

Chapter 19

November 10th, 2020

“You had to know this was a possibility, babe,” Linda told him as she brought the car deeper into New Eden, heading more towards the residences and away from the military buildings. “When you eggheads discovered that pairing people resulted in locking them out from others, it was always going to come to this, one way or another.”

“I didn’t like thinking about it before,” Phil sighed as the car turned in towards the residential streets, usually lined with fences and hedges designed to keep people out of their neighbor’s properties. “I don’t like thinking about it now. I’m trying to help keep the species alive – the last thing I need to do is find reasons not to do that. Where are we heading?”

“Over the house of some dude named Morrison,” Linda told him.

“First name or last name?”

“Last name.”

“How the hell did he kill someone?” Phil grumbled. “She would’ve been in intense pain at the first contact with the dude’s semen.”

“Phil, baby, I literally know pretty much what you do,” she sighed. “The only reason I have the name and the address is because Bill texted it to me so I’d know where to bring the car.”

As they approached the destination, Phil could see a couple of Air Force Humvees around the outside of the fences, the gate held open by a woman in camo with a machine gun looking glum. He couldn’t entirely blame her.

The mansion wasn’t one of the very custom-tailored ones, but instead was the sort of assembly line stamped and processed ones that made up a portion of the land that people had moved into after the initial surge. They were a step above McMansions, but not much of one.

Phil had been glad the house he’d been allowed to pick to relocate into had plenty of individualistic flair to it. It was being built for one of the billionaires of the Silicon Valley who had died very early on into the epidemic and the home was claimed under eminent domain, since the billionaire left no heirs.

As their Tesla Model X moved towards the building, what surprised Phil the most was a vehicle by the front marked “New Eden Police,” mostly because he hadn’t even been *aware* that New Eden had a police department. There was a woman in an extremely new police uniform throwing up off to one side of the front door, and *that* didn’t surprise Phil at all. He had to imagine the crime scene was going to be fairly gruesome, the officer seemed like she might have been younger than one might have normally expected.

“You okay there, officer?” Phil asked as Linda was looking to secure the scene, making sure the security forces weren’t letting anyone else into the area. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Doctor Phil Marcos, from the Boeing/Air Force research team. This is one of my partners, Captain Linda Hayes, who’s one of the leads for security over at the New Eden research facility.”

“Forgive me, Dr. Marcos, Captain Hayes,” the woman said, “I know who you both are, and I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. I’m Captain Elaine Gutierrez, but Lane’s fine. I’d been planning on swinging by the base to meet you and your team when this came across my desk this morning. I take it you have some knowledge about what happened to her?”

“You’ve been imprinted, yes, Captain?” Phil asked.

“Of course,” she said. “I’m here with four other members of my Team and oh my God... is *that* what happens when someone fools around with someone outside of their Team?”

“I haven’t seen the body yet, but I’m told by my colleague that yes, that’s what we’re looking at here,” Phil sighed. “Can we go in and have a look? I know it’s going to be unpleasant to look at, but I imagine any crime scene would be. I can walk you through what’s happened medically and you can fill me in on the investigation aspects.”

“Well, in terms of investigation, there’s not a whole hell of a lot, simply because we have a

confession, and he's already been taken to the station, where he's being booked," the Captain told him. "Guy had blood all over his hands and admitted he did it, tears in his eyes when I pulled up. He was even the one who called it in."

"He say why they did it?"

"He insisted she claimed it was all bullshit and that she wanted to prove it to him," the Captain said. "Guess it clearly *isn't* bullshit."

"No, no it most certainly is not," Phil said as Linda moved back over towards them. "How strong is your stomach, love?"

"I've had to handle someone gutshot dying in my arms, honey," Linda said to him with a bitter smile. "You learn early on that once the spirit's left the flesh, all that remains are broken parts, and you tend to look at them without too much attachment."

"Alright then," Phil said, as they were starting to walk into the front door of the building. "Then I want you to photograph everything. Close up, distant, whatever you can, because we're probably going to want to show this to everyone to make sure they understand how fatal all this can be."

"It's pretty grisly," the Captain told them.

"Of course it's going to be, Captain."

The three of them walked into the room, and Phil could already smell the stench of bile in the air, as they moved from the hallway down a long passageway before reaching what seemed like the main living room. Off to one side laid the body, and as expected, it was a particularly difficult thing to look at.

Much of the jaw and throat had been burned away from the inside, and that line of burned flesh continued down the center of the chest all the way to the middle of the stomach, as if the woman had drunk pure acid and it had begun burning through her flesh as soon as it had touched it, exposing the woman's stomach to the open air, the contents having drained out onto the carpet.

Phil imagined it all must have happened rather quickly, although certainly not quickly enough for the woman to have not suffered insanely. He suspected from the moment she'd swallowed the man's sperm to the point when her injuries were enough to end her life couldn't have been more than two minutes at the very longest, although those would've been the two most excruciatingly painful moments of this woman's life, he had to admit to himself.

"Fucking hell," Phil muttered, surveying the carnage. "This practically borders on suicide, because the intense amount of pain she would've felt the second even a droplet of precum hit her tongue, she would've been doing everything she could've to get it out of her body. To actually *swallow* it? *Through* that much pain? That's crazy."

Linda's face was scrunched up, as she shook her head. "I was wrong. That's worse than I expected it to be, and I'm not sure anyone can look at this too long. Who's the victim?"

"Her name's Veronica De La Cruz," the Captain told them. "She's part of the Covington Team."

Phil snorted. "Well, maybe it was an actual suicide attempt. I don't think anyone wants to spend time with Covington. Guy's not exactly what I would call a fine, upstanding citizen."

"He a criminal I should be keeping my eyes on?" Gutierrez asked.

"Not that I can prove," Phil grumbled. "Not yet, anyway." He glanced over at his colleague and friend Dr. Bill McKenna. "What's going on, Bill? Is it just what it looks like?"

"Yeah," Bill sighed. "She was dead in less than minute. It ate through her esophagus and carved its way through her heart and lungs. It would've been system shock so at least she wouldn't have suffered for too long."

"And this is what would happen to anyone?" the Captain said.

"Any woman who swallows a normal man's load is going to have this," Bill said. "It would be worse if it was in the lower half, simply because it would take longer to be fatal, but it's still going to be fatal."

"What do I charge the guy with?"

“Murder, I’d say,” Linda said. “The woman’s dead. The man’s responsible for it.”

“What if she was doing it knowingly?” the Captain asked.

“You’d know far better than any of us, Captain,” Phil said, “but I’d argue he’s still probably involved in manslaughter. Even if she wanted to die, there are far more graceful and less painful ways to go about it.”

“Unless the pain and suffering was the point she was trying to make,” Linda said. “I know it wasn’t your intention for the serum to work this way, baby, but you have to admit, for some people, being shackled to the wrong person is basically like torture.”

Phil sighed, the only person in the room not to have looked away from the body. “Yeah, I get that, but as long as you’re alive, there’s always hope, and I’m doing my best to try and find ways to change pairings. All of this is radically new science. If she really thought it was that bad, she could’ve come to us and we could’ve tried to help her through this.” He finally looked away from the corpse to turn his attention back to the officer. “You said the guy who did this confessed?”

“He’s a fucking wreck,” Gutierrez sighed. “Guy can’t stop crying.”

“He said *she* claimed it was bullshit?”

“You sound suspicious, Doctor,” the officer said to him.

“I am, officer. If we were out dealing with a bunch of people who’d gotten the serum in some remote part of the country from one of our second or third tier teams, maybe I’d believe that, but Miss De La Cruz came through *our* offices, and we’ve been incredibly strict about making sure people knew and understood what a mismatched partner would do in terms of damage. Usually the sight of a square of burning flesh on someone’s arm from a single drop of semen is enough to freak most people out, but clearly we need to move to showing this kind of footage, so there’s no mistaking what will happen. She wasn’t just told in passing – this woman had detailed knowledge of what would happen, so the idea that she ‘didn’t believe it’ smacks as complete and total horseshit to me,” Phil growled. “Not that I’m a detective or anything. I’m just telling you what doesn’t make sense.”

“It also doesn’t make sense to me that they wouldn’t start small if they wanted to prove it wasn’t true,” Linda said. “Even if I doubted all the evidence, if you’re convinced you can fly, you take off from the ground and not off the edge of a twenty-story building. I’d get a drop of some other man’s semen, test it on my skin, and when it started to burn, there’s my evidence. You don’t go throwing your life into the meat grinder.”

“So what are you thinking?” Phil asked his partner.

“I’m thinking this is a particularly grisly way to send a point, but I bet it would be an incredibly effective one,” Linda grumbled. “Do we know of any crossover between Miss De La Cruz and Mr. Morrison?”

“It’s a small town, hon,” Phil said to her. “I imagine there’s gotta be some overlap somewhere. Was Miss De La Cruz a personal or professional member of Mr. Covington’s Team, Captain?”

“I haven’t spoken to him in person yet, Dr. Marcos, but according to your friend Dr. McKenna, they’re *all* professional members over there with the exception of his wife,” Captain Gutierrez said.

“That’s the understanding *I’ve* gotten, anyway, each time we’ve had someone into the office to pair with him, although a handful of them felt like they were neither.”

“You mean like Charlotte and her daughter,” Phil grumbled.

“Among others, yes. I wouldn’t have put down Piper Brown as someone he would have either a personal *or* a professional connection with,” McKenna said.

“Yeah, well, Covington’s a problematic link to all of this,” Phil said.

“Anything you all would like to share with the lowly peace officer on the scene?” the Captain interjected.

“Let’s just say I have reason to believe that not all of Mister Covington’s pairings were done in accordance with how the system is supposed to work out,” Phil said. “Nothing we can prove at this point, but we’ve got more than enough reason to be suspicious about him and to have him in our

crosshairs when it comes to problems with the system. We're keeping tabs on him, let's just leave it at that, okay? Because if I had the evidence to nail his ass to the wall, I would've."

"You think he's got a hand in all of this?"

"I do, but like I said, I can't prove anything, and until I do, I don't want to start kicking hornet's nests and getting my ass stung needlessly." Phil took one long look at the corpse, shaking his head with a very deep sigh. "Make sure our photos detail all of this, Bill, and that we've got the sort of proof that nobody wants to argue with. I'm debating if it's more traumatizing to show people stuff like this or to just tell them and only break out the photos at the moments when it seems like they're not taking us seriously enough."

"Show'em to everyone," Linda said. "I don't care how many people look away or throw up. I don't want anyone to ever tell me they didn't know this was possible, and if they do, I want to know for sure that isn't because we didn't try hard enough to show them."

"So let me ask you, Dr. Marcos – how do I tend to the needs of this man's partners while he's in jail? It feels like I'm going to be running something of a sex club in my jail, which I can't say I'm particularly fond of," the Captain asked.

"I'm afraid you'd better get used to that, Captain," Phil said. "Strip search the women when they come in for conjugal visits, or, worst case scenario, have them suck him off through the bars, but these women are going to need their weekly dosing, and depriving them of that could leave you liable for their health problems. Decide what level you want to have going on there, and then set that as your across-the-board standard, no changes, no way, no how. And make sure it's something you can defend if someone comes asking about it, because people are going to come asking about it."

"You think?"

"By assisted suicide or murder, Captain, this is the first death of its kind anywhere in the world," Bill told her. "It's going to be talked about quite a great deal, so yes, I would expect you're setting precedent here for not only yourself but law enforcement all over the country, maybe even all over the world. This is historical, and it's important that you keep that in mind, so when people are asking you why you did what you did, you aren't responding with something like ... 'it seemed like a good idea at the time.' The Air Force aren't going to be the only one following up on this."

"Any physical damage to the man?" Linda asked.

"No," the Captain replied. "Psychological only, it looks like."

"I can't decide if that's worse or better."

"Neither, hon," Phil said. "Just different."

"And if I decided *not* to allow those women to come in to tend to his needs?"

"It's not just his needs, Captain," Bill told her. "You'd be damning that whole Team to a rather painful, inhumane death."

"Seriously?" she asked them. "I know the sexual needs can get a bit strong, but... fatal?"

"There comes a point in a woman's body where if the need isn't filled, the serum starts eating away at the internal organs, and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

"Little monster of a thing you folks have cooked up over there, isn't it?"

"We were trying to save lives, Captain, not end them," Phil grumbled. "If I told you your options were this or the extinction of the human race, which would you have chosen?"

The pause was unmistakable but only for a moment. "Well, this, obviously, but I'd still be looking for other options."

"Every damn day of our lives, Captain, we assure you," Bill told her.

"I certainly hope so, Doctors. I certainly hope so."

"Do you need the body for evidentiary purposes, Captain? Otherwise we might like to study it."

"We're going to do everything completely by the book, Doctor, so that means I'll take it in, and have a proper autopsy done, even though we know what's happened here," the Captain told them. "We'll get it all documented and then send the body on to you after we've got all our evidence lined up."

You three realize you're all likely to be brought onto a stand in this man's trial, assuming it gets that far?"

"I certainly suspected it, Captain, so thank you for airing voice to my suspicions."

"And there's no way to reassign anyone?"

"Not as of yet," Phil said, "but we're still looking into it. Although, if you reassigned all that man's partners to other people and left him without partners, you're pretty much sentencing that man to death, because the odds of him not catching DuoHalo and dying are extremely slim. You've heard how insidious this virus is, how often it can be spread by people who aren't even aware they've got it. I can't tell you how ridiculously hard it would be to keep someone from getting DuoHalo for the next five to ten years without the serum we've developed. But yeah, I'm still up at all hours of the night, trying to find a better solution."

"Not comfortable playing God?" the Captain asked him.

"Never have been, never will be," Phil sighed. "I was just trying to help people and then I found myself in the middle of all this. You need anything else from us?"

"Just for you to be around if it comes to testifying."

"We live and work here, Captain," Phil chuckled. "The only reason we'd be away from here is if we were deployed on an emergency condition, and then the Air Force would be able to tell you exactly where we were at any given moment. We'll be back here soon enough for you to ask us whatever you need to."

Linda and Bill were talking over in the corner before Bill nodded and Linda started walking back towards Phil, all three of them heading back to the front door of the manor. "Just let me know, Bill," Linda said as Bill waved and climbed into his car.

"What's that all about?"

"Probably nothing, but I've got Bill looking into some stuff for me," Linda said, watching Phil get in the car before climbing in after him. "If it turns out to be something, I'll let you know, but I need you to keep your big brain working on the reassignment problem, as well as how we can get gays and trans folks vaccinated. I don't like leaving anyone behind."

"I'm trying my best, baby, I genuinely am," Phil said.

"I know you, are, Phil, I know. And you know why I care."

He did. Linda's younger brother, Jake, was 27 and trans, and as much as Linda had wanted to find some way to get him vaccinated, as of the moment, there was no way to do it, and so he'd basically locked himself in his apartment and hadn't come out all year. Linda had come by and basically turned the place into a bubble for the time being.

Jake had started life as Jacqueline and had come out as trans in college, much to her family's confusion. The Hayes family was military through and through, and while her parents had come around eventually, at first, there had been a lot of people talking *at* one another instead of *to* one another. Linda had made it a point to always listen first and foremost, though, and had eventually turned into the peacemaker of the family, as Jacqueline had begun transitioning into Jake.

All of that had happened in 2019, and when the clusterfuck of 2020 had reared its ugly head, things only seemed to get worse for Jake Hayes. Linda's parents were both career lifers and had gotten vaccinated early, while Phil had done his best to explain to Jake how sorry he was that his serum couldn't currently help him.

It had been bothering Phil for months now, and was part of the reason he was running so many tests, trying so hard to find a way to find an alternate solution, because he had family with skin in the game, which meant the problem was always just a phone call away.

A number of Phil's friends from UC Berkeley were gay, so it wasn't as though Linda's brother was the only one that Phil knew. He had a lot of people in the Contacts section of his phone that he needed to keep safe. Speaking of which, he thought to himself as his phone started to vibrate.

"Hey Tori, everything okay with you and Terry?" he asked his sister as soon as the line

connected. She was living up in San Francisco proper, and had gotten immediately elevated to level 5 as soon as Phil had the ability to elevate them. His nephew, little five year old Alvin, was half-Filipino and half-white, and thankfully had never been anywhere near the Kill Zone, because his sister's family were almost all the family he had left, both of his parents having died to cancer in the last five years, his mother first five years, followed by his father, just eighteen months before the beginning of the crisis. "Nothing going too crazy over there?"

"No no," his sister said to him over the speakerphone inside the Tesla. "Mostly just calling to see if you're going to be coming over for Thanksgiving this year, and how many people I should expect if you are."

"Jesus, Tori—"

"Language, Phillip."

Phil had to laugh at that. His sister was ever the better Catholic than he was. "Fine, I'll throw a dollar in the swear jar when I get home. You don't want me to bring my whole crew over for Thanksgiving, do you?"

"No, but I wouldn't mind at least getting a chance to see Linda and Audrey for a few hours, and letting them tell me all about whatever dirty little secrets you've got going on over there."

"Hey Victoria," Linda said. "Of course the three of us will be over there for Thanksgiving. Thank you so much for inviting us. You mind if we bring a couple more with us?"

"Not at all," Phil's sister Victoria said to them. "As long as you aren't looking to bring more than eight, we should be okay."

"Just a total of five of us," Linda said. "We've got a couple of new additions that I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving at home."

"Always happy to have you. We'll see you in a few weeks."

His sister hung up the line as the car continued to head back to base. "Charlotte and who else?" Phil asked.

"Violet," Linda replied. "If we're going to be in San Francisco proper, I want as many pairs of eyes on you with guns as I can get."

"Then why not bring Palermo?"

"I don't fully trust her yet. I know, I know, I need to get over that, but I'm paranoid, baby, and you know I've got every reason to be."

"Okay, well, I've learned to trust your judgment on these things, Linda," Phil said, "although I'm not keen on you and Bill keeping secrets from me."

"It's not a secret, Phil; I just know that if I tell you, you're going to start thinking about the problem and you're going to get distracted, and you can't afford to be," Linda sighed. "Bill can afford to spend a few brain cycles focusing on something else for a change."

"And this is something that'll be useful in the long term?"

"Phil. Honey. Have I ever done anything that wasn't beneficial for us in the long run?"

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes for a long moment before he opened them. "I'm not the trusting type, Linda, but I'm gonna trust you on this, as long as you promise to let me know when it becomes important and relevant to me, okay?"

"Don't worry, baby," she said to him. "You'll be the first to know..."