figures into it,” Melody said, shivering a little bit as Lexi’s hand slid across Melody’s ass. “It seems like it pulls all us women towards the bisexual line, no matter what the starting point was, straight or gay. The last few weeks, when you’ve been changing in front of me, I’ve started noticing how fit you are in ways that were strictly unprofessional.” Before Melody could say anything else, Lexi pulled Melody in closer and kissed her with an intensity that caught everyone off-guard, her lips parting to let her tongue really get in there and explore Melody’s mouth, while the other girl whimpered and moaned a little, sliding her hand on Lexi’s hips.

When the two finally broke from their embrace, both turned to look at Andy, grinning to see his erection was full and stiff. “Looks like the bossman doesn’t mind the show,” Lexi giggled.

“Who wouldn’t?” Melody said, her fingertips trailing up along Lexi’s back. “Two hot, dangerous women making out in front of them? It’s like he’s got his own private James Bond fantasy going on.”

“Well, I’m not going to wait,” Lexi said, turning towards Andy before lifting one of her feet up and pushing him in the chest onto his back on the bed, as he laughed, imagining her saying ‘This! Is! Sparta!’ in his head. She was on top of him before the spring mattresses had stopped wiggling, her legs sliding over either side of him, as she immediately reached for his cock, rubbing it along her slit. “Normally, I like Andy to be all lovey dovey and shit, but today I want to get rough and rowdy. You don’t mind, do you, boss?”

He was about to answer when he felt her firmly pushing herself down onto his cock, and he suspected she must’ve been trying to clench her muscles when she did, because it felt ridiculously tight, and whatever words he’d been planning came out as an “Nnnngghhh” sound instead.

“I think we can take that as a no,” Melody giggled, crawling up on the bed next to them, sliding behind Lexi so that she could run both of her hands up to toy with Lexi’s nipples, the nipple that she’d regenerated last year still clearly more sensitive than the other, because Lexi’s thighs squeezed onto his hips a little harder when it was toyed with. “Mmmm... he looks so happy, getting fucked by you... I can’t wait until it’s my turn, and he’s getting fucked by me...”

“Oh, I’ve got... nnnhhh... something different in mind for you, Mel,” Lexi groaned. “If you don’t like it, you can... mmmm... tell me no, but you did... unnnhhh... say you’d follow my lead... Fuck, are you getting bigger boss, or is my coochie getting smaller? Because you feel so much fucking bigger right now, more...gggrrrrhhh... more than ever before...”

“It’s caramel and peanut butter mixed together, chief,” Mel giggled. “It’s the tasty treat no man can resist. Fuck, you look hot, riding him like this, grinding on his dick. You’re one beautiful bitch, chief... I hope he makes you cum real fucking hard...”

“Well, I—” Andy tried to get a word in, but Lexi placed one of her hands over his mouth to quiet him, grinning down at him, her other hand resting on his tattooed chest, tapping at the intricate inkworks done into his flesh.

“I never told you what a fucking surprise these were to me, Andy,” Lexi purred. “And such a fucking delight. It meant you had depths nobody fucking knew about that you liked to keep well-hidden. Hot like I didn’t fucking expect.”

“I think he’s getting close to popping already, chief,” Mel said with a kiss that was originally aimed at Lexi’s cheek, but the Latina turned and let them lock lips for a moment instead. “You gonna drag it out, or make him squirt?”

“Normally I’d like to take my fucking time, but we have a busy day today... rrrfff... and

he's gonna take care of you before we go... so c'mon *Andy*, what're you waiting f—"

Andy wasn't one to just be completely passive in his sexual engagements, so his hands had stealthily slipped up along Lexi's thighs, and just when she was starting to get into a rhythm, one of his hands moved up to press his thumb against Lexi's clit, rubbing down on it frantically as his other hand shoved her hips down as hard into his as he could, and when his orgasm broke through, it induced one in her, one that he had to imagine was amplified and complicated by Melody's fingertips working on her nipples, sending Lexi into a feverish orgasm to match Andy's, her head leaning back as she let out a wild shriek that Melody moved to swallow with her own mouth, the three of them in one interlocked circuit, the overloaded pleasure spilling from one to the other to the next.

A few moments later, Melody and Lexi broke from their kiss, and Andy, who was more than a little dazed himself, didn't recall seeing Lexi look so dazed and delighted, an almost dopey grin on her face as her fingertips slowly clawed against his chest through his thick chest chair. "Okay, I am *officially* way open to new things," Lexi said with a slightly exhausted giggle. "That hit *way* fucking harder than I'm used to..."

"In a good way, I hope," Melody purred.

"Oh *hell* yeah," Lexi laughed, as she slowly climbed off Andy's lap, his cock starting to surge up again. "You ready, Mel?"

"Sure, lemme just hop—" Before Melody could finish her sentence, Lexi had pushed Melody's body down towards the mattress face first, until she was on her belly, and basically staring right at Andy's dick in front of her, a playful laugh escaping his Asian bodyguard's lips. "What gives?"

"I don't want to have to gag you, so you aren't talking all the time," Lexi said with a manipulative smile. "So I figured you can suck him off... taste *me* on *him* until you've gotten your fix for the week."

"Well, I—" Melody started, but as soon as her mouth was open, Lexi took her head in both of her hands and pushed Mel's face down onto Andy's cock, shoving it deep within the bodyguard's mouth, a moan from Mel's throat coating his shaft even as Lexi pushed him into it.

"That's it," Lexi laughed. "Take his cock. Get skullfucked like you said you wanted. Oh, I overheard you and Emily talking on the plane ride here, how you said you wished Andy would get a little rougher, a little wilder with you, but that you didn't feel comfortable asking him for it. Well, you never get what you don't ask for, you silly little girl, so you'd better put on your big girl panties from now on and if you want something from the boss, you learn to fucking ask him." The entire time she was talking, she was pushing and pulling on Melody's head, making her partner thrust her face as far down into Andy's crotch as she could get it before pulling her head back up to let her gasp and laugh, spittle and juices from both Andy and Lexi dripping from her lips.

"Thank you, Mistress, may I have another?" Melody managed to get out with a taunting laugh before Lexi grinned and started the whole process over again, pushing Mel's face down hard once more into Andy's body.

It wasn't long before Andy could feel another release building up inside of his balls, and he gestured over to Lexi, who leaned in and this time kissed him as Andy's orgasm peaked, and he started pouring a jet of hot cum into Melody's mouth, triggering her own orgasm, the two of them sharing an intense, private link, vibrating as his nanobots and hers exchanged and caused both of their bodies to twitch and shiver before both of them sort of slumped into an exhausted heap, Andy's softening shaft slipping out of Melody's burbling lips.

“You okay, Mel?” Andy asked her.

“That was fucking *awesome*,” Melody giggled, still a little fazed from her orgasm.

“How’s that for team playing, Andy?” Lexi asked, slowly helping him to his feet.

“Great, now let’s get showered, get dressed and get moving, before any of us decide to take a nice long power nap,” he laughed.

Half an hour later, the trio had gotten themselves cleaned up and dressed, and then met Ming and Fiona in the main foyer of the hotel room, and Fi gave Andy a strange smile before nudging Lexi in the side. “Better together, am I right?” Fiona said with a smug look upon her face.

“Yeah yeah yeah, ma’am,” Lexi admitted, rolling her eyes. “You were right, and I was misguided this *one time*. Even a stopped clock’s right twice a day.”

“I’m just sayin’.”

As they were heading down the elevator towards the garage, Fiona turned to Andy. “You sure you don’t want Phil and Linda to come and join us on this one?”

“I’d be too worried about them losing their temper.”

“Phil?”

“*Also* Phil.”

“Ah,” Fi said. “It’s going to be that bad?”

“Worse,” Andy said. “You’ll see.”

Nobody much talked during the car ride across town. They all knew why.

They got to the prison and Andy had to check in, but was told he could only bring two people in with him. He naturally wanted to take Fi and Lexi, but Lexi insisted that Melody go in her stead. “It’ll be good for her,” Lexi told him, and Andy acquiesced.

As much as he knew it was a prison, Andy couldn’t help but notice how lax everything seemed to be. He’d been told it was a maximum-security prison, and that meant it should still *feel* like a prison to Andy, but it truly did not. There weren’t a lot of prisoners there, but it was clear there were both women and men in the prison, and Andy wasn’t entirely sure how safe *that* was, although he did notice fences keeping the men and women separated.

The guards and staff were entirely women, naturally.

“You sure you want to do this?” Fiona asked.

“You asking me or the boss?” Melody said.

“Both, I think.”

“I need to face my fears,” Melody said. “You, boss?”

“He’s just a man,” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “Don’t buy into his hype. I turned him into a ranting lunatic for a bit with a deck of cards.”

They were guided into a room with a plexiglass window with holes in it, a rather lush visitors room on the other side of it, with a couch even. The door on the far side of it open and in walked a familiar man in an orange jumpsuit, like he didn’t have a problem in the world. He raised his newly regenerated hand in a wave, the smile evil and crisp on the older man’s face.

“Well, hello Andrew,” Arthur Covington the 4<sup>th</sup> said to him. “It is simply wonderful to see you again after all these months. I was beginning to think you might never come to visit me, now that I am temporarily located out on the East Coast and all.”

Covington *knew* Andy didn’t care for being referred to by his full name (unless it was Emily) and so he responded in kind. “Hey there, Artie,” Andy said to him. “Orange is a good color on you. Shame about your hand and all.”

“Why, my boy, it’s better than new!”

“I know, that’s the shame of it,” Andy said. “I’m ostensibly here to make sure you aren’t being mistreated, as one of the few prisoners involved with a Quaranteam serum killing, but really I’m just here hoping to see what your miserable life looks like behind bars, and praying it isn’t half as cozy as it currently looks like it is.”

“I maintain my innocence regarding Miss DeLaCruz’s death, Andrew,” Covington scoffed dismissively. “We are still appealing the court’s decision.”

“And I’ll testify again that I heard you and Jack talking about it after you did it,” Melody sneered at him. “The only reason anybody showed you any loyalty, you shit, was because they had to.”

“Ah, Miss Park, I hadn’t noticed you hiding behind Mister Rook’s skirts there,” Covington said, his voice cold and bloodless. “We’re working to have *your* testimony discredited, as you are an unreliable witness, as I’m sure you already know.”

“Unreliable my ass,” she snarled.

“You were jealous of the amount of attention other members of my staff were getting and so you concocted this ridiculous tale as a form of retribution.”

“Nobody’s going to believe that horseshit,” Andy said.

“Reasonable *doubt* is all it takes, Andrew, and my attorney seems certain we should be able to generate that. After all, I’m going to insist upon a jury of my peers, and that means mostly men. Besides, it’s quite clear the science of this is evolving much faster than our ability to control it. When has science ever been right about anything the first time? I chose not to believe in experts – they’re often bought and paid for by people exactly like me, with the intent of manipulating the masses who do not know better. That shall be rather easy to prove in a court of law, that we had no reasonable expectation to take the idea that our semen would be toxic to women as ‘fact.’ It’s the sort of thing you would see in a silly little science-fiction story, not the real world. So, I don’t anticipate I will be here all that much longer,” he said, walking closer towards the plexiglass. “Not that it’s all bad.”

“I will do literally everything in my capabilities to keep you right here, Covington,” Andy said, trying to keep his voice as calm and even as he can. “If not get you sent somewhere worse.”

“Oh, by all means, my dear boy, keep me here!” Covington said, sweeping his arms around him confidently. “This place is my own personal paradise! I do not have to worry about my safety! There are guards, paid for by the federal government. I have women assigned to me to keep me alive, whom it’s mandated I have to have sex with regularly, although I will admit those circumstances are rather often less than pleasant, as sometimes I am required to have my arms and legs shackled down while doing so. That won’t last, however. I am having that rectified soon enough. Within a few months, I will be having the same sort of normal sex that I am certain you and your partners are having.

“I can’t believe you found new people to have sex with you,” Melody growled, leaning her face against the plexiglass like she wanted to reach through it and finish the job her sisters in the DNR had started. “What, did you have to pay them?”

“There is very little in this world that money cannot solve, Miss Park,” Covington said. “I bought and sold them, like I have everything else. They are willing to tend to my needs and ensure I have a very large, robust team. Not *quite* as large as yours, Andrew, but large enough to get benefits.”

“You really *do* think money can buy you anything, don’t you?” Fiona asked.

“Ah, who’s this? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Fiona Rook. One of Andy’s wives.”

“Ah yes, the reporter,” Covington said, as if her name had jogged his memory. Andy felt like Covington had done plenty of homework on the Rook family after his incarceration and had known precisely who Fiona was before she said anything but wanted to underplay his knowledge. It was a tactic Andy had seen Covington use enough that he was no longer falling for it. “You were the one who came crawling back to Andrew years after the two of you had split. The college sweetheart.”

“And you were the rich pompous asshole who tried to buy all the women who he thought would’ve turned him down once you had the option to just take what you want, and then found a corrupt shit heel inside of the Quaranteam Project who you could pay off to send you whoever you wanted,” Fiona countered. “Until people with morals and ethics found out, and you got cut out.”

“As it turns out, Mrs. Rook, I needn’t have bothered,” Coving said with a slight shrug as he sat down on the couch. “I simply should’ve just paid people what they were asking for, and settled for ‘good enough,’ rather than insisting on the very best. The difference in the upper echelons is, at best, negligible. You were an excellent bodyguard, Miss Park, but I was able to find several people just as good as you for approximately the same rate.”

“Were they willing to put up with you slapping your tramp stamp tattoo on them?”

“Property is meant to be marked, and my employees are just that, so yes, they have agreed to the body modifications in the contract they signed in order to get their very generous salaries.”

“People aren’t *property*, Covington,” Andrew growled. “And you might think your money will buy you anything you want, but it won’t buy you a way out of this prison. You can run through all the appeals you can ever think of, and you’ll keep coming back to the fact that the person you paid off to game the system for Project Quaranteam flipped on you and even your own wife wants basically nothing to do with you. I heard she’s looking into trying to take a sizable chunk of your wealth for herself and then go off to find a new man. She’s willing to take the risks involved with reassignment, that’s how much she can’t wait to be away from you.”

“Yes, well, I do not intend to let her have a dime of my money while there is still air in my lungs, Andrew,” Covington said with a slight titter of laughter as the door on the far side of the visitation room opened, and one of the guards moved to set a plastic cup full of tea on a table on the inside of the door, closing it behind them as they left. “My tea’s arrived. Have you seen my dear wife lately, Andrew? My weekly visits with her for the past few months have involved me being blindfolded and gagged, so I haven’t even been entirely certain it’s been her. It is illegal for me to refuse her visits, so I too am looking to have her reassigned to someone else, but only with complete assurances that she will get none of my money. Her ability to use the funds I have stored away is severely hampered, to the point where we deny almost all her requests. She will not be throwing away my hard-earned capital, unless it is over my dead body.”

“Not even for your own kids?” Andy asked him, tilting his head to one side.

There was the briefest of changes in Covington’s expression, something Andy couldn’t really read, but thought might well have been anger. “Those children are no children of mine,” he said quietly. “No matter what that woman claims.”

“She’ll make you take a paternity test, then, and when it comes out you weren’t interested in paying for child support, that’ll certainly play into a judge’s opinion,” Andy countered. “C’mon, man. You can’t deny reality. They’re your children, like it or not.”

“Have they come to visit? No. Have they written me? No.”

“As I recall, they’re not that old, Artie,” Andy said. “Both of them weren’t in the Kill



Zone, so they probably don't entirely understand what's happened over the last couple of years.

"Then they will have to learn the hard way that there are only two choices in this world – loyalty or destitution," Covington said, as he stood up from the couch and made his way over to the table by the door. "They offered *her* their loyalty and not me, so I have nothing but annihilation to offer them in return."

"Pretty cold way to look at your own flesh and blood," Fiona said.

"Yes, well Mrs. Rook, not all of us have as fiercely loyal families as yours," Covington sniffed in annoyance. "I would ask how you gained such remarkable loyalty, Andrew, but I suspect you would offer me some false platitude about love and honor and respect, rather than whatever the *real* reasons actually are."

"Those *are* the real reasons, Artie," Andy said to him.

"That's just how deluded you are, Andrew," Covington sighed, picking up his tea with one hand, taking a sip from it. "You're convinced that people genuinely *care* for their neighbors and those around them. It's childlike but certainly not laudable. People don't give a damn about their neighbors, other than what they can do for them. Life is strictly transactional, Andrew, and if you are not getting something from any interaction, you are being taken advantage of."

"That's the difference between you and me, Artie," Andy responded. "I *like* people. I think they're all trying to look out for themselves first and each other a little bit after that, but most of them? They have a sense of pack survival that I just don't think a sociopath like you is capable of. They give a damn if their fellow humans live or die. But you? You just see people as another steppingstone for you put your feet on, to keep building your empire."

"And that, dear boy, is where you and I differ so fundamentally in life," Covington said, placing his regenerated hand against the plexiglass. "I know you look at me and see nothing but a self-serving lunatic who you think lost his mind long, long ago. And I hate to dispel you of those notions, because your fear of me will continue to serve me well moving forward. But I think you have earned a peek behind the curtain, Andrew, especially considering all the wealth our dear cause-traitor Nathaniel Watkins has bestowed upon you, to bring you into the upper echelon. I am neither racist nor sexist. I am neither misogynist nor homophobic. To be blunt, I could not give less of a shit about any of that, beyond their uses as tools to keep people away from the real game. There are, was and always will be only two classes of people in the world – those with wealth and those without. It is, literally, the only thing that matters. We do not care how you got it. We do not care how many lives you destroyed to get it. We do not care about the destruction you left in your wake in accumulating it. There are only two states in this world – rich and poor, and anyone who isn't rich, let's not kid ourselves, is poor. The poor are irrelevant. They are meaningless. They are cannon fodder for those of us whose lives actually *mean* something. You may see prison walls, but all I see is another home where I currently rest my head at night. I am still as powerful as ever, within these walls, and my reach is just as great as it was when I lived in New Eden. Certainly, the weather is less than optimal here, but this too shall pass."

"You're not worried about all the rules and guidelines that have been laid down for you with the Men's Protection Act?"

Covington laughed, shaking his head before taking another sip from his tea. "My dear boy, I helped *write* that piece of legislation. We cannot have our workforce completely dying out now, can we? I need there to be men out in the world, keeping the species alive. But let them be fat, complacent and lazy. Let them see the joys of having regular constant sex and it will distract them from all the other things I am asking them to do that they might normally say no to. Masculinity may wither and die, but wealth remains eternal. I'm meant to understand you saw

the President yesterday or the day before. Did she mention her intent to invade a few of the more decimated countries, to add them to our natural resources now that they have no military to speak of to defend themselves?"

"No, but I doubt that it's true."

Covington smiled at him the way an adult would smile at a small child who was insisting the moon was made of cheese. "I am many things, Andrew, but a liar when it comes to my boasts I am most assuredly not. You will see, in the coming months, as the country continues to shift. My hands are not on the wheel, but my fingerprints are all over the roadmap, and the path is certainly one I have contributed to the choosing of."

"All of this, from the confines of prison," Fiona said contemptuously.

"This?" Covington said gesturing around him with the cup. "As I have said, this is simply window dressing. A placebo meant to placate the masses, so we can still sell terms like 'good' and 'evil' to the general and vapid public. We do not want the sheep to be rattled in their cages, so we give the luxury of things like this to believe in, an opiate to keep them quiet and docile, while the adults are making decisions."

"So, you can go about destroying the planet and stripping every last resource on it to further your own personal wealth and power?"

"Well, yes, but not as much as we did *before* the Big Change," Covington said. "After all, we're going to be around a lot longer now, so some of the problems we were happy to ascribe to the next generation we are going to need to solve for ourselves." Covington brought his tea to his lips for one final sip, finishing it. "I'm rather looking forward to watching my children get old and die before my eyes, as my empire continues to grow."

Andy wished he could've been surprised that Covington knew that the aging process was decelerated for larger teams, something that was still a closely held secret among less than a hundred people, but Covington clearly had spies everywhere, and so the fact that the bastard had known about it already didn't surprise Andy in the least. He was far too jaded for that.

"We really should've killed you when we had the chance," Melody spat.

"Oh, most assuredly," Covington said, rather matter-of-factly. "But you shan't have that chance again, as I have taken steps to make sure that, should I pass rather untimely from this world, retribution shall be doled out upon those responsible for it in Biblical measures. Until then, Andrew, you should enjoy yourself, and the great game you find yourself elevated into playing. I have an adversary now, someone with a different societal goal than my own, and I look forward to seeing how you attempt to shape society in ways that are counter to mine."

"I'm not playing your ridiculous game, Covington," Andy said.

"That is why you will lose, of course. Well, one reason, perhaps, amongst a sea of them. I have decades more experience at this, and a natural cutthroat attitude that you simply cannot bring yourself to bear, but the sport is in the challenge. Run along now, I have an appointment with my attorney in an hour or so, and she will, of course, want me to fuck her brains out while she's here, in addition to our regular business. Who knows, Andrew? Perhaps I will pick a new wife or three from my sexual partners and have them start giving birth to a new generation of Covingtons, one with the singular goal of fucking with you and your clan. That seems an interesting project to undertake. Congratulations on the birth of your son, by the way. You are quite fortunate to have a male heir first, what with the dramatically lowered birth rates of men. I look forward to watching his death from old age along with so many others. Goodbye Andrew. Do come by again, should I still be here. It's always nice to see a face from home. Toodles."

With that, Covington tossed the empty plastic cup onto the floor, moved to the door of the

visitation room leading back into the cellblock, and walked out before Andy could think of anything to say in response.