

### **Chapter 39**

It was with a little surprise that Andy stepped out of his front door to see a familiar electric blue Tesla parked in front of it, Phil helping Maya remove her things from his trunk. “Hello Maya,” Andy said, walking down the steps towards her, seeing Emily and Sarah were already there, Emily talking with Maya while Sarah was crouched down next to the little carrier, giving the dogs inside scratches while cooing at them affectionately. Linda, Phil's bodyguard and one of his partners, was also there, but her attention seemed to be more focused towards the driveway leading up to the house instead of on any of them. Andy didn't mind. He knew Linda'd been under a lot of stress lately, much like Phil had. “Hope you don't come to regret your decision to be here, Maya,” he teased. “It's a whole hell of a lot of people, and I wouldn't have blamed you if you wanted to turn around and head out for the hills.”

Maya's hair was still dyed green, in that undercut flop hair cut she'd seen when they'd talked over Zoom a couple of days ago, but it wasn't just her shoulders that were tattooed now, but in fact she had full sleeves on both arms, a wild mix of graffiti style tattoos and traditional Japanese images, classically styled samurai locked in battles with demons done in washes of hypermodern framing. She looked like a cyberpunk character sprung to life. She was dressed in a tank top and baggy brown cargo pants with a seemingly endless number of pockets on them. She had a large suitcase with her, as well as a smaller wheeled bag travel case and a satchel purse slung over her arm. Andy expected the rest of her things would show up in a few days, much like the rest of the girls' things had, by delivery.

“Nah,” she said with an easy smile. “During our conversation, everything you said seemed like we'd be a good match, and Em here's one of my closest friends, so if you're keeping her happy, I suppose you'll do just fine for tending to my needs. I wouldn't mind a day or so to get settled in before we got right down to it, though, if that's fine by you.”

Andy nodded. “Of course, believe me, the last thing I want to do is rush you into anything. Take some time and get settled in here. Catch up with Em and Sarah, ask them all the questions you like. You can introduce Stan and Ollie to Muninn and Huginn, and see who's tougher, my cats or your dogs.”

Maya moved over and kissed him on the cheek. “Your cats, no contest. I love my little boys, but they're scared of their own shadows, and wouldn't last five seconds. Oh, they think they're tough but they'll turn tail and run at the drop of a hat. They're going to love exploring the house, though.” She was shorter than he'd expected, but he could see how muscular she was, built more like a scrapper than a dancer or an acrobat. He remembered that Emily had told him she had originally been a stuntwoman before becoming a director, and he could see bits of scar tissue woven into the mesh of tattoo work on her arms, concealed just enough that they wouldn't be caught at first, but not so hidden that they were invisible, as if she was proud of the war wounds she'd gotten in the first stage of her career.

“And if they do shit anywhere, either Maya or I will clean it up, Andy, promise,” Sarah said, as one of the dogs happily licked her finger through the grate.

“Hopefully none of your team fucks up packing up my things and shipping them over here,” Maya said to Phil.

“Hey, they're not *my* team,” he said defensively. “They work for the government, just like the rest of us. But they're generally pretty good at getting things from one place to the other. Sarah and Emily both had their stuff sent here that way, so they can tell you.”

“It was *rather* strange, seeing everything I have ever owned stacked on pallets, wrapped in sheet plastic, being unloaded from the back of a massive lorry and laid out on our driveway, but everything *was* there and nothing was damaged or dinged,” the blonde Brit said, “so one mustn't complain too loudly. And, of course, they couldn't bring anything from my London home, but that wasn't to be expected. I rather think that will remain where we stay when we are finally allowed to travel over there once more. Any word on that, Dr. Marcos?”

"I'm not at liberty to speak for any other country, Miss Stevens, but I can say our friends across the pond have been getting some of our serums in preparation for a mass rollout within the next few weeks, so while we're not on the other side of this yet, we might be starting to see some light from the other side of the tunnel."

"I understand, Dr. Marcos, but I was hoping that I might be able to introduce Andrew to my parents sometime early in the new year."

"Never say never, Miss Stevens, and you may live in hope, although the entire world's going through a massive restructuring, now that people are starting to realize the scale of the casualties."

"I thought the rest of the world wasn't as badly hit as the United States," she said. "Oh dear. How bad is it?"

Phil sighed, shrugging a little. "Globally, somewhere between 60-80% of the world's male population is likely to be dead by the time we're finally through this thing. Some countries took the lockdown very serious, and your native England was one of those, and they're looking at closer to 40-60% fatalities, but others have been hit much *much* harder. China's closer to 90% and their entire government is in disarray, as the women are working to figure out what works for them and what they want to discard."

"Who made out the best?"

"New Zealand," Phil laughed, rolling his eyes. "Can you believe they didn't get even one casualty from this? They locked down their islands and didn't let anyone come over, and we sent them some of our serum too, so they're struggling to make out what to *do* with it, considering they don't have our numbers problem."

"How do you figure?"

"Well, the serum's a lot more effective for a man if he's paired up with multiple women who've got the serum running through their blood, but it's still basically fatal if administered to any man directly, so what is New Zealand going to do with all the single men who don't have a partner? It's a good problem to have," he said, "but it's still a problem."

Emily leaned her head against Andy's shoulder, and he put her arm around her to give her a hug, seeing her crestfallen face. "It's almost incomprehensible that nearly all the cast and crew of any movie I ever worked on is likely dead," she said, her eyes watering with tears for a moment before she wiped them away, trying to stoic up. "I don't even know where to begin grieving, it's simply so immense a tragedy. So many lost souls."

Sarah and Maya moved over and they all hugged the tiny blonde for a long moment. "We'll get through it together, Ems, the only way we know how," the tall redhead said.

Emily tilted her head up and Sarah leaned down to press her lips kindly to hers, a soft and warm kiss, more of concern than affection, at least for the moment, before Emily pulled back, smiling up at her. "You always did know how to keep my mind moving," she said. "Well, we should show you the house, Maya, and let you pick a bedroom of your own. I think there's still a handful unclaimed to choose from."

"Any of them have a door leading into the back yard so it's easy to take Stan and Ollie out?" she asked, as the group of them slowly untangled from one another.

"I do believe such a room is available," Emily said, plastering on a smile, trying to move past her sadness with her best 'keep calm and carry on' attitude. "Let's go have a look, shall we, and see what we can do about getting you settled in."

"And then we can have some much needed drinks!" Maya laughed.

"Not *too* drunk," Sarah giggled. "At least not before Andy comes and joins us."

"Go easy," Andy said with a grin. "Dinner's in a couple of hours, so maybe let's save the hard cocktailing until after you have some food in your stomachs, hm?"

"Oh sure sure," Maya said. "We won't start in on the *real* drinks until after dinner, but I could probably do with a cocktail or so just as a warmup. Cosmos, ladies?"

“Not until *after* you have a room chosen and have settled in,” Emily said, placing her hands on her hips, trying to look as stern as possible. “I truly *must* insist.”

Maya rolled her brown eyes but grinned back at her. “Ever the prim and proper lady with a stick up her ass,” she said, grabbing her big suitcase with one hand, the dog carrier with the other.

“I got that for you,” Sarah said, taking the dog carrier from her, as she leaned in, stage whispering to her. “The stick's not the *only* thing she's gotten up there lately.”

That sent Maya off into a blast of laughter, as the three women headed into the house, Emily pulling the wheelee bag behind her, all of the luggage taken into the house, as Andy glanced over to look at Phil, as Linda moved over to stand closer to him.

“You didn't have to bring her over here yourself Phil,” Andy said to him. “You've got plenty of people over at the base for that kind of thing.”

“Not as many as I used to,” he said. “You heard about this Valhalla Shores they've set up over in Pacifica?”

Andy nodded. “Yeah, the other Phil called a little earlier today, told me he'd been moved into there. Why, are they taking some of your people?”

“Seems like it. Maya was in the last batch of people we were doing serum injections for here in New Eden for the foreseeable future. Me and my team have been retasked, with studying the long term effects of the treatment, and with finding a way to help women survive if their male partner is killed. This thing we've got, it's kept a bunch of us alive, but the last thing I ever intended was for it to be binding men and women together.”

“Fucking McCallister,” Linda grumbled.

“Who?” Andy asked.

“Don't worry about it,” Phil said. “Anyway, they're using the base next to Valhalla Shores to be doing serum induction and pairing now. New Eden's mostly a closed community at this point.”

“Mostly?”

“Nothing's ever truly completely done, so if we get special requests, or emergency needs, we'll add some more people to New Eden, but they want us focused on countering these side effects so badly that even the people who are being moved into Dos Eden are mostly going to be dosed elsewhere. There's a large facility in Oakland that's basically going to be the headquarters for serum induction, even though I *told* them it would probably be easier for all the Dos Eden people to just be inducted here, but the higher ups are adamant I start working some of this out.”

“I mean, that's probably for the best, isn't it, Phil? What happens right now if a man dies and he's partnered to multiple women? They just go insane?”

“Well, *no*,” Phil said, “but it's not pretty. We have a sort of temporary work around, but I think it's cruel, and it's certainly not anything I want to be advertising.”

“The hell are you talking about, Phil?”

“So fairly early on in the crisis, we had to send some samples out to Washington, so they could see about getting some key people inoculated against the virus. We sent enough that all of Congress and the Joint Chiefs of Staff could've taken it if they wanted, but almost to a man they refused. The military leaders were a lot smarter about it, though, and many of them decided to have their partners take the treatment, so they would have some level of immunity from DuoHalo. The fact that General Brown, who took over for General Goldfein in August, was so proactive in making sure the top brass at the Air Force were inoculated might just be the defining action that saved this country from extinction.”

“Once again,” Linda said with a sigh, “the black guy has to work three times as hard just to get so much as a thank you.”

“Well, when I have the privilege of meeting General Brown, I'm going to thank him hard enough for three people, because he's basically the only reason any of us are alive,” Phil said. “He sprung into action, and made sure that we were working to get our solution, the *only* workable solution, out to as many people as possible, as quickly as we could. And he's the person who assigned you to me,

Linda, so for that I'll be eternally grateful, because you've saved my life more than a couple of times over the past few months, in more ways than one.”

“I told you, the sniper was a freebie, so he doesn't count,” she said, a hint of flirting layered into her voice. “So that means you only owe me, like, three or four, tops. All the emotional, mental stuff, that's all Audrey's doing. She's the one who takes care of your brain while I take care of the body.”

“Oh she does her share of body care too,” Phil teased back.

“I *suppose*,” Linda said with a wink. “Anyway, tell Andy what you needed to.”

“I'm getting there, Linda, just be cool.”

“Pssht. Like you know *anybody* cooler than me.”

Phil looked back to Andy with a grin and a shrug. “When she's right, she's right. Did Lesser Phil say much about Valhalla Shores?”

“Only that they were super strict about their quarantine rules. He was calling to tell me he didn't think he'd be able to do poker for the foreseeable future, because he couldn't come and go any more. He said that if he left the area, he had to spend a week in quarantine before he'd be allowed back in to see the rest of his family. Struck me as sort of an over reach, considering we're all basically immune to DuoHalo, as long as we're having regular contact with our partners, right?”

“Theoretically, yeah, although we're still doing a *lot* of testing on that,” he said. “Well, I guess the *Air Force* is doing that testing, because right now, I'm just focused on making sure we get women the ability to survive the death of their partners.”

“You said you had a workaround.”

“Not a good one,” Linda interjected.

“Agreed,” Phil said. “So if a man dies, as long as his body isn't too badly damaged, we can harvest slightly necrotized semen from his corpse, introduce that into one of his partners, and it will act as a sort of a reset function, but the woman needs to be reimprinted almost immediately. As soon as the necrotized semen hits her system, she'll basically be in a state like the one you found Piper in, in a crude, violent frenzy.”

“Jesus,” Andy said, “who the hell knows about this?”

“The women who are staffing what few emergency rooms we have open near any induction centers, and the staff of the centers themselves, so we're keeping the loop pretty small on it, at least for the time being. It's given me a starting place on where to work on a reset serum, but I'm still quite a ways from having anything even vaguely useful.”

“Have you considered trying to get the serum to work on men without the need of the pairing?”

Phil shot him an annoyed look. “What a great idea! Why didn't I think of that?” he said, slapping his forehead. “Yes, I fucking thought of that, but it's almost like our serum is actively fighting against pairing with immunization suspensions. We suspect we had someone sabotaging the project from the get go, so it's entirely possible the bastard had this whole thing baked in there for some other reason. God only knows what the sick motherfucker thought he was going to do with it.”

“If you think you had a saboteur—”

“No,” Linda interjected, “we *know* we had one. His ass fled to Russia.”

“Russia? Seriously?”

“It's part of the reason their military and political cabinets are in so much better shape than ours, although they clearly didn't have the infrastructure to mass produce it, considering how horrible the casualties of their population are. While the Russian authorities had plenty for themselves and their generals, their population was hit harder than almost anyone else's, with close to 90% of the Russian male population dead. Putin's not anywhere near as scary when most of his military bases are staffed by corpses, and there's nobody to climb inside of his tanks.”

“But what about all the women of Russia? With so few men there, there's no way your system would work, would it?”

Phil nodded. “I mean, DuoHalo isn't anywhere near as fatal to women as it is to men, so I think

the Russian gambit is to just hope enough women survive DuoHalo naturally as to keep the country even vaguely functional, while all the important men have at least a dozen partners each, to ensure they're always completely buffered from the DuoHalo virus. I'm almost wondering if this was what the saboteur had in mind when he started tampering with my serum in its early days, trying to invent something that would enslave women to men. Christ, if he was still here, I'd shoot him myself," the Filipino-American man said, scratching the back of his neck.

"Get to the point, babe," Linda told him. "Our absence off base raises red flags the longer we're gone, and the last thing we want is them getting suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Andy scowled at his good friend for a moment. "Phil, what the hell are you up to?"

"You remember when you told me a few years ago that you thought one of your superiors was actively getting in the way of you getting promoted?"

"I do remember that," Andy said, "and I also remember you telling me that I was being paranoid and that I should just forget about it."

"Yeah, well, maybe I was wrong, okay, and maybe someone's actively trying to keep my project from developing a version of the serum without the sexual side effects."

"Phil are you—"

"*Listen*, will you?" Phil said, grabbing his friend's shoulder. "The military has thought overpopulation was a giant problem in the U.S. dating back thirty years, and they had all sorts of contingency plans to reduce the population, not only of our country, but of the entire world. They called it the 'die back' contingency. I know it sounds insane—"

"It *sounds* insane, Phil, because it *is* insane. Our own government planning mass casualty events across the globe?"

"It was all supposed to be theoretical, Andy, whitepapers and proof-of-concept stuff, but nobody was every supposed to have *built* anything, but I'm starting to think that's what DuoHalo is, somebody's die back contingency that got loose and got out of control, because the Russians acted *way* too quickly quarantining their people for them to have just 'gotten lucky.' They knew this was coming, long before anyone else did, so I think it's *their* fuckup, and they just got lucky that we had something that could counteract it, and so be it if it's got some mad scientist's project woven into it. That just gave them a foothold into getting their hands on it."

"Phil, we've known each other a long time, and if there's one thing I know about you, it's that you love your secrets, so if you're telling me all this, there's got to be a very good reason for it. You wouldn't give me a peek behind the velvet rope like this without an extremely important cause. What's going on?"

His friend sighed, glancing over at Linda, who simply shrugged, before he looked back at Andy. "I've doled out a lot of favors over the last several months, so now it's time for me to ask one of you, and it's kind of a big one, so if you say no, hey, I get it, but realize I need someone I can trust on this."

"Talk to me, Phil."

"So you know how we had someone defect to Russia?"

"Yeah?"

"The Russians had some defect to *us*."

"Seriously?"

"It gets funnier," Linda said, a grin on her face.

"So the guy who defected from us, the one who we think caused a lot of the mess with the imprinting in our serum, his name was Adam McCallister."

"Okay."

"The group that defected from Russia? The person who reached out to me on their behalf was Adam's wife, Evie."

"Adam and Eve?" Andy asked. "Are you putting me on?"

“Wish I was,” Phil sighed, leaning his back against the door of his car. “She reached out to me personally with an offer. I get her paired to some rich fella who's going to take care of her, and she's going to help us crack the unpairing/repairing problem.”

“Phil...”

“I'm not asking you to take her, Andy, relax. I was hoping maybe you could reach out to Watkins and see if he'd be willing to take her in.”

“Nate said he did feel like he owed me a couple still, even with all the money he gave me.”

“That's not the whole of it, though.”

“What else...”

“So Evie McCallister has with her a pair of men who are imprinted on each other.”

“Wait, what?” Andy said. “I thought being homosexual was like a giant taboo in Russia.”

“They certainly frown on it, which is why two of the scientists who were working with Adam McCallister didn't reveal they were gay until they'd devised a work around, a sort of Rosetta Stone for this whole thing. That's what let them flee.”

“Just give him the short and quick, hon,” Linda said to Phil.

“Okay, long story short—”

“Too late!” both he and Phil said in unison before chuckling.

“Right,” Phil continued. “So one of the two men has what he describes as 'reassignment sperm,' in that his sperm isn't toxic, even to women who are imprinted already. A small amount of it will essentially reset a woman, but she'll immediately go into the state we've seen with using the necrotized sperm, which is part of the reason I believe Evie when she told me all of this.”

“You haven't tested it yet?”

“I'm getting to that. This guy, Sergei, has a variation of our serum running through his veins, and it might eventually lead to some kind version of the serum where people don't have to be paired to one another, but we are a long way from that right now. He also claims it can pair two men together, which was a large part of the reason he and his boyfriend fled here with Evie McCallister. In Russia, they'd both have been killed, but if he's right, we could, albeit very slowly, at least start getting gay men paired up and resistant to DuoHalo. But I've been keeping this on the down low because I'm worried that if some people on the base found out, they'd try and quash it.”

“You can't believe that,” Andy said.”

“Wish I didn't, but I do. They're mostly focused on making sure I can get women to survive their partner's death. There hasn't been any push on us trying to get a solution for gay men and women, so now that I may have a partial one here, I'm doing everything I can to validate it quickly and pushed out in front of as many people as possible. It's really not scalable, but at this point, I'll take what I can get, you know?”

“So what do you need from me?”

“We've got Evie, Sergei and Sergei's boyfriend Andrei stashed in a house over in Dos Eden. Now I can't go over there, because if I do, they're going to know I was there, and I don't want to bring her in until I've validated her claims. Do you have anyone in your family who wouldn't mind fooling around with some other guy for a bit?”

“My family's all here by choice, Phil,” Andy said.

“What about your cook, Jenny?” Linda asked. “Didn't you say she's married to your gardener, and they're both just with you to stay healthy? Think she'd be okay to help you test this all out?”

“She doesn't want to leave the family, Linda, even if she's not emotionally invested in me like my partners are.”

“She wouldn't leave your family, Andy. She'd just be on a very short, temporary loan, and she's not going to have to sleep with anyone she doesn't want to,” Phil said.

“I can talk to her about it, but lay it out for me how it's all going to work.”

“You take her over to the house, along with one of your male friends, Eric or Xander, whichever

one Jenny wouldn't mind having one evening of fun with. You put a little bit of Sergei's cum on her skin, just to prove it doesn't have any sort of adverse reaction. If it's all good, you have her taste a little bit, and then she should go back to the imprinting state, and you let your friend imprint her. A couple of days later, you do it again, but reimprint her back to you. If Evie's telling the truth, it'll only be a few days and then everything will be back to the way it was. And if she's not, the minute Jenny touches Sergei's semen, she'll have an adverse reaction and she doesn't have to go any further." Phil sighed, shrugging a little. "I need someone I can trust on this, Andy, and I don't know who else to turn to. If you don't think she'll go for it, you don't have to bring it up, and I'll... I'll see if there's anybody else I can ask. I could ask Xander, I guess."

"No," Andy sighed, shaking his head. "You ask Xander and he'll feel obligated to try and help you. I'll talk to Jenny and Katie, and I'll let *them* decide. Fair?"

"Fair enough," Phil agreed. "Get blood samples at every stage in between. Take Niko with you, and she'll know how to do it."

"What have you got that girl up to behind my back, Phil?"

"Oh *hell* no," his friend laughed. "If you can't get her to tell you, what the hell makes you think *I'm* gonna tell you? She'd kick my ass if I said anything. You can ask her again."

"She'll probably tell me what she told me last time – I shouldn't worry about it."

"It took a long while for Phil to trust me as well, Andy, so I wouldn't worry about it," Linda said with a smile. "You guys are so used to thinking you have to be self-reliant, how you need to be tough, that it takes you a while to get used to the idea of having a woman take care of your helpless asses. But you'll learn. You all do eventually."

"Well, I feel like I just got scolding by the nuns at Saint Agnes Academy again. How about you, Andy?" Phil chuckled.

"I didn't go to Catholic school, Phil, but I know the sentiment. I guess we just have to trust they're doing everything they can to keep us safe."

"Even when you're both being a pain in the ass about it," Linda said, just the tiniest undercurrent of genuine annoyance to her voice.

"Sorry Linda," they both said in unison.

"You're both forgiven, but we really gotta get back to the base, Phil, otherwise Fielder's going to get suspicious, and that's the last thing you want."

"She's right," Phil said, giving Andy a hug. "Thanks for even considering it. I know it's nuts, but if you follow the instructions I gave you, worst case scenario is that Jenny gets a rash on her skin for a couple of days."

"Like I said, it's *their* decision, not mine."

"Right. Right right right. Anyway, if you decide to do it, I can give you all the instructions when we're over tomorrow for the party."

"God, that is tomorrow, isn't it? Crazy how time flies."

Phil let go of Andy and headed back to his car. "Stay safe, man. Niko or Lexi with you at all times if you leave this house. And don't tell *anyone* about this little Evie thing that you don't have to."

"I'm gonna tell my family, Phil."

Phil shrugged a little bit, opening the door of his car. "If it was me, I would keep it to only the very few who need to know. Anyway, your house, your call. See you tomorrow, man." He and Linda hopped into their car and drove down the driveway and headed off into the evening air.

"That's the difference between you and me, Phil," Andy said to himself. "I'm no good at keeping secrets."

He walked inside to find Aisling waiting for him, a warm smile on her face as she slid her arm around his waist and saddled up next to him as they walked to the dining room. "Why the long face, Andy?"

"Phil dropped a bit of a heavy thing on me, and it's a lot to think about. I'm not built for this

cloak and dagger shit like he is.”

On the stroll to dinner, Andy explained to her everything that Phil and Linda had told him, as she peppered him with questions along the way. At the end, she suggested he wait until later in the evening to talk to Jenny and Katie about it.

When they got to the dining room, Andy was pleased to find nearly everyone there, Lauren and Taylor having texted earlier that they were just going to grab dinner at the training grounds tonight and would be back late.

Emily, Sarah and Maya were a couple cocktails in already, but all of them were in that pleasant space between buzzed and tipsy, talking up a storm, and as soon as Andy and Ash walked into the room, Emily immediately ushered them over to make sure that Andy was sitting next to Maya, Ash on the other side of him.

Early on, the girls had tried convincing Andy to always sit at the head of the table, and he'd told them exactly what they could do with that idea, so the table seating constantly shuffled, and nobody sat at either end of the table two nights in a row, so that it was clearly established that nobody was more or less important than anyone else. It was a symbolic thing, but Andy was the first to point out that symbols have power, and their subliminal influence should never be underestimated.

Dinner gave everyone a chance to take turns grilling Maya, which let Andy just sort of sit and listen. After he'd made the decision of who he would offer spots in his house, he'd talked to each of the girls over Zoom for about an hour, letting them ask him whatever questions they wanted while he'd asked them a few as well. It wasn't enough time to get to truly know each other, but it gave both him and the woman in question a chance to check for any real dealbreakers that they might have overlooked, so many of the questions the girl were asking Maya were things Andy already knew the answers to, although she did have one surprise up her sleeve for him.

“So what's your favorite of Andy's books,” Sarah asked her. “I know you have to have read some of them right now, since I gave you all of them the last time I saw you, a few years ago.”

Maya tilted her head to one side, a wry grin spreading wide on her face. “You're not going to believe me.”

“Is it 'The Trouble With Werebears,' because if you say it is, I'm gonna have to shield you from Andy throwing a dinner roll at you,” the tall redhead giggled.

Maya reached into her satchel and pulled out a book, setting it down on the table. It had dozens of post-it notes sticking out from it, and the cover was starting to bend back a little. Andy glanced over and then his eyes widened in surprise.

“No! Really?”

The book in question was easily the least popular thing he'd ever written, partially because it was so far out of his normal wheelhouse. “I think it's easily your best work, and frankly, I'm surprised nobody's ever tried to make a movie out of it, which was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Emily reached over and picked up the book. “Fatal Alliances?” This isn't a Druid Gunslinger book. I don't know that I've ever seen Sarah reading this.”

“Oh I read it,” Sarah said. “But it's super fucking sad. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's fucking hot, and I get why maybe it was too fucking steamy for the mainstream, but it's such a fucking downer ending that it isn't something I wanted to come back to that fucking often, even as great as it is.”

“What's it about, love?” Emily asked him.

Maya decided to answer instead. “It's a Cold War story about two spies, one American and one Soviet, and they're each sort of fatal honey traps. Anyone who either of them has sex with dies within a couple of days, from what looks like natural causes, except that their bodies are generating some kind of sexually transmitted poison. They're considered important assets, the assassins you send when you want no traces left behind. They both witness something they shouldn't one night in East Berlin, and so they flee together. After killing their respective bosses, the two decide they're done with this world, so they have sex with each other, and die in each others arms a few days later. If you expounded upon the



action sequences, fleshed them out a bit more, this could be an excellent fucking movie.” She paused for a second. “It could be *my* excellent fucking movie. Who owns the rights to this, Andy?” Maya asked him, taking the book back from Emily.

“Nobody?” he chuckled. “Well, I guess that means *I* still do. Nobody had that much interest in it, so I didn't worry about it. Hell, I know it's out of print, so I'm a little amazed you got that copy.”

“I got her everything, Andy,” Sarah told him. “And you know me. What I want, I fucking get.”

“So I have learned,” he nodded. “Yeah, I can have my agent draw up a contract to let you get the rights to it.”

“Soon,” Maya said, “before the *Druid Gunslinger* film makes everyone claw at all your old work.”

“I barely sold fifty thousand copies of *'Fatal Alliances,'* Maya, so I think you're overestimating people's interest in the property.”

“Believe me, Andy, I know what I'm talking about.”

Dinner carried on with several conversations going on and Andy drifting in between them. One of the things he'd learned early on as his family grew was that as soon as they had moved into the mansion, the family size had grown too large for there to only be one conversation at the dinner table. He'd also stressed a number of times that the girls shouldn't always stick to their usual cliques and should intermingle, making sure to spend a little time with all the other girls over the course of any given week, and it was starting to settle into cycles.

When Jenny was bringing out dessert, Andy grabbed her and asked her and Katie to meet him in his office in a few hours, so he could talk to them about something. Jenny seemed a little nervous and Andy said it wasn't anything bad, and they shouldn't worry.

After dinner had wrapped up, the whole family began carrying dishes into the kitchen, refusing to let Jenny and Nicolette clear the table entirely by themselves, as Andy, Maya, Emily and Sarah started walking down the hall towards Maya's room.

“So whaddaya think, Maya?” Sarah asked eagerly. It was clear that the relationships between Sarah and Maya and the relationships between Emily and Maya were *very* different, with Sarah acting almost like Maya's eager little sister, and Emily more like Maya's old friend. “You okay with staying?”

“Yeah, I think I can make all this work for me,” she said. “Good people, good environment, the dogs seem happy enough, and with the shooting studios in Oakland, Marin and Pleasanton, I can definitely carve out a career here. So sure, why not? I'll pitch in with you lot and call this home.”

“Marvelous,” Emily said, leaning in to kiss Maya on the cheek. “Sarah and I will leave you and Andrew to make your final arrangements, and we will see you tomorrow. Good night!”

“Night Maya!” Sarah said, taking a turn to kiss Maya on the cheek, before she and Emily headed back up the hallway towards the stairs, Maya's bedroom on the ground floor so the dogs could easily walk right out into the back yard. Katie had even set up the fenced area so that Maya could simply slide open the deck door in her bedroom and let the dogs run straight out into it unsupervised.

“This new world's pretty fuckin' crazy,” Maya said, looking up at him as they reached the door to her bedroom. “You must feel like the luckiest man in the world.”

Andy sighed a little. “I mean, on one hand, sure. On the other, my brother and most of my oldest friends died to DuoHalo over the last few months, so a lot of times, I'm dealing with survivor's guilt, y'know? Why'd I make it and not them?”

Maya took his hand in hers, shaking her head at him. “Don't get caught up in your head about it. It's too big for anyone to think about, so you just have to learn to roll with it.”

“Yeah, thanks. That's what everyone keeps telling me, so I'm doing what I can to not dwell on it too much. Anyway, I'm glad you've decided to join the family, and when you feel like the time is right, just let me know and we can make it official.”

Maya squeezed his hand a little bit, as if she thought he might be planning to pull away. “Look, I talked to Em and Sares about it while you were talking with your friend, and I decided I want our first

time to be like normal people, without all the complications of imprinting tied to it, so I was thinking maybe you could come in, and I could give you a hummer to get over that whole hump, so that when we do bump uglies for the first time, we feel a little more like regular people. That cool?"

Andy smiled at her. "Hey, whatever you want, Maya. We don't even have to do the imprinting now if you don't want to."

She looked down, unable to look him in the eyes for the moment. "That's just it, Andy. I do want to. And we do kinda have to, because sometime in the middle of dinner, I realized it was getting harder to think clearly, and the one thing I don't ever want is to feel out of control of my own body. So is it cool if we just do this now? I'm sure you've banged, like, five or six people already today..."

"Actually, it was a pretty light day today," he chuckled. "I provided for Jenny and Katie this morning, and Ash snuck in while I was writing to have a quickie as a break, to make sure I wasn't sitting all day."

"Good," Maya growled at him, as she grabbed his shirt, "then you'll have a nice fat fucking load for me to swallow." She pushed him into her bedroom, and closed the door behind her. The sliding door was open just enough so that the dogs could come and go, and that made it cool inside, the evening November air chilling the room a bit. "How should I do this?"

"The minute you get it, you're going to black out, so maybe I should lay down on the bed and you should just—"

Maya peeled her tanktop up and over her head, revealing small tan breasts with tiny brown nipples atop of them, tossing it aside. "I think I'm the most flat chested girl in this house, so I hope you're okay with that," she said, unbuckling the belt holding up her cargo pants as he crossed the room to her. She must have had some large tattoo on her back, because Andy could see what looked like a portion of a serpent's tail curving around her waist.

He turned her head up suddenly and leaned down to press his lips against hers in an intense kiss, feeling her tense up for just a brief second before settling into it, relaxing. "You are absolutely fucking beautiful, Maya, and I don't ever want you to think I'm just *okay* with you. Got it?"

Maya grinned up at him, a softening in her eyes. "Em's right. You *are* a magnificent and sappy bastard, but that makes you lovable. Can I finish getting naked now, or you wanna make out a bit more first?"

"I wanna make out a bit more first," he said, grinning back at her.

"Yeah, okay."

They locked lips again, but even while they did, Andy could feel Maya's hands unbuttoning his jeans, unzipping them. He was about to shift to help her take them off, but when he did, she pulled back from the kiss, shaking her head. "Leave'em on. I like the idea of feeling like a couple of teenagers trying to get each other off quick before the parents come home."

She turned them both and pushed him back onto the bed with enough sudden force that he didn't even see it coming and just fell backwards before she dropped her cargo pants down and stepped out of them, leaving her in just a large pair of cotton panties. She started climbing onto the bed next to him. "It's also that time of the month, and while Em said you aren't squeamish about playing on the field during red tide, not for our first time."

Andy moved just a little bit, shifting to brace his shoulders against the pillows at the head of the bed, so he'd be able to watch her. "Whatever makes you comfortable."

Maya frowned a little, her eyes narrowing at him. "Take a more active hand in this, would you? I don't even know if you're ready for this."

"I don't know if *you're* ready for this, Maya, but you are gorgeous and I can't wait to feel you sucking my cock."

She winked at him, the frown disappearing. "That's the spirit. Now let's see this mythical first contact orgasm," she said, stroking his cock, sitting on her knees alongside him.

Maya moved to bend down, placing one hand against the top of the bed as the other brought his

cock to her lips, a jewel of opaque white emerging from the tip of his dick to greet her. She leaned down and let her tongue swipe the dollop of precum into her mouth, and suddenly began to shake, her hand letting go of his cock to thrust down atop of the bed, keeping her up on all fours as an intense carnal moan ripped from her lungs, her face obscured from his view by that curtain of green hair.

“You motherfucker,” Maya eventually spat in between giggles and gasps. “You said it was gonna be strong, not, like, the strongest fucking thing I'd ever fucking felt.”

“The imprinting one's even stronger, everyone says.”

“Em said it was like being consumed by an orgasm until she blacked out,” Maya said, tossing her hair out of her face to turn her brown eyes up at him. “She wasn't kidding?”

“That's in line with how most of—”

He was mid sentence when Maya suddenly shoved her face down onto his cock, forcing it into her throat before pulling her head up, her tongue spiraling around the head of his dick before she pushed her head back down onto it again.

Over the last several months, he'd gotten more than his fair share of blowjobs, far more than he'd ever thought he would get in his lifetime, and he felt like he'd gotten familiar with most of the rhythms and styles, but there was something *hungry* about the way Maya was doing it, like she didn't want to pause, didn't want to break, hell, didn't even want to *breathe* until she got what she wanted.

Her hands were gripping onto his hips, as her mouth slurped along the length of his shaft, from tip to base, trying to hold down with it engulfed for as long as she could every so often, no warning given when she was deepthroating or just quickly fucking her face onto his dick.

He was along for the ride.

Andy could feel himself starting to get close, when Maya popped her head off, one of her hands stroking his cock feverishly while her eyes held his gaze with her own, as he suddenly felt like a deer in the headlights, or a small animal caught under the gaze of a predator, the look on her face having total control of the situation.

“You're gonna give me what I want, Andy,” she growled at him, licking her lips. “And I'm gonna swallow you down and wake up a new woman, a kept woman, a bonded woman, a woman with a man who makes her cum like a fucking hurricane. You have no idea how hard I'm gonna fuck the shit out of you soon, but for now, you're gonna give me what I want. It's not your fucking cum, it's *mine*.”

She looked back down and started thrusting her face onto his cock as quickly and deeply as she could, letting spit drool from her lips all over his balls, filthy 'gluck gluck' sounds coming from the motions, until finally Andy knew his resolve was shot, but he wanted to have one stab at surprising her, so just before his balls drew up, his hands both reached down to grab her head and pushed her face down until her nose was buried in the trimmed pubic hairs of his crotch, and the first load of his cum blasted right against the back of her throat, setting her into a fit of orgasms, at which point Andy was mostly just holding her head, while she spasmed in time with him, feeling her do her best to swallow it all before he pulled her head off his shaft and rolled her limp body onto her side, as she whispered that word that haunted him now, “Imprinting.”

Andy moved to get her beneath the sheets and made sure the dogs were inside the room before he closed the outside door, so that the room would warm up. He would make a point to stop and tell Nicolette to come and open the door in the late morning so the dogs could go back out and do their business even while Maya completed the process.

She looked peaceful beneath the sheets. There were a few speckles of his jizz on her cheeks, so he took one of his fingers and wiped them off, sliding the finger into her lips, which she seemed to instinctively suckle on for a moment before he pulled his finger free, having spent long enough in the room that she'd fallen silent.

He moved outside of her room, and closed the door behind him, leaning his back against it with a slight smile of relief. That, he figured, would be the last person ever added to his family, if he had anything to say about it.

Of course, as Emily had pointed out not so long ago, he really did have *very* little say about it.