

Quaranteam: Piper's Prelude

A 5-part Quaranteam Story

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Part One

As the sound of Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby" barked out of a little portable speaker, Piper Brown found herself wondering if it came right down to it, who had more endurance, her or Sheridan. They were two entirely different types of athletes, but Sheridan's endurance was not to be underestimated.

Sheridan was currently leading most of the girls in a workout, but she had also definitely tailored it so that everyone could keep up and break a decent sweat without anyone being overly taxed, although it wasn't remotely close to the sort of high-intensity stuff the two of them did most days after the general class.

The November air was crisp by California standards, but it wasn't so cold that any of them were freezing their asses off, despite the tight workout clothes. Most of the girls were definitely aiming to get a solid workout in, but more than a few of them were also intent on looking cute while they did it, something Piper didn't really understand. Andy generally wasn't a morning person, and even if he did come and check them out, the man loved all of his partners unflinchingly. He wasn't going to judge them if their hair was a mess while they were out doing aerobics and cardio. Hell, she thought to herself, he'd probably find it adorable.

The sky was overcast and the app on her phone said there was a 40% chance of rain later in the afternoon, but that the morning should be fine.

This particular morning, Sheridan and Piper had gotten their power workout done first and then gathered the girls up for a general calisthenics and fitness class, something they tried to do at least three times a week for multiple reasons. It made sure none of the girls were neglecting their workouts, first and foremost, but it was also a chance for the girls to get together and gossip a bit afterwards. Lord were they a chatty bunch post workout, sitting around the dining room table, talking about the past few days, their schedules for the upcoming day, who'd had fun time with Andy (or each other) and making sure the Needs board had been updated accordingly. It was like a thrice weekly brunch party.

When Piper had first seen the Needs board, she'd thought it was ridiculous, a tablet-like LCD screen designed just to have a single application on it. All the women's names were there, and the last day they'd gotten their fix from Andy, as well as a "do by" date, as in "he'd better do me by this day or else I'm going to lose my goddamn mind."

The expression wasn't figurative, as she knew all too well from personal experience.

Piper had come around once she'd realized the sheer monstrosity of scheduling it took to keep track of this many people, let alone keep straight the last time they'd connected with the man of the house. Whitney was even in the process of coding an app for their phones so they could all update it remotely, and that Andy could check it from wherever whenever he wanted to.

She hadn't updated the Needs board last night after she and Sarah had taken Andy for a very solid thrill ride, so she made a mental note that she'd have to do so after brunch. It had been a fun night, and had eased off a little of the tension she'd felt around Sarah, although she still felt a little starstruck by Emily. The woman was a goddamn international movie star, even if her star was a little bit on the wane. Em needed to stop picking such dumb arthouse flicks, Piper thought to herself.

It was a little remarkable to her that, despite all the big and varied personalities in the house, there weren't many actual splits or disagreements, something Piper attributed to Ash and Niko's stern guidance. If the House of Rook had been a volleyball team, while Andy would have definitely been the coach, Niko and Ash would've shared the captain's job. (Beach volleyball teams were only two people, so there wasn't really a need for a captain there.)

The connection she'd built with some of the women here over the past few weeks had made up for the fact that she hadn't been able to see her actual squad, the rest of the volleyball team, in a few

months, although she had talked to all of them either via Zoom, FaceTime or good old fashioned phone calls, since her arrival at Andy's house on November 3rd.

She was stirred from her memories and reflexive workout motions by the scent of Andy, and she knew he was out on the balcony behind them. Being able to track him by sense of smell had been fundamentally *unnerving* at first, but now she sort of drew comfort from it, as it meant she knew where her rock was, and how to find him.

When the girls bent down to touch their hands at the ground beneath their feet, Piper made sure to give her ass a little wiggle, since she knew Andy was looking on, and wanted to give him a cheeky little show. He didn't seem to favor boobs or butts, but just generally liked the female form, and good on him, she thought.

The song mercifully came to an end, and as it did, Sheridan pointed over their heads behind them, drawing all the girls' attention to Andy standing on the balcony. All the girls looked over their shoulders then, once they'd realized it was Andy, they all turned to look and wave at him.

"Good morning, angels," he shouted to them.

"Good morning Andy!" they cheered back in his direction.

"You know, you really ought to join us some mornings, Andrew," Emily teased politely, placing her hand on her bared pale hip.

"Mmmm," he replied to them noncommittally. "I'd be worried about making a fool of myself." He wasn't in *great* shape, but he wasn't in terrible shape either, although in the months since he'd gone from no partners to many partners, he'd apparently lost quite a bit of weight from all the constant sex he'd been having. In fact, just a few days ago Piper had seen a picture of Andy and Aisling when she'd first joined up with Andy in May, and he looked many pounds heavier. There were worse ways to shed excess weight.

"I can make sure we don't overwhelm you on your first work out, dude," Sheridan said to him with a wink and a grin. Piper knew that she meant it, too. Sheridan had the perfect demeanor of a fitness instructor, just the right amount of encouragement while still pressuring to push onward. "Let's give it a go tomorrow, 'kay?'"

Andy groaned a little bit, but raised his hands in surrender. "God help me. Okay, I'll give it a try, but no making fun of me!" She was glad to see him caving in. Within a few year's time, the house was likely to be flooded with children, and that meant he needed to be ready to handle it, even if he was going to have plenty of hands around to help him when he staggered.

All the girls made various catty comments and gestures as he rolled his eyes and headed back into the house, knowing they were only teasing. He'd gotten good at recognizing when the girls were giving him shit, which was essential, since the girls *loved* to give him shit whenever they could.

'Stay humble,' Emily always said, and Andy certainly did that in spades.

"Hey Piper," Fiona said, walking over to her. "I was wondering if maybe you and I could break off from the group brunch this morning. I've got something I want to talk to you about."

Piper had liked Fiona and Moira right from the start, especially since Fi had a certain level of cheekiness to her that made Piper feel like she was back with her volleyball squad. It also helped that Fi and Andy had been in a relationship for a long while back in college, so even if he'd changed a bit over the years, she still probably knew him better than most of the people in the house, and she'd always been willing to have a conversation about how he might take something, or what he might be thinking.

Fiona had even been one of the two people Piper had gone to when she'd been worried that Andy hadn't taken her request to bring Brooke in seriously, the other being Aisling, naturally. But Fi had stressed to Piper that Andy rarely did anything without thinking, rethinking and overthinking, so if he had passed on Brooke, there were likely very good reasons for it, even if they weren't immediately evident. After Piper had explained all about who Brooke was and what she was like, before Piper could continue, Fiona had asked if he'd suggested she get paired up with Xander. Piper had been shocked, but said, yes, that was what had happened, and then Fi had suggested Piper just wait until she saw Brooke

and saw if she was happy with Xander, and to her astonishment, Brooke had been exuberant with Xander. They'd turned out to be a far better match than Brooke and Andy would've been.

“Hey, you were great council for me, Fi,” Piper said as she rolled up her yoga mat. “What's shaking?”

“C'mon, let's get breakfast and we can go sit on one of the balconies,” Fiona said, tucking her own yoga mat under her arm, heading back towards the house. “So Brooke was happy with Xander?”

“Happy is the understatement of the century,” Piper laughed. “That girl is *lovestruck*, and just from meeting him. They're gonna be rebuilding cars together in no time. I guess you're right – she and Andy probably would've been too different to make it work, and she's in New Eden now, so I've got a friend I can go over and see on the reg. I love Andy to death, but we need to start getting out of this house more.”

“I'm still in the honeymoon phase,” Fiona said, “but I get you.” Despite the fact that Fiona was twelve years her senior, the woman wore her age remarkably, barely looking a day over thirty, and yet, there was a confident grace about her that Piper hoped she might one day gain herself. She was almost as tall as Piper was, which was also nice, considering so many of the girls were half a foot to a foot shorter than she was.

The gaggle of women filed into the house, and each of them put their yoga mat into an individually marked little cubbyhole in a massive cabinet just inside the patio door, inside the room they'd converted into a gym. They were having exercise equipment brought in a bit at a time, but they'd also put in some very non-typical things to start with, such as a couple of stripper poles, a high hanging scarf and a pair of aerial rings, mostly things that Sheridan used as an acrobat (although she'd also insisted that she was going to teach each and every girl in the house to pole dance eventually).

Sheridan headed over towards Piper and Fiona, a smile on her lips. “You going to be free this afternoon to spot me, Pipes, or should I make other plans?”

“Why don't you take today to help Tala with getting her workspace set up?” Piper said. “I know she and Jade have made a bunch of progress, but it'll give you a chance to spend some time with her and maybe you can break the ice with Jade a little bit. We both remember what it's like to have new girl syndrome.”

Sheridan rolled her eyes and flipped her frizzy blonde hair back over her shoulder. “Yeah, okay. Maybe I can get her to loosen up a bit, while I'm at it. She seems so damn uptight.”

Piper grinned, as she realized clearly Sheridan hadn't heard. “Oh, you should ask her about her experience getting imprinted to Andy, then. And if she won't tell you, ask Ems. Better yet, ask her over brunch and Em will probably just volunteer it.”

The blonde acrobat giggled a little bit. “No ways it's totes all that.”

“All that *and* the bag of chips, Sher.”

“Well hot damn! Then I guess I gots me a story to get.”

Before they could get breakfast in, the girls needed to get their showers done first, and the pool house, which was going to be Tala's workspace soon, also had a large communal shower attached to it, so the girls headed into that, which let most of them chat while they showered. Piper asked Fi when they first got in what she wanted to talk to her about, but she'd insisted it would keep until breakfast, and at that point, everyone sort of diverted the attention to Sarah, who was playfully complaining about how wonderfully her ass hurt after their encounter with Andy last night, but also remarking on how much fun it was to play with Piper lending a hand.

One of the things that had surprised Piper about all the girls in the house was how they were so playfully competitive about what they had and hadn't done with Andy, and in particular the game between Emily and Sarah seemed especially intense. It also gave the girls chances to gossip about what they were planning on springing on him next, and what she heard while she scoured the sweat from her skin about what Hannah, Taylor and Asha had planned for him made her wonder how long it would take for Andy's jaw to lift off the floor.

Despite the fact that more than half of the girls were bi, nobody ever seemed to get up to much other than showering when they were in the group shower. Piper wasn't really into women, but she wasn't against them being around when she and Andy were playing. She didn't mind touching or caressing the other girls, or having them caress her, but as she'd heard the comedian Jackie Kashian say, "I'm gonna need the pointy bit." Besides, having some of the girls around when she was involved with Andy gave her someone to bounce off of, and it wasn't like they hadn't all seen other naked plenty of times. She supposed that her resolution was going to get the ultimate test when Emily tried to convince her to have a go at her. Piper knew she was, like, 90-95% straight, but when it came to Emily Stevens, she was only human, and Emily could tempt even the most fiercely hetero woman.

After the shower, they all headed towards the dining room, but Fiona and Piper detoured directly into the kitchen. Jenny was just finishing up preparations for breakfast, and Nicolette was starting to relay food out into the dining room. If the girls had special requests, they were always invited to make them, but on group workout days, Jenny had just taken to making family-style buffet lunches, and the girls were encouraged to just grab whatever.

Andy had clearly been through the kitchen recently, because there was a plate with hot sauce on it sitting on the kitchen island from his morning breakfast burrito, and both Jenny and Katie had a healthy glow to them, meaning they'd likely gotten their fix just a few short minutes ago. She hadn't noticed it at first, but now after having spent a few weeks in the house, there was no denying that a woman just after having had an encounter with Andy had a certain sense of being energized to them.

"Hey Jen," Piper said, "me and Fi are going to sit up on the back center balcony. You think Nic could bring us up a couple of plates and a couple of coffees?"

"Absolutely positively not, you crazy, crazy bitches," Nicolette teased. "Yeah, sure, no problem. Mind if I get the group served first?"

"Sure sure," Piper replied. "No rush."

Nicolette shot her a thumbs up as Piper and Fiona exited the room, heading towards the stairs. While group brunch was a tradition, it also was the sort of thing people had been known to dip out on from time to time. Sarah and Emily had video conferences with agents and directors, Hannah and Asha sometimes had virtual classes, and while it was nice to get lots of the girls around one table, sometimes people just had other things to do.

"So what's up, Fi?" Piper asked as they started to make their way up the stairs.

"You know I'm a journalist, right?" Fiona said. "Forgive me for not remembering if I've told you or not, but it's a lot of people here and sometimes it's easy to slip on who you've told what."

"Yes, Fi, I know you're a journalist," Piper replied with a soft smile. "Both you and Andy have mentioned it." They reached the top of the stairs and started walking down one of the hallways, towards the large French windows that opened onto a nice deck balcony overlooking the back yard that held a half a dozen chairs or so. "You want to talk to me about the Olympics? Because I'm pretty sure they're going to be delayed for a good long while, considering how many people are dead in the world. Or maybe you wanted to talk to me about the 2016 Olympics."

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about the Olympics, but only indirectly," Fiona said as she opened the doors, letting the two of them move out onto the patio, not bothering to close the doors behind them, knowing that Nicolette would be up with brunch in not too long. "I've decided to write a book about the entire plague, a sort of oral history if you will, a collection of survivor's stories about their experiences with the plague, with being moved across country, with the imprinting process, with all of it. And I wanted to see if it was okay to get your story, and to use that in my book."

Piper frowned for a moment, considering it. Her journey to the House of Rook had been anything but idyllic, and for much of it, it would be her word against other people's. She hadn't even told *Andy* the entire story yet, simply because parts of it still made her skin crawl even just thinking about what she'd endured. And yet, it also struck her that it would be an important story to reclaim, that in talking it out she could try and move past the survivor's guilt and would be able to get some of the

weight off of her shoulders. “Parts of it are pretty fucking rank, Fi,” Piper said. “I don't just mean dark; I mean fucking midnight pitch black. You sure you want to get into this?”

“It's your story to tell or not, Piper,” Fiona said, “but based on just the little bits I've gotten from the other girls, I think it's an important perspective to hear. Besides, don't you want to talk to someone about the experiences you went through? Andy said even *he* hasn't heard the whole story, and I think you've *got* to talk to someone about it, so why not me? Also, don't you want me to write about what Covington did to you for everyone to know about? It's one way you can definitely stick it to him.”

She inhaled a deep breath and then sighed it out, considering her options. “Everyone in that fucking house is going to say I made it all up.”

“Except that Andy and Niko can corroborate the state they found you in, so it's not going to be so cut and dry,” Fiona chided. “Plus, you never know what I can get people to tell me. I'm *damn* good at my job, Piper, so if anyone in Covington's house is going to talk, I'll find them and get them to talk.”

“Here's your breakfast, ladies,” Nicolette said, laying the tray down on the little table between them. Piper was convinced Andy was right – the girl secretly *was* a ninja and just hadn't told anyone. Whenever she wanted to, the maid had an uncanny ability to appear or disappear, to arrive or leave without anyone noticing. “Pineapple juice for Piper, and coffee with cream and two sugars for Fiona.”

“How the hell did you know how I like my coffee, Nicolette?” Fiona said, tilting her head to smile at her.

“You made a reference to it in a story you wrote eight years ago, and I found it when I was doing my research,” Nicolette said matter-of-factly. Fiona was agog at that, and Nicolette tried to hold her composure for as long as she could, but after a few seconds devolved into a fit of giggles, letting Fiona off the hook. “Oh my *fucking* God, you really will believe *anything* about me. I asked Moira, you dummy, and she told me.”

Fiona let out a breath and then laughed herself. “I cannot *believe* the balls on you.”

“And you bought it,” Piper teased. “She's good, but she's not a fucking wizard, Fi.”

“You say that *now*...”

Piper turned away to pick up her glass of pineapple juice. “Anyway, thanks for this, Nicolette. If we—” She looked back over her shoulder and Nicolette was already gone, having even closed the door behind her without either of the two women noticing. “Okay, so that *is* impressive.”

“I'm telling you,” Fiona said, lifting her coffee to her lips. “She's *absolutely* a wizard or a ninja or a ninja-wizard.”

“That's not a thing.”

“Mark my words. Ninja. Wizard.”

“I'm telling you, that's *not* a thing.”

“I'm not so sure.” Fi took a sip from her coffee then blew across the top of it. “So anyway, tell me how you got here.”

“How far back do you want me to go?” Piper asked her.

“As far as you think you need to.”

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I could tell you all about my early life and childhood, but I don't know if that's at all relevant to your book, or to this story, so let me just blast through the early details first. I grew up in Gainesville, Florida and spent most of my life there, with two major exceptions. The first was college, where I went to University of Nebraska-Lincoln for four years, majoring in sports medicine and physiotherapy. The plan was that after I was done with my athletic career, I was going to either become a personal trainer for other athletes or I was going to work with veterans or other people going through physical therapy after traumatic experiences. I sort of knew I had plenty of time to think about that after my sports career, because I was very heavily recruited my sophomore year of college.

Before I was old enough to drink, I knew I was going to be going to the Olympics. I'd considered trying for the beach volleyball team, but I've always preferred the camaraderie of having a full team of twelve, so I stayed in the traditional volleyball program.

I graduated in 2015, and was part of the Olympic team that won the gold medal in 2016 in Rio, although all of that went by so fast, it barely even registered. The medal meant I got plenty of endorsement deals, which meant I could make volleyball a full-time thing for at least five to ten more years. I stayed with the National team and started playing with them regularly, training several hours a day, and in 2017, I relocated to Colorado Springs, to begin training around the clock with the rest of the team, who were also living there.

They say volleyball is a sport where you have to learn to trust everyone around you, and that can be hard for some people I guess, but it didn't take me long to develop a family relationship with the rest of my teammates. There are twelve people on a traditional volleyball team, and my position was outside hitter, which is sort of the lead person when you're on the offense. That meant I needed to have a very good jump and a very good spike, and I'm damn fine at both.

We were the defending champions at the World Championship in 2018, but the team had seen a lot of turnover and we weren't gelling as well as we needed to at that point, so we finished fifth. The coach was happy, though, considering he'd told us not to expect anything before we left.

Also, the World Championship in 2018 was where I suddenly became an internet sensation. Ever since I was in high school, I've had a little warm-up dance that I do before a match, but I'd always done it in the locker room where no one could see. For one of those games, though, we didn't have time to head into the locker room, so I did it on the side of the court, and one of the television cameras was pointed at me the whole time. Before I knew it, I was Internet Famous.

For the next month or so, that little animated GIF of me doing my shimmy and shake was *everywhere*, and it turned me into a flash-in-the-pan sensation. Shit, I even went on Jimmy Kimmel to talk about the whole thing, although I tried to spend as much time as I could hyping up the volleyball team itself, instead of what it was like to be a meme. Every so often, I still get one of those "Got me feelin' like..." meme gifs from my friends when they're getting excited for something, but the whole thing was really over as quick as it started. I got invited to a photoshoot for the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition, which I did, and then like a few weeks after, the fame basically disappeared and I went back to being myself again.

Being a professional athlete is a strange life. You spend almost all day either training or playing, and the outside world sort of fades into the background. Colorado Springs is a city of about half a million people, but the Olympic Training Grounds sort of looms large over the whole region, and the future Olympians sort of try to avoid mixing with the civilians too much. At least, that's what I tell myself to excuse the fact that I never had a boyfriend after college, that I just didn't have time for it. I would occasionally go trawling for dick now and again, but I always went to their places straight from the bar and then left before they woke up and never called them again. Hell, after I'd picked up a one night stand somewhere, I wrote off that entire *bar* off and never went back again.

Most of the girls on the team were like that, although a few of them had boyfriends or husbands, and the ones who did, well, they had the benefit of having someone to go home to at the end of the night. Anyone who had a boyfriend or a husband, however, had picked them up *before* they'd joined the Olympic team, simply because there wasn't time. Hell, I even attended one of my teammate's wedding, although they had to keep their honeymoon to just four days, because she couldn't afford to give up that much training.

You could have a sex life, as long as it didn't get in the way of staying on top of your game.

(There was also the orgiastic two days after we won the gold medal in Rio back in 2016, but honestly, the whole thing is mostly a blur at this point. I have a very distinct but hazy memory of being in a wobbly H with two men from some part of the diving competition while a couple of my teammates were riding on top of guys they'd just met a few hours earlier, like, three feet away from me. Their

names, their countries? Shit, I dunno. Please don't write about that in the book, though. It's embarrassing enough just thinking about it now. I even told Andy and Ash once that I didn't do anything back then, mostly because I didn't want Andy to think less of me, although now I think he probably wouldn't have even cared, since it was before he met me, and he seems pretty chill about us having lived real lives that had sex with other people in them.)

In March, we were given lockdown orders like a week before the rest of the country was. We weren't even entirely certain what lockdown meant, since none of us generally went many places other than to the training center anyway. A few weeks later, we got clarification. We were to keep on individual training, but to do so at home, and to avoid contact with anyone else. Don't go out. Don't go to see friends. Don't go anywhere you don't have to.

I didn't really have much of a home, so to speak, at that point. Sure, I had a house that I'd bought where I lived, but it was so under decorated that even the Spartans would've looked at my place and gone "Damn girl, get some furniture. Hang some pictures. Make the place feel lived in." This meant that "stay at home" was especially brutal on me.

By May, things had gotten even weirder, what with reports of two competing plagues starting to kill what sounded like a decent number of people. Covid was bad, DuoHalo was worse, and both were getting very much out of hand.

In the middle of June, the members of my team had reached a consensus – we would "bubble" together, coming to the training facility to practice, but we wouldn't interact with anyone else, so we would be doing the best we could to stay safe. We knew it was slightly risky behavior, but those of us without partners were starting to go a little bit stir crazy, so it seemed like the only option. We'd even heard rumors the men's team was doing the same on the other side of campus.

It wasn't ideal, but it worked for a time. The girls with partners were told their partners couldn't go out at all, and for a while, we thought about just basically locking ourselves in the training camp until it was all over, but the sleeping accommodations there weren't great, so everyone kept commuting back and forth from their own homes.

One day in mid July, it seemed like the whole world fell apart. The president fell into a coma and then when they went to swear in the vice president, *he* collapsed at the swearing in ceremony, which made the Speaker of the House go from President Pro Tempore to actual President. Trump and Pence both died a few days later, President Pelosi became the first woman President of the United States, and at that point, we knew shit was getting bad, because people had stopped talking about how soon we could get out and started talking about what the world was going to look like *if* we got out.

Nobody wanted to say it, but at that point, survival no longer felt like it was guaranteed.

It got even worse a week later when our coach, Coach Barry Parker, didn't show up for practice. We found out he'd been hospitalized with DuoHalo, and he died a few days later. We couldn't even have a funeral for him. We also stopped getting messages from the men's team around then, and knowing what I know now, I think most of them must've died around the same time. One man probably got sick and infected much of the rest of the training facility.

Coming to practice every day was a lot harder after that, but I think somehow, we all just decided we needed each other to get through the storm.

There was a very strange change in how the news was reported around then, and while it seemed like every major broadcaster was talking about the importance of staying home and staying masked (except for Fox News, naturally, who was claiming it was *unproven science* or some other nonsense), very few people were talking about the death toll, other than to say it was "sizable."

The whole country really doesn't know what that means yet, but in a couple of days they're going to find out that it means "catastrophic" and that most of the men in America are dead. I think a lot of us have had that sense that the news was going to be insanely bad for a while now, but it's one thing to feel that way and another thing entirely to have it confirmed in facts.

I'm not too proud to admit that there were a couple of nights where a handful of us girls slept in

one bed holding onto each other, just to not feel so alone in the middle of the giant mess. For once in my life, I'd found myself desperately wishing I'd gotten a pet, just to keep me company.

It felt like the whole damn world might've been coming to an end. I tell you this, because I think it's important to stress what kind of state of mind I was in, and how desperate I was to connect with someone, *anyone*.

In the second week of September, a woman from the Air Force came to the training camp. I'll never forget it, because she was dressed in a goddamn hazmat suit, and that scared me right down to the bone. I remember thinking, "This is it. One of us has DuoHalo and they've infected all the rest of us, and we're all now dead, we just don't know it, but they sent this woman here to tell us that we're all gonna die any minute now."

That isn't what happened, though.

She said the Air Force had a stop gap solution that they were going to be employing, but it was very unconventional, it was experimental, it was very slowly getting rolled out and would involve pairing us up with a man, whom we'd need to be sexually active with regularly.

You can imagine after having been cooped up for so long, as ridiculous as it all sounded, if it meant it would get us out of there, we were all for it. I remember thinking that I'd fuck a bridge troll if it meant I could go somewhere new, talk to someone new. We were each tested for both Covid and DuoHalo, and when the tests came back negative, we were given a website link to something called The Oracle, which would help us get paired up with a good match for us.

I know you didn't have to take The Oracle Test, but you should get Niko to give you a copy of it, just so you can see how, uh, *thorough* it is. I'm a Florida girl, born and raised, so I'm no shrinking violet, but I don't think I've ever had to be that explicit about my sexual tastes with anyone or anything before or since.

Some of it is just your basic kinda stuff – do you like men, women or both? Do you like your partners taller than you, shorter than you or do you not care? Do you like soft sex, aggressive sex, both or neither? But then it drilled down into *all* sorts of fetishes and philiias that I'd never heard of, so many that I had to keep up a second tab on the browser to look up what a lot of things I was being asked about even *were*. Also, I don't want to judge what other people are into, but *ick ick ick ick!*

The test took about two hours to fill out, and I'd never felt so utterly scrutinized in my entire life. When we were given the links, we were also told to stay at our homes and not to come back to the training center until we'd been given the serum, or until the plague had passed, although the woman didn't seem to have any idea when that would be.

Because we weren't allowed to see anyone else in person anymore, the team started having day long Zoom calls where we would all sit around the house and talk with one another, but after a while, even that started getting difficult to maintain, since it felt like we didn't have any new stories to tell each other.

Nothing was happening.

Then, on October 18th – Jesus, was it really just a month or so ago? – Anyway, on October 18th, there was a knock on the front door of my house, and it was the woman from the Air Force again. She told me a match for me had been found, and she was taking me across the country to get injected with the serum and introduced to my new partner.

* * * * *

"Covington?" Fiona asked.

"Covington," Piper sighed. "But let's not jump ahead. If I'm going to tell this story, I need to tell you all about the trip, and the imprinting process, even if it's similar to your own. Let's start with the plane..."

