

Chapter Twenty-Three

April 28th, 2021

Valhalla Shores.

Even the *name* sounded pretentious as fuck, Andy thought to himself.

The location was on the south side of Pacifica, and the entire area had been walled off, and not in a discreet way, either. Highway 1, which had originally run down almost right against the coastline, had been diverted to run around the newly erected walled in city of Valhalla Shores, so it could run up to the waterfront.

It looked less like a modern city and more like a military base, with razor wire and gun towers atop the fencing.

“Jesus,” Andy muttered beneath his breath. “It’s Fortress California.”

“That’s some pretty intense external security they’ve got going on here, boss,” Melody said, trying to scope out the perimeter while Lexi was attempting to find the place to drive into. It was almost as if they’d gone out of their way to hide the entrance on the north side, and he had to expect the entrance on the south side would’ve been just as difficult. “This isn’t light local security. This is Fort Knox level shit here. I’ve been on forward operating bases with less intense borders.”

“How the hell you expect we’re going to get onto this base, boss?” Lexi asked him.

“I’m Civilian Oversight for everything Quaranteam related, Lexi,” Andy said with a grin. “That means I’m *supposed* to be showing up around this stuff and poking my nose into everything. I’ll bet you \$20 we’re on this base within twenty minutes.” He grabbed his iPad and flipped the leather case to open it, taking out the Pencil to make it look more like a clipboard.

“You’re on, boss,” Lexi said.

“I’ll take a piece of that action,” Melody said. “If you don’t have clearance, you don’t have clearance, so they’re just going to turn us away.”

“Watch me Karen, Mel,” Andy laughed, as the Model X finally found a gate to drive up towards, a couple of soldiers approaching the car, as Andy rolled down the window.

“You can’t be here, sir,” the woman whose nameplate read Martinez said. “This is a highly restricted area.”

“Of course it’s a highly restricted area,” Andy said, putting on his best indignant face, as he pulled out his wallet, hanging it to the woman. “They’re doing Quaranteam serum research in there, which is why I’m here. I’m Andy Rook, a member of the Civilian Oversight Group for all Quaranteam research, and I’m here to do a surprise inspection of your base and what you’re working on in regards to the serum.”

“We don’t have any notice to expect you, Mister Rook,” Airman Martinez said, looking a little nervous, looking at her partner, who offered a little shrug. “I’ll have to call the C.O.”

“You do that,” Andy said, swiping on his tablet over to a stopwatch app. “Meanwhile, I’m just going to start a timer here, so that I can put in my report how long I was delayed at the gate, if there’s an attempt to cover up whatever it is you’re working on in there from the people who are *supposed to goddamn know about it*.” He was actually relishing the opportunity to get into the role of a pompous asshole who assumed his presence was allowed anywhere. He swiped back from the stopwatch app to his notes app. “Let me get the names down. Martinez. Aaaaaand White. Got it.”

“You don’t need to write our names down, sir,” Airman White said, as Airman Martinez had gone into the booth to call to the base’s commanding officer. “We’re just doing our jobs.”

“Oh I’m sure you are, Airman,” Andy said, continuing to scrawl notes on his iPad. “But you’ll have to forgive me, I’m just doing *mine*. And when the President of the United States of America says she wants you to be part of the team keeping an eye on what’s being done in terms of Quaranteam serum research, you can imagine that made me take it all very deadly seriously.”

“Yes sir. Sorry, sir. I’m sure it won’t be long, sir.”

“What’s been made worse is the fact that I’m also afraid you’re keeping American citizens

hostage here, and not letting them out, nor even letting them make phone calls,” Andy said, not looking up, still focusing on his scribbling on the iPad. “My friend Phil Pak lives within these walls, and he didn’t show up at my wedding, nor has he returned any of my phone calls for months now, so I’m starting to think that I should contact the President and have an entire platoon of Air Force Security Services come down and pry this place apart down to the studs.”

“I’m certain that won’t be necessary, sir,” Airman White said nervously. “It’ll just be a few more minutes. I’m sure the General is just explaining where to take you first.”

“I hope for your sake that’s true, Airman, because the longer this takes, the more I’m going to suspect you’re all trying to conceal something from me, which I can’t imagine the President is going to react well to.”

“Sir, as far as I know, they don’t have anything to hide from people here, but we’re just gate guards, not scientists,” Airman White sighed. “Look, here comes Martinez now.”

“Alright, Mr. Rook,” Airman Martinez said. “The first thing I’m going to do is temporarily confiscate your cellphones. They’ll be returned to you when you leave the base. Then I’m going to hop into my Jeep and lead you over to the General’s Office and take you in to see her. After you’ve met with her, I’m going to be your escort and I’ll accompany you to any part of Valhalla Shores you want to see, including going to visit your friend Mister Pak. Is that acceptable to you?”

“It’s a start,” Andy sighed, as he, Melody and Lexi handed over their cellphones, which were put into a small bag by Airman Martinez that she handed over to Airman White for safe keeping. “Let’s get going.” He rolled up the window as Airman Martinez moved over to head to a Jeep parked next to the booth, as White started to open the gate for them to drive in. Once they were past the gate, Andy held out his hand, and Melody reached into her pocket, grabbing her wallet before pulling out a twenty, putting it in Andy’s hand.

“I’ll pay you when we’re back home, boss,” Lexi said. “Right now, I’m on high alert.”

The inside of Valhalla Falls was not at all what Andy expected to see. In almost every direction, there were very new condominium complexes, stackable buildings three or four stories tall, with rows of garages on the ground floor, or small businesses on the ground floor instead. None of the structures could’ve been from before the lockdown, and everything felt almost uncomfortably new. While the places could show signs of individuality here and there, there was a strange conformity to the structures, as if most of them were built off of the same template, with the same amount of room. There were some variations here and there, but for the most part, the uniformity felt off-putting.

“Talk about a McCity,” Andy muttered to himself. “Don’t get me wrong – I like the first floor commerce, upper floors real estate, but, c’mon... a little variety ain’t gonna kill ya.”

“Looks like it’s only part of the town, boss,” Lexi said. “If you look out that way, looks like a lot of unique homes, well, more like mansions, like a more open-air version of New Eden.”

“Cause *that’s* what we needed *more* of,” Andy grumbled.

The car continued in through the city, although Andy could see a number of soldiers in camo, either training or patrolling, he couldn’t be quite sure, as they approached the center of the city, where a series of five buildings eight or nine stories tall made a central spire, a helipad on top the tallest in the center. The five buildings were all sharp lines and no curves, wedge angles all over the place, with one-way mirrored glass on all the exterior surfaces, wedge like corners jutting out in the mid sections every other floor, like the building was some off-kilter rotation puzzle. The exteriors had been painted grey, or maybe had just been left as exposed concrete, but there were streaks of dark brown along them, the effects of the ocean air slowly attacking the building’s facades.

There was a sign in front that said “Opprimo Research – an Air Force, National Security Agency, Invincible Strategic Investments, Mandible Technologies & Ingsoc Communications partnership” with each of the five organizations’ logos beneath it.

“That’s not ostentatious at *all*,” Melody said.

“Designed to intimidate on sight,” Andy replied. “A modern form of brutalist architecture. Or

did you mean the list of the companies?”

“Well, you’ve got military, informational security, financial appropriations, a science-is-all thinktank and a media conglomerate with a very strange name,” Lexi said.

“It’s not strange at all if you know where it comes from,” Melody said. “It’s from Orwell’s *1984*, and Ingsoc was Oceania’s political system, one that venerated the ruler above all else. Cult of personality taken to the extreme, if you will.”

“Sound familiar?” Andy asked, as Lexi parked the vehicle next to where Airman Martinez had parked her Jeep, in an area marked Visitor Parking that looked like it had never seen a single vehicle parked in it before. “You best not be trying to keep me from anything, Airman Martinez,” Andy said as he got out of the car. “I’ve got to make a report about this mess to the President within a week, and so far, I’m starting to feel like I’m on rails.”

“Just a little bit longer, Mister Rook,” Airman Martinez said. “You need to meet with General Ibanez and she’ll clear us to go wherever you want within the base and see whatever it is or whoever it is you want to see while you’re here, so you can see we’ve got nothing to hide.”

“How many in your Team, Martinez?” Lexi asked, walking on one side of Andy while Melody walked on the other. They’d relaxed a little bit, seeing as they were on a secure base, but still wanted to make sure they were doing their duty as his protectors.

“Eleven, ma’am.”

“You happy?”

“As Larry, ma’am.”

“Who’s Larry?” Melody asked.

“Just an expression one of the other members of my Team taught us, ma’am,” Martinez said.

“She’s former UK military. I just liked how it sounded. Ma’am.”

“Carry on, Airman,” Andy said as they made their way into the building. They were stopped at the entrance to the building, and needed to check in, being issued RFID visitor passes that they were told to keep on them at all times, so the base could keep track of where they were going.

Andy wasn’t surprised that people were looking at them quite intently, but he *was* surprised at how little information about what this company was or what they were *doing* was visible *anywhere*. It was the most bland and nondescript building inside he’d ever seen. The walls, the floor, the lack of artwork – it was like looking at an empty movie set that hadn’t been dressed yet, far too immaculate to be used or lived in, and yet, the place had clearly seen foot traffic. The floors seemed a little less new, less shiny than the rest of it.

People were *walking* these halls.

They walked down the hallway and past a second security gate, still being escorted by Martinez who didn’t seem intent on leaving their sides the whole time, and up to an office that had no prestige, no pomp, no circumstance, nothing marking as a position of power, just a door that read “General Ibanez” on it.

Martinez knocked on the door before a voice inside said, “Come in.”

The Airman opened the door and gestured for Andy, Melody and Lexi to head inside.

The office was a welcome change of pace from everything they’d seen so far. It was a well-decorated room, an American flag on one side, a desk in the center, with a single computer on top of it and a telephone. There were a couple of thick red cables running from the computer and the phone into the wall. Behind the desk sat a woman in her early forties, dressed in military uniform. She looked up at Andy like he was just another person passing through, not judgmental, nervous, or angry. “Mr. Rook, I presume?”

“That’s me, General,” Andy said to her. “I would apologize about being unannounced—”

She laughed softly. “Don’t worry about it, Mr. Rook. If you told us in advance, it wouldn’t be a *surprise* inspection now, would it?” She stood up from her desk as she looked over his two bodyguards. “I’m guessing this is your security detail?”

“Alexis Coleman, former of the CIA, General,” Lexi said.

“Melody Park, former Army Ranger, ma’am,” Melody added.

“Couple of very capable people you got there, Mister Rook,” the General said. “How’d that happen?”

“One’s a recommendation from a member of my staff, the other’s a rescue,” Andy joked.

“Melody joined our family after wanting to leave her previous partner, who’d been one of the people that had been manipulating the Oracle system over at New Eden.”

“Which one?” the General asked.

“Covington, ma’am,” Melody answered.

“Ah,” she said, bouncing her eyebrows. “The *utter* asshole. I remember reading about what he’d done and I do not blame Dr. DeMarco’s taking off of his hand in retaliation for what he did to you ladies. We aren’t doing anything like that over here at Valhalla Shores, despite all the secrecy.”

“So let’s start there,” Andy said. “Why all the secrecy?”

“There have been elements of the kind of research we’re doing in some of the elements of what Dr. Marcos and Dr. McCallister invented, and we’re pushing the boundaries of things that the nanobots are capable of,” the General said. “But it’s mostly been theoretical because we haven’t had a lot of luck getting the sort of results we’d like. You want to sit and talk here, or you want to walk and talk through the research facility?”

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time, so let’s walk and talk,” Andy said.

The General stood up and started walking out of her office, expecting Andy and his team to keep up, Martinez following right behind, forming a little protective bubble around Andy reflexively. “You’re a part of Oversight, Mister Rook, and I know you have a fairly large Team,” the General said, “but how much reading have you been doing into what the nanobots are capable?”

“I’ve been *experiencing* a lot of it,” Andy said. “From the sort of weird transmissible orgasms my wives had on our wedding day, to the fact that a couple of my partners can basically track me short range by smell, but all of that’s been in my reports to the Quaranteam research community, which I expect you’re a part of and have access to.”

“Have you experienced any sort of... I suppose you might call it empathic or telepathic communication between you and any of your partners, Mister Rook?” the General asked him as they made their way down a very non-descript hallway to an elevator.

“I... I can’t say that I have,” Andy said, as he watched the General insert her badge into a slot in front of an elevator door that opened for them. “Has that kind of thing happened?”

“Rarely, but we have enough reports into it that we’re researching the matter,” the General said with a smug smile. “You are, of course, familiar with we’re calling Team DNA, for lack of a better term currently, yes?”

“The idea that each individual team has its own identifiable makeup of nanobot development that could function as an identifying characteristic for that team, like a group fingerprint? Yes, we’ve been aware of that for a few months now.”

“It goes a bit further than that, I’m afraid, Mister Rook, although we’re just beginning to scratch the surface of it,” Ibanez said, pushing a button that said 4, as the elevator began to slowly lift upwards into the building’s heart. “We know the nanobots that are part of a Team are swapping information all the time, working to improve and synthesize better group function solutions for the Team as a whole, but what we’ve only just *recently* discovered is that they aren’t *only* doing that when nanobots are being exchanged, but, in fact, when they’re in near proximity to each other. Think of it like having an RFID chip and reader inside of your body that’s constantly checking against nearby people, and then sending small databursts when it’s a recognized and trusted source.”

Andy looked at Melody, then Lexi, then back to the General. “You mean the nanobots in my system are talking to those in my two partners’ here... right now? Without me knowing it?”

“That is, in fact, the working theory, Mister Rook,” she said with a slight bristle of amusement.

“The range is *extremely* limited, we’re talking a matter of a couple of feet, tops, but it’s a way for the nanobots to be updating software and hardware without having to wait for a sexual intercourse exchange. Little buggers are far more active than we expected them to be.”

“What *kind* of information?”

“That’s *part* of what we’re still trying to determine here,” the General said with another soft laugh. “We’re still not entirely sure. We’re referring to a cluster of nanobots unique to a Team as a Swarm, and we think each Swarm does its best to look after every member in the Team, so it’s constantly relaying status updates. Have you noticed that some of your partners seemed to have unusual swings in their need cycles? Not so often that you get worried, but just often enough that you wonder why one of them needs to be fucked a little bit sooner than you’d had scheduled?”

“I’d been chalking it up to ‘shit happens,’ but you’re telling me that’s not the case?”

“It *might* be ‘shit happens,’ but it *also* might be that particular partner was fighting off an infection and needed an injection of additional resources with which to fight that battle. Or that they have highly important information that they need you to distribute to all the other members of the Swarm as quickly as possible, since you function as the Hive.

“What kind of information?”

“Pregnancy has usually been the biggest cause we’ve seen in terms of information transfer,” the General said as the elevator doors opened, revealing a large open-concept lab workspace with several workstations scattered around the floor. “But that’s partially what we’re researching – what *other* kinds of information could we get members of the same Swarm to communicate across short distances without saying a word? That’s the military use, obviously, but there’s also plenty of practical applications, especially if we can get the nanobots to be sending status reports, which we think we may be able to. That would mean a person could walk into their doctor’s office, put their hand on a scanner, and we could pick up a full internal and accurate report on what’s going on inside of that person in terms of problems or needs. We currently *think* that information is being kept by the nanobots, but we haven’t yet determined how to get it to *give* that information to *us*.”

“It’s more complicated than we originally thought,” a doctor in a labcoat said to Andy, offering her hand, “because as it turns out the nanobots communicate in their own actual language, and we haven’t figured out how to translate that into anything we can use yet. I’m Doctor Abernathy, I’m one of the Head Researchers in the nanobot relay research team here at Opprimo. Would you like a demonstration of one of the things we *have* been able to get the nanobots to communicate across?”

“As long as it’s not harmful,” Lexi said.

“Come over here, ma’am, and hold onto this signal booster,” Abernathy said as she led Lexi over toward a small metal box with a couple of handles on it. “Hold onto this.” Lexi did as instructed. “Now, I assume you’re both paired with her. Tell me what you feel.” The doctor reached up beneath the back of Lexi’s shirt, and Andy and Melody both shivered.

“Are... are you drawing an A on her back?” Andy asked.

“Very good, Mister Rook! It seems you and your Swarm are very much in synch with one another,” Abernathy replied. “That didn’t take much in the way of time at all!”

“You can imagine how we might find ways to communicate information across short distances in ways that can’t be intercepted useful,” the General said.

“Yeah, I can see that. But that can’t be the only thing you’re studying here,” Andy said. “There’s a whole lot of buildings here.”

“Of course not,” Abernathy replied. “Although nearly one of these whole buildings is dedicated towards breaking down how the nanobots language works. They’ve made basically no progress in that regard, however. But we’ve been studying to see if we could trigger a post-imprinting regeneration, something which we’re starting to see a little bit of results in. We haven’t been able to do it reliably, but we have, once, been able to trigger a regeneration in a person completely independent of the imprinting/pairing process.”

“Any idea how?”

“We’re trying to investigate every possibility, but we’d basically fallen back to Operation: Grasping At Straws when we got the result which helped an already paired woman trigger a regeneration, which regenerated a foot she’d lost in combat,” Abernathy said.

“That said, we proved it *can* be done,” Ibanez said. “Which is only encouraging our researchers to double down on their efforts. Can you imagine the kind of strategic advantage we would have if we could get our soldiers to just need a couple of days and a few very calorific meals before they could be deployed again, and that’s after losing multiple limbs.”

“Not to mention the number of illnesses we could defeat or at least delay,” Abernathy said. “We’ve seen the serum destroy or repair hundreds of various illnesses and ailments that modern medicine has *no idea* what to do with. We owe it to humanity to keep researching those solutions, now that we know this sort of thing is within our grasp.”

“We’ve got not just dozens but hundreds of various research projects going on here, Mr. Rook,” General Ibanez told him. “I certainly don’t have time to walk you through all of them, but I can have the progress reports for everything we’re working on sent over to your secure email account, and you’re welcome to go anywhere within the base you want, talk to anyone you want. We don’t have anything to hide. I just ask that Airman Martinez accompany you, so we can make sure you aren’t stumbling into a door with sensitive research that we may have forgotten to mark or something. It’s just as much for your safety as it ours, I assure you.”

“Alright, General, I can agree to that, as long as you aren’t attempting to separate my security detail from me.”

“Last thing I would want to do, Mister Rook,” the General said with a soft laugh that almost put Andy at ease. “I know how protective I am of my Team’s man, and I wouldn’t dare stand between a woman and her man. Your detail can accompany anyone you like. Any other questions before I take my leave of you?”

“Just one – my friend Phil Pak lives here, and he hasn’t been able to leave, nor has he been able to return phone calls for over a month now,” Andy said. “What the hell is going with that?”

“Well, because we’re constantly running tests on most of the residents of Valhalla Shores, we require them to remain within the borders, or at least we’ve been operating that way for the last few months. We’re hoping to be able to lift those restrictions within the next few months and allow our residents to come and go a great deal more freely.”

“That doesn’t explain why he hasn’t called me back.”

“Oh, that’s actually very easy, Mr. Rook,” Dr. Abernathy said. “It’s the same reason your cellular phones were confiscated at the gate. Because we’re working with communications frequencies, we don’t have any cellular towers near to the base, and we do not allow cell phones anywhere on the base. All of the five central buildings here are Faraday cages. Hell, we’re trying to avoid as many stray signals as we can anywhere near the city, so you’ll notice we’ve had to go out of our way to have everything wired,” she said, gesturing to a computer terminal, as Andy noticed it also had thick red wires running out of the back of it. “In fact, your visitor badges might be the only RFID tags we have within the base. We’ve been in the process of getting a series of landlines installed, but as it stands right now, we only have a few, which are specifically for the base’s use here. Your friend probably didn’t know your phone number by heart, and so he didn’t have a way to reach you from here. What’s your friend’s name?”

“Phil Pak.”

Abernathy typed into the computer, pulling up some kind of registry program. “Yep, says here he’s in the office today, so he’ll just be in the next building over. You should definitely stop by and see him, I’m sure he’ll be glad to see a friendly face,” the doctor said with a smile. “As important as our research is here, there’s no denying it’s been a bit lonely being isolated from everyone and everything. It’s been especially hard on the people who are used to having up-to-the-minute information on

everything, because we're sort of on a signal sanctuary out here. That means we're getting our entertainment and news in via landlines."

Andy thought it would also be a *great* way to control the flow of information in or out of a modern base or even a modern country. It sounded like the sort of thing he'd heard China had been doing to prevent 'cultural contamination via the Internet' back before the giant collapse. He wondered if they were ever going to get any information on what was going on inside of the Chinese borders, but at this point, it was starting to seem like that part of the world almost didn't exist. "I'll head over there next," Andy said. "Maybe he can give me the nickel tour of the rest of Valhalla Shores."

The General nodded but shrugged. "There's not a whole lot to see, truth be told, beyond the five research centers," she said. "Just residential places for those researchers to stay and commercial places for them to eat and relax. We've got a movie theater, but it seems like even though they're partnered up, they still don't trust large gatherings of people."

"Yeah, I've seen that for myself," Andy said. "I even did a little book tour to try and encourage people to come out of their homes some."

"How did it do?"

"Mostly went pretty well."

"Although shots were fired outside of one event between two different groups of protestors," Melody added.

"I think you and I have varying opinions on what 'pretty well' means, Mister Rook," the General said to him.

"Those sorts of protests are happening all over this country right now, General, although maybe you haven't heard as much about that in your little ivory coastal tower here," Andy said, realizing the words were a bit more heated than he'd intended seconds after they'd come out of his mouth. "Sorry about that. I was trying to do the right thing in encouraging people to start picking up their pieces of their lives, but yes, I wasn't thrilled about the shooting either. It seems that trying to do the right thing carries with it a certain level of risk in these modern times, I'm afraid to say."

"Understandable, Mister Rook," the General said. "Anyway, as you can see, we're not up to anything nefarious over here like Mister Covington or Dr. McCallister were. This is genuine, good, clean, beneficial research that benefits our civilians, benefits our military or benefits our species. No downsides. And with that, I'll leave you in the capable hands of Airman Martinez."

As the General made her way back down the hallway, Dr. Abernathy looked at Andy with a soft smile. "Any other questions about the sorts of research we're doing that I might be able to answer for you, Mister Rook?"

"Are you doing any research into the imprinting/pairing systems?"

"No, we're strictly focused on the communications systems between nanobots and trying to trigger regenerations without pairing," the Doctor told him. "Dr. Marcos has a giant head start in trying to understand the pairing systems, and he has Doctor Merriweather with him, so they're going to be ahead of everyone else in that line of research, so we're leaving it to them."

"Also, you don't see any way to exploit that system for financial or strategic gains," Lexi said.

"Not any more than we already are as a country, Ms. Coleman, no," Abernathy said with a smile. "But we focus where they tell us to."

Andy nodded to Airman Martinez. "Let's go see my friend Phil Pak now."

They headed back down the elevator and out of the building over to another one of the buildings, this one marked "Structure C" on the outside, although it didn't look remarkably different from any of the other four on the outside except for the sign at the front, and a red ring around the front doorway. There was a security guard at the front desk who looked like she'd been bored since the first time she'd sat down at it, and this was *far* from her first time at the desk. "Looking for Phil Pak," Martinez asked the desk guard.

"Third floor," the desk guard said.

As they walked down the hallway to the elevator, Andy decided to try and talk to Martinez a little bit. “What about you, Airman? You finding it lonely here in Valhalla Shores?” he asked her.

“It is what it is, Mister Rook,” she said flatly. “I’ve got my Team and I’ve got my pitbull, so that’s good enough for me to get by without complaint.”

“You’re not frustrated by not being able to make calls to family?”

“It’s temporary and it’s for the greater good,” she said as she pushed her access card into the slot to let the elevator open for them to step in. “Sometimes you gotta take one for the team, Mister Rook.”

“I think Andy knows a lot more about that than you do, Airman,” Lexi said, seeing slight intended where Andy had simply written it off as disrupted routine. “So maybe let’s lay off the judgment of people you’ve only just met, hm?”

“I saw the television special, ma’am,” Martinez said. “How come you two weren’t featured in it?”

“Neither of us had arrived in time, Airman,” Lexi said, keeping her tone even keeled. “Team Rook’s gotten to be quite the sizable team.”

“Define sizable.”

“Twenty-two, plus Andy,” Melody offered.

Martinez let out an appreciative whistle. “That is a *lot* of fucking.”

“That it is, Airman,” Andy agreed as the elevator doors opened. “That it is.”

Once the elevator doors opened, instead of laboratory equipment, they were confronted with something far more insidious and insipid – wall to wall *cubicles*.

It was just like a million other Silicon Valley startups he’d ever been in, with the same types of constructed felt walls erected to keep everyone segregated to their own little fiefdom, away from the prying eyes of their neighbors and coworkers.

To be honest, Andy had expected something significantly better from the National Security Agency, but he guessed they were expected to work semi collaboratively. They walked down three rows before stopping and peering in, where (Lesser) Phil Pak was looking at his screen intensely. “If that’s my sandwich, you can just leave it on the desk,” LP said, not looking up or even realizing Andy was there.

“Don’t make me have to explain to everyone why you’re called Lesser Phil,” Andy said with slight scolding to his tone, a subtle laugh cutting beneath it.

“Andy!” LP was quite the contrast to (Greater) Phil Marcos – LP was Korean-American, while GP was Filipino; GP was relatively thin, while LP was significantly more rotund; GP was Andy’s height, while LP would be lucky to be measured at 5’3”; GP had a lustrous head of magnificent long black hair, while LP had alopecia, or at least he’d *used* to have alopecia, as LP now sported a stylish short hair cut with actual hair care product in it, which Andy guessed was the result of a regeneration between now and the last time Andy had seen him, which would also explain the lack of Coke bottle bottom glasses LP had usually worn. “What the fuck are you doing here, man? How the fuck did you get in?”

“I’m part of the Civilian Oversight Group for all things relating to the Quaranteam serum now, so I decided I’d better find out what kept my friend from attending my wedding,” Andy said, giving LP a long hug. “How you been, man?”

“Great!” LP said. “Other than I can’t get outta here, really great. C’mon, I’ve got to take you to see Brandy, because if she finds out you were here and she didn’t get to see you, she’s going to shred my asshole into kimchi.” LP tapped a button on his phone to mark him as ‘out of office’ and then started leading Andy back towards the elevators. He glanced at the women surrounding him as they did. “Your security detail?”

“Jesus, where are my fucking manners?” Andy said with a chuckle. “Ladies, this is Phil Pak, a.k.a. Lesser Phil. LP, this is Alexis Coleman, the head of my security detail, and Melody Park, one of my bodyguards. Airman Martinez is one of yours, on loan from the front gate to make sure I don’t

stumble into whatever nuclear missiles you have hidden on base.”

“Ha ha,” LP said. “I wish we were half that cool. Can I ride with you?”

“You can ride with me, Mr. Pak,” Airman Martinez said.

“C’mon,” LP said. “Lemme have a few minutes with my friend alone.”

“No can do, Mr. Pak,” Airman Martinez said. “You know how important OpSec is here. I can’t leave anyone alone with the guests at any point during their visit.”

LP sighed, rolling his eyes. “Fine, I’m riding with you. Let’s head back to my house.” He moved to get in the front of the Jeep with Airman Martinez as Andy, Lexi and Melody got back into their Tesla.

During the drive across town, Andy tried to surveil the place as well as he could, but the uniformity made it hard to remember much of anything. As they drove by an open field, however, he saw several women out doing yoga in a field on mats, and there was something... odd about them. They seemed to be moving in perfect synchronicity, each of them in exact lockstep with all the others in their movements. Normally when looking at any exercise class, there were one or two people who were just a few steps behind everyone else, but not here. There was also an incredible similarity in the hairstyles and outfits that all the women had – ponytails and bangs, yoga pants and sports bras, even though the variety of sizes, hair colors and skin tones made it clear they were individuals.

When they got to what seemed to be LP’s house, Andy wasn’t all that surprised to find it a nice large structure with a certain sense of modern style to it. Brandy, LP’s wife (from before the pandemic), was waiting to meet them, and Andy was a little surprised to see she had her hair in a style matching those of the women he’d seen doing yoga on their way over, ponytail and bangs. She was also dressed similar to them – sports bra and yoga pants, all in soft pastel colors. “Andy Rook!” Brandy said. “God, it’s fucking good to see you! Come in, come in! I know you can’t stay long, but I need to introduce you to all of our new partners and hear how your wedding went!”

For the next couple of hours, LP and Brandy did their best to get caught up with Andy, and get to know both Lexi and Melody, as well as get some news about what had been happening on the outside, and for a little while it was almost like a perfectly normal visit between old friends. Towards the end of the visit, Airman Martinez insisted it was time for Andy to be leaving the base, and Andy moved to hug Brandy, then LP before they got back in the car, following Airman Martinez to the gate, turning in their IDs, getting their phones back and then starting to drive back up towards San Francisco.

They were all the way at the Bay Bridge when the three of them spoke. “You okay, boss? You’ve been completely quiet since we left Valhalla Shores.”

“Trying to figure out what to do next.”

“What do you mean, boss?” Lexi asked him from the driver’s seat. “It was odd, but I didn’t see anything that set off panic bells.”

“Mmmm.” Andy paused then spoke again. “Except when LP went to hug me goodbye, he tapped me nine times before he let me go – three short taps, three long taps and then three more short taps, all on the small of my back, where nobody could see.”

“S.O.S.?”

“Something’s not right over there, and I need to figure out what it is.” His pocket started to vibrate and he pulled the phone from his pocket to see Ash’s face on the caller ID picture, so he answered it. “Hey babe, we’re on our way back to New Eden now, just crossing the Bay Bridge.”

“Well, don’t come to the manor,” Aisling said to him. “Niko’s water just broke, so we’re on our way to the hospital. Meet us there.”

“Aren’t we like a week early?”

“Baby’s coming whether you like it or not, Mister Rook, so you best get your shit in gear.”

“Heard, we’ll be there doubletime.” He hung up the phone. “Lexi, Niko’s water just broke. We’re heading the hospital.”

“Roger that, boss. Baby time, here we come!”

Character Guide

(Author's Note: This is intended to be used as a character reference for the Quaranteam universe on the whole, including the main Quaranteam stories, but also its offshoots, at least the ones authored by me. It may contain minor spoilers, depending on where you are in the story, but I have done my best to keep them to a minimum.)

Team Rook (23 people)

- **Andy Rook** – A 38-year-old content writer for Netflix, who also lives a double life as semi-successful urban fantasy writer Blake Conrad, known for his Druid Gunslinger books. Shaved head, neatly trimmed brown beard, 5'11", hazel eyes, tattooed on the chest with a griffon, could stand to lose a few pounds. Originally from Ohio, has lived in the Bay Area for over a decade. Our protagonist, such as he is. Still reaping the benefits from one random act of kindness to a stranger named Dave.
- **Aisling (Ash) Blake** – A 27-year-old graphic design contractor for Google. Originally from Dublin, she's lived in the States for 4 years. Red hair, freckles, short (5'4"), fit. Outgoing and charming, but also protective of Andy. Aisling showed up first (at the same time as Lily) and has helped keep Andy levelheaded and sane throughout the entire ordeal.
- **Lauren White** – A 35-year-old personal trainer for the San Francisco 49ers. Originally from Australia, she's lived in the States for 2 years. Very tall (6'6"), very tan, blonde, athletic, emotionally involved with Taylor as much as (if not more so) Andy. Lauren is big and boisterous but has a tendency to not think things fully through.
- **Captain Niko RedWolf** – A 22-year-old Air Force Security Forces officer (military police). Originally from South Dakota. Half Lakota, one quarter Mexican and one quarter Japanese. Long, black hair. Toned and slender. 5'4". Sarcastic, wry and witty, Niko has basically become Andy's right-hand woman, along with Ash, whom she considers her best friend. She's helped provide endless insight to the vaccine program being managed at the local Air Force base, where she works.
- **Nicolette (Yvette) Seydeaux** (staff) – The 22-year-old maid of Rook Manor. Blonde, with long curly hair. Extremely buxom. 5'9" or 6'1" (in heels). Second generation French American. Enjoys wearing classic maid's outfits and being a bratty submissive. Pretended to be named Yvette at first, at the suggestion of Phil. Very close friends with Whitney.
- **Katie Rodriguez** (staff) – The 32-year-old gardener of Rook Manor. Hispanic, butch, 5'8", with short black hair cut in a bob, almost always seen in overalls and a button up shirt. Lesbian and wife of Jenny Peters. Had reservations about the program but wanted to ensure safety for her and her wife, so they took the deal and came to join the House of Rook.
- **Jenny Peters** (staff) – The 35-year-old cook of Rook Manor. Midwestern and plump, 5'8, with brown bushy hair. Wears large circular glasses. Tends to be overly motherly. Bisexual. Wife of Katie Rodriguez. Former college roommate of Alexis (Lexi) Coleman.
- **Taylor Morrison** – The 25-year-old ex-ex-girlfriend of Lauren White. Platinum blonde, stacked, short (5'2"). Was in the doghouse upon arrival for having cheating on Lauren almost a year ago, but now a regular member of the house. Closer to Lauren than anyone else, Taylor is still working to find her place in Team Rook.
- **Piper Brown** – A 26-year-old gold medal winning Olympic Volleyball player. Brunette, tall (6'2"), muscular but lean, blue eyed. Went viral for a video of her pre-game warm up dance. Still slightly recovering from the abusive treatment she received at Arthur Covington's home. Has developed very intense feelings for Andy in a very short time.
- **Asha Varma** – An 18-year-old college student and daughter of Dr. Charlotte Varma. Half Indian, half French, raised in London until last year. Brown skin, black hair, pierced navel, wild child attitude. 5'6". Party girl and socialite, Asha tends to enjoy causing trouble, as it gets her attention. Has some growing up to do. Has bonded well with Hannah and Taylor and will be going back to college once lockdown is lifted.
- **Sarah (Sares) Washington** – A 31-year-old actress. 6'2", redheaded, quirky, clumsy and a bit dorky. Originally from New Jersey. Swears like breathing. Very girl next door. Huge fan of the Druid Gunslinger books and had a crush on Andy before she even met him. Big lover of Broadway theater and musicals, both attending and performing in. Was the partner of Emily Stevens before arriving at Team Rook, and still is.
- **Emily (Em) Stevens** – A 30-year-old actress, 5'1", blonde, blue eyed, pale, slender, very posh, British. Left

London for LA just a few years ago. Incredibly charming and witty, with an almost supernatural social sense. Grew up as a child actress in a wildly popular series of movies called “The Dagger Academy” series but has since struggled to establish a successful acting career outside that role. Very sophisticated and has worked to help Andy feel more comfortable in his new financial echelon. Was the partner of Sarah Washington before arriving at Team Rook, and still is.

- **Sheridan Smith** – A 32-year-old acrobat and performer for Cirque Du Soleil. 5'7” Blonde, frizzy hair, slender and extremely flexible. Very laid back and go with the flow. Has been teaching the girls of the house yoga in her spare time. Despite a bit of a rocky start, has grown very fond of her teammates in Team Rook, and of Andy himself. Sheridan tends to protect her heart closely, however, and so her true thoughts are often a little guarded.
- **Hannah Nakamura** – An 18-year-old college student and former cheerleader. Half Hawaiian, half Japanese. Short (5'1”), Asian, with long black hair with blonde stripes in it. Curvy, *very* well-endowed and a firecracker of energy. Originally supposed to be joining the House of Watkins, she is much happier being part of Team Rook. Hannah is adventurous and energetic.
- **Tala Jordan** – A 31-year-old Iranian American woodcrafter and musician. Curvy and incredibly confident about it. Tala was Sheridan's roommate back in college and has played with a large number of failed Bay Area bands, while making puzzle boxes for people such as Elon Musk, Neil Patrick Harris and Kris Angel. Has a fetish with being turned on and made to wait. Was recommended by Sheridan, her roommate in college, to be brought into the house. Tala exudes both unshakable confidence and blue-collar swagger.
- **Jade Dillon** – A 26-year-old cheerleader for the 49ers and kindergarten teacher, Jade is also the daughter of tech billionaire Cormack Dillon, whom she hates. Blonde, bubbly, full of endless joy and confidence. Has a tendency to use fake cuss words, which gets on Andy's nerves like nails on a chalkboard. Also a virgin. Friend/co-worker of Lauren, who recommended she be brought into the house. Has distanced herself from her father as much as she thinks she can, and is a little nervous it may have repercussions, not only to her, but to all of Team Rook.
- **Whitney Wells** – A 23-year-old IT engineer with a penchant for BDSM. Jet black hair, icy blue eyes, porcelain white skin, ruby red lips, slender, almost frail, figure. Likes being completely under a Master's control. Best friend and regular play partner of Nicolette, who recommended she be brought into the house. Whitney can sometimes seem a little cold or distant, but Andy has decided this is mostly just a self-defense mechanism, and that the woman simply prefers to keep her opinions guarded.
- **Fiona Smith** – Andy's former girlfriend from college. A 38-year-old journalist who has spent most of the last fifteen years covering the Washington D.C. beat. Brunette, 5'11”, slender but in very good shape. Fiona has more history with Andy than nearly anyone in the household, and brought her partner, Moira, with her when she chose to join the Rook household after having spent a decade and a half apart from him. They picked up right where they left off without so much as a blip.
- **Moira MacLeod** – A 33-year-old Scottish doctor who had a threesome with Andy and Fiona some fifteen years ago at a wedding in Scotland. Andy lost touch with her after that, but apparently she's kept in touch with Fiona enough that Fi insisted on bringing her into the Rook household when she arrived. Slender, fit redhead with riotous red curls, pierced nipples and a handful of tattoos. Worked for Doctors Without Borders. An optimistic pragmatist, Moira is one for getting things done first and deciding how to feel about them later.
- **Alexis (Lexi) Coleman** – A 35-year-old former operative in the CIA. Latina, muscular, 5'6”, dark hair. Had significant scarring (burn scars) on her chin, neck and chest from an unknown event, but was restored as part of the imprinting process. After leaving the CIA in 2017, worked as PMC for a while, then as a bodyguard for a while. Former UCLA roommate of Jenny, who suggested she be brought into the house. Head of Andy's security, along with Niko. Has a big heart and will always take the more difficult option if it means helping more people.
- **Maya (Summer) Steele** – A 37-year-old Jewish American former stuntwoman and current director. Her hair styles vary wildly and regularly, and her nose looks as though it's been broken and reset once before. Described as a hard-drinking woman, with a very confident attitude and strong opinions, she worked as the stunt coordinator on several Dagger Academy movies with Emily, who suggested she be brought into the house.
- **Mali Merrick** – A 32-year-old personal and professional finance manager from Wales, who recently inherited Emily Stevens' account, and has been invited to relocate to America, join Team Rook, and take over management of the now substantial Rook family fortune. Lost her childhood sweetheart and fiancé to DuoHalo very early on in the pandemic. Is currently organizing her relocation to the States, along with bringing Andy “his plane.”
- **Melody Park** – A 28-year-old mercenary, and formerly Covington's personal bodyguard, now part of Team Rook, joining Andy's protective detail. Her family immigrated from South Korea in the 60s. She's ex-Army, ex-Ranger and dangerous as hell. Certainly has kept most of her opinions on the whole Quaranteam system to herself, but make no mistake, there's careful plans and refined thoughts rolling around behind those quiet eyes.

Team Yang (16 people)

- **Eric Yang** – A 39-year-old engineer, and Andy's former roommate. Second generation Japanese American. Short (5'5") but athletic, if a bit shy and bookish. Piggybacked on Andy's one good deed into a complete life change he wasn't expecting. Andy and Eric are friends, but not overly close ones, despite having shared a condo for most of a decade. Eric has been working indirectly for the US intelligence as part of something called Project: Long Thought, which has both ties to the CIA and the NSA.
- **Lily Wu** – A 25-year-old coder for Door Dash. Second generation Japanese American. Dyed purple hair, short (5'2"), punkish. Eric's first partner, who expected to be his only partner only for life to get majorly in the way. Lily is the iron fist that runs the House of Yang, sometimes making decisions for Eric so he doesn't spend too long dwelling on them.
- **Jenny Carnero** – A 28-year-old meteorologist for the local Fox News channel. Statuesque brunette (5'10") who always remains overly tanned. Lily's ex-roommate who had to be rescued after fleeing from the person she was supposed to be paired up with, before getting paired up with Eric. Threatened to tell her story to the reporters at the station she worked at, but Lily convinced her that doing so would be bad for all involved. Phil claimed to have cleaned the mess up, and also to have ensured the problem wouldn't happen again to other people.
- **Sarah Wilson** – A 26-year-old HR specialist with Adobe Systems. Short (5'3"), blonde, Nordic and curvy. Sarah's a bit of a fretter, always expecting the worst of everyone and everything. Originally from Kansas. Meshes especially well in Team Yang, but has some deep seeded distrust of governmental systems.
- **2nd Lieutenant Rita Arroyo** – A 25-year-old Latina member of the Air Force's Security Services, assigned to Eric as his protection detail, but also his partner. Ex college athlete but seems to fit well within the Yang House. Easy going until shit goes down then turns all business at the drop of a hat.
- **Jane Fowler** – A 31-year-old blonde, blue eyed farm girl from Oklahoma who moved out to California to become a professional chef half a decade ago. Curvy, relentlessly upbeat. Serves as the cook/caretaker for the House of Yang.

Team Marcos (18 people)

- **Phil Marcos** – A 34-year-old Filipino project manager for Boeing, working in conjunction with the Air Force to manage the vaccine development/distribution program trying counter the epidemic. Probably (strike that, *definitely*) involved in a sizable amount of heavily classified shit. Tall (5'11"), slender and usually exhausted. Has a deep love of fighting games and mischief. Phil always knows more than he can talk about. Phil has been heavily involved with the response to the DuoHalo virus but is unable to talk to even his close friends about it, as per his agreement with the Air Force. As of late, however, Phil has decided to let Andy see behind the curtain more and more.
- **Audrey Percy** – A 29-year-old Hispanic psychologist. Short (5'1"), very curvy. Also a big fighting games fan. Has been doing her best to keep Phil sane throughout the apocalypse. One of the first successful recipients of the current vaccine. Has been helping coordinate the base's mental health responses to all of the side effects from the Quaranteam serum. Pregnant with Phil's child and engaged to him.
- **Lt. Colonel Linda Hayes** – A 35-year-old Caucasian lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. Blonde, fit, lethal. Also doubling as Phil's bodyguard most days. Paired up with Phil at the exact same time as Audrey, a split moment decision she's later remarked was the best thing she's ever done with her life. Linda is razor sharp, quick witted and while her pairing with Phil was originally intended to be mostly professional, she's fallen very hard for her partner since their initial meeting.
- **Tamika Jefferson** – An 18-year-old African American college student. Short (5'2"), curvy, disaffected and disinterested in most things. Tamika's paired up with Phil purely for convenience, as she is a lesbian, and the daughter of one of the other scientists on the base.
- **Yuko Takahashi** – A 22-year-old first generation Japanese immigrant and video game engineer. Very short (4'10"), very slender but extremely agile. The most sarcastic of Phil's partners. She feels Phil takes too much of the risk and does not garner nearly enough of the reward for all the things he has dealt with both on and off base for the past year.
- **Dr. Charlotte Varma** – A 44-year-old French infectious disease researcher working with the Air Force and Boeing. Lead developer on the current vaccine. Average height (5'7"), blonde, matronly but also a bit bougie. Originally from Paris, she moved to London and married Dev Varma, before they emigrated to the US earlier this year with their teenage daughter, Asha (now part of Team Rook). Dev died in a lab accident on the Air Force base

where DuoHalo was being studied. Was rescued from Covington by Andy but chose to go with Phil, with Andy's blessing.

- **Natalie Jacobsen** – A 25-year-old pre-med student and stripper, Natalie is Taylor's best friend who Taylor suggested be added to the Rook household, but when Andy passed, he recommended her over to Phil, who decided to add her to his household to keep Taylor's friend nearby. Natalie seems a little overwhelmed by all the new faces and people in her life but is doing her best to integrate to her new family.
- **Rachel DeMarco** – A 28-year-old infectious disease researcher working with the Air Force and Boeing. Was originally responsible for getting Covington the women he wanted, either legitimately or questionably, but revolted against him, leading the New Daughters of Revolution. As per the terms of their surrender, has been paired into House Marcos. Has a very “just get through it” attitude that almost borders on nihilism.
- **Master Sergeant Violet 'BigTits' McGuinness** – A 26-year-old Security Forces member of the Air Force who's been brought in to operate as Phil's nighttime security detail. Because of his knowledge of the DuoHalo virus and the serum being used to treat it, Phil was given two handlers, not just one, although Linda is still very much in command, both of the operation and of the household. Violet is a stark contrast to Linda, soft and gentle whereas Linda is fast and coarse. Phil's survival and well-being is always her number one priority, as McGuinness was there when the lab accident that killed Charlotte's first husband happened.
- **Winnie Brookmeyer** – A 34-year-old originally from Ohio, she was a private chef to some high-end tech bro before he died to DuoHalo. She also had a sideline gig appearing on cooking shows, where she was a rising star, right up until the pandemic hit. Winnie and Linda were in a yoga class together, so when it came down that Phil was going to need a house with a staff, Linda went to work recruiting her friends.
- **Valerie Staples** – A 38-year-old executive assistant for the same tech bro that Winnie had worked for, Valerie takes scheduling to new levels entirely. When Linda reached out to Winnie, she also reached out to Valerie, asking her to take over the house management job for Team Marcos. Valerie and Winnie are a couple, but both enjoy a little spice of men in their life from time to time.
- **Bella Porter** – A 26-year-old former cannabis grower who is doubling as the house's maid and gardener, while still growing pot out of the greenhouse for the mansion. Bella's fairly laid back but was chosen by Linda as someone she felt like she could trust, as they'd become friends since they met one day when Linda was out getting marijuana and Bella was incredibly helpful.
- **Paloma Gallagos** – A 33-year-old former Spanish intelligence officer, brought to the US as part of Operation Honey Trap, offering insight into the Spanish National Intelligence Centre, Spain's CIA/FBI equivalent. Probably has her own agenda, but also definitely seems to have fallen hard for Phil on first contact, something Phil suspects may be down to a DuoHalo variant.
- **Rochelle Waters** – A 26-year-old civil rights attorney from Atlanta, half-black and half-white, who has been involved in voting rights and defund the police movements for the better part of her life. Has been working with the Quaranteam Project in an attempt to increase adoption rate among paranoid and distrustful communities.
- **Ingrid Virtanen** – A 23-year old physical therapist from Helsinki, Finland, she operates as a sort of front-line first-wave personal doctor for the Team.

The House of Covington

- **Arthur Robert Covington IV** – A 63-year-old investment banker. Considers himself the most important person in New Eden. Certainly is the richest. A horrible prick with a rumored proclivity for making his partners do awful things. Has ties within the Quaranteam project, and the organization behind the construction and management of New Eden. Attempted to break Piper Brown, unsuccessfully, and still holds some deep resentment over it. Was taken hostage by his own Team until they could be extracted from his pairing and repaired with other people. The person Andy hates the most.

The (former) House of Covington

- **Lisa Davis** – A 25-year-old graphic design contractor for Google. Ex colleague of Aisling. Partner for Covington, who does not allow her to speak in public. Ash has been trying to find ways to talk to her on the side, but Covington is very particular about visitors to his house and has refused to let Lisa come out to see Aisling.
- **Veronica DeLaCruz (deceased)** – A 27-year-old Hispanic card dealer for the House of Covington privately, as well as professionally over at a local casino. Cheated on her partner (Arthur) with a man named Brian Morrison, and the sexual encounter resulted in her death. The first fatality in New Eden, her death is being used to remind women the dangers involved in being unfaithful in the new world.
- **Alicia Covington** – A 46-year-old housewife and socialite. The mother of Covington's two children, Alicia is a

silent but lethal force in the House of Covington. She certainly seems like she has her husband's ear, but also mostly applies that influence from the shadows, never once speaking out about him in public, or in front of company. Make no mistake about it, however, Alicia is a controlling power broker in Team Covington, and she is not to be underestimated under any circumstances. She has been part of his particular viper's nest since long before DuoHalo and has used it at every opportunity to strengthen her power base.

- **Layla Greene** – A 25-year-old former Fox News analyst. White, blonde, blue eyed, fake tits, fake lips, fake personality, a seemingly perfect yes woman. Layla left Fox to become a communications consultant, and Arthur brought her into the house to help him shape his message and communications, possibly considering a run at politics, or just feeling like the ultra-rich were going to need image managers moving forward.
- **Hope DeMarco** – A 31-year-old ex-Marine, 5'10", muscular and Germanic, blonde hair, blue eyes, half-sister of Rachel. Former drug addict who got clean and joined the service. Petty, vindictive, spiteful, and angry a lot of the time.
- **Amber** – the butler for the House of Covington.
- **Darcy** – one of the maids in Covington's house, French, blonde.
- **Janice Flowers** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.
- **Eloise Childs** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.
- **Teresa Kenzington** – one of the women Covington won in the poker game.

The House of Vikovic

- **Gregor Vikovic** – A 52-year-old business owner. Russian, huge (6'2", 275lbs), muscular, with a big, braided silver beard and a fondness for expensive things, particular food and drink. One of the more elite members of New Eden.

Former House of Vikovic

- **Katarina Vikovic** – A 41-year-old homemaker, and Gregor's first wife. Came over with him from Russia a couple of decades ago, but has dual citizenship since 2005, much like her husband. Participated in the New Daughters of the Revolution's revolt, and was unpaired from Gregor.

Team Watkins

- **Nathaniel Watkins** – A 41-year-old investor and insanely rich self-made gadfly. Tall (6'1"), lean and Waspy, Nathaniel tends to look more like an out-of-work yoga instructor than the forty-first richest man in the world. His brown beard is always somewhat disheveled and seems to relish always walking around in socks and Birkenstocks. Has a friendly relationship with Andy, whom he gave a shitload of money to, seemingly to punish his son.
- **Benny Watkins** – An 18-year-old high school student. Benny is Nathaniel's biggest failure, spoiled and thoughtless, entitled and arrogant. His claiming of Deborah Barnes resulted in his punishment by his father, and the reassignment of Hannah to Andy.
- **Deborah Barnes** – A 34-year-old veterinarian from Los Gatos, originally from Kansas. She was originally assigned to Nathaniel, who used her as a stake in one of Covington's poker games. She was won by Andy, but Benny claimed her before she could be relocated. As part of Benny's punishment, Deborah's been assigned control of Benny.
- **Erin Teresa Donegal (Teri)** – A 36-year-old pharmaceutical representative. Dated and lived with Andy about a decade ago until she gave him an ultimatum - "either your friends go, or I do." Andy gave her the boot, and she stalked him on and off since then. Second generation Irish American. Blonde (but dyes her hair brown), curvy. Andy refused to bring her into his house, and she was reassigned to the House of Watkins.
- **Eliza Watkins** – A 38-year-old tech exec (although she looks significantly younger), and Nathaniel's first wife, Eastern European who immigrated to the US after attending university stateside, where she met Nathaniel. A very smart and measured woman who shows an immeasurable amount of patience, especially in contrast to her free-wheeling and reckless husband. Yet the two seem very much in love, and she values his safety extremely highly.
- **Octavia Hakimi** – The 35-year-old head of the Watkins security detail. Persian, although has a slight Spanish accent, probably ex-military or special forces. Adept at blending in and not being noticed. Almost always dressed in all black and has a sort of quiet deadly confidence that makes her not a force to be lightly reckoned with.
- **Rosalyn Chambers** – One of Nathaniel Watkins' assistants.
- **Nina Choi** – One of the women won by Watkins during the poker game at Covington's.

The House Of Haunton

- **Mayor James Haunton** – The 54-year-old mayor of New Eden. Portly and short tempered. Has a mustache that whole bowls of soup could get lost in.

Former House Of Haunton

- **Major Monica Peters** – The 36-year-old wife of the mayor, who doubles as the greeter and tour guide of New Eden for the most recent arrivals. Originally the head of the base where Phil was working but was superseded by the arrival of Major General Fielder. Caught up in the scandal of the NDR and illegal forcible reassignments of several individuals under the direction of Covington.

The House of Jacobson

- **Jake Jacobson** – The 49-year-old owner of the AllStore chain of department stores. Jet black hair with a pencil thin mustache. More reptilian than human, with beady eyes and a perpetual sneer on his face. Hot tempered, petty, and vindictive.
- **Ariel Smith** – the woman won by Jacobson during Covington's poker game.

Team Baker (9 people)

- **Xander Baker** – A 38-year-old auto mechanic and car restorer from Ohio. Andy's oldest and best friend. Being relocated to New Eden to get paired up with Captain Betsy Ross. Covered in tattoos, ridiculously muscular, Xander is a gentle giant. Not to be allowed near karaoke machines under peril of death.
- **Captain Betsy Ross** – A 34-year-old Air Force officer, working on the reconstruction program, rebuilding America's heavily damaged infrastructure. Soon to be Xander's first partner. Betsy is insanely smart but has confidence issues when it comes to relationships.
- **Madison Buckley** – A 26-year-old singer/musician in a symphonic metal band named Nicomachean but extremely friendly and upbeat. One of the first people to be paired with Xander, she was only willing to be paired with him if he relocated to California, which he immediately agreed to, although she had to compromise and move to northern California from her home near Los Angeles.
- **Brooke Maloney** – A 24-year-old Olympic swimmer, and friend of Piper. Second generation Swedish American. Blonde, short (5'4") and extremely athletic. Originally, Piper was trying to convince Andy to bring Brooke into the House of Rook, but Andy immediately recognized her personality would be a better fit for Xander, and asked Phil to help redirect her.
- **2nd Lieutenant Samantha Percy** – The 27-year-old member of Xander's family handpicked by Captain Linda Hayes to operate as his security detail. Like most of Linda's Girls, Samantha is a highly decorated combat soldier with special skills in asset protection. She tends not to be too chatty out in public.
- **Alicia Geller** – A 37-year-old retired actress (ex-child star) turned schoolteacher (high school history). She's mostly glad to be forgotten by most of Hollywood and has enjoyed her life as a teacher. Had some particularly bad experiences as a child star, which she is reluctant to discuss casually.
- **KC Kadrey** – A 20-year-old Vietnamese American Stanford student majoring in mechanical engineering. Bright, bubbly, always the life of the party. Has a golden retriever named Boggle she takes with her everywhere.
- **Serena Ortiz** – A 27-year-old Latina Federal Marshall. Very much a Southwestern girl, having grown up in New Mexico, playing cops and robbers before she grew up and took it professional. Has a reputation of tracking down fugitives and spotting subtle mistakes that give criminals away. Very full of bravado, but mostly seems earned. Very much a genuine cowgirl.

Team Friedman (12 people)

- **Ari Friedman** – A 47-year-old former golf pro turned tech job surfer, a member of the board game group, Ari stumbles through careers like most people stumble through fashion phases. His life is always upside down, he's always learning something new that he's just picked up and he doesn't seem to have any regular habits beyond the boardgame group.
- **Gwen Friedman** – Ari's 41-year-old wife pre-pandemic, manages a non-profit focused on ocean conservation. Gwen's still adjusting to having to share her husband with so many other women but seems like she's making peace with it.

Team Wilson (13 people)

- **Jenna (Jones) Wilson** – A 34-year-old heavyset woman with an oversized personality, one of the original members of the board game group, was paired off early as part of Phil's "protect my friends" efforts.
- **Dale Wilson** – A 39-year-old wall-of-muscle FBI agent, Dale was paired up early with Jenna very early on in the pandemic. Andy had thought it an odd pairing at first, but the two seem to have a natural matching rhythm and get along incredibly well, so as long as his friend is happy, he's happy for her. He seems a little frustrated that he's being sidelined from most active fieldwork for his family's protection, however.

Team Pak (11 people)

- **Phil Pak (a.k.a. Lesser Phil/LP)** – A 37-year-old Korean-American man who was part of Andy's friend group before the pandemic. LP works for the NSA as a Data Analyst (as far as Andy knows) and has always been especially jovial and joyous.
- **Brandy Pak** – A 31-year-old housewife, Phil's original wife, and mother of LP's 5-year old son, Kyung-jae (KJ) who has been a stay at home mom since Andy's known her.

The House of... Dave? Aka Team Straussman

- **Dr. David Straussman (previously just "Dave... something or other?")** – a thirty(ish)-something(?) quarantine management engineer for the CDC, who came to test Andy and Eric, and found out that Andy was secretly Dave's favorite author. In exchange for an advance copy of the newest unpublished Druid Gunslinger book, he put Andy and Eric into the system as Top Level VIPs, which has changed their life forever. Nice dude, but Dave's just this guy, you know?

The House of McCallister (Mr.)

- **Dr. Adam McCallister** – the man behind the pairing portion of the Quaranteam serum. For reasons still unknown, Adam McCallister was directly responsible for the creation and integration of the portion of the Quaranteam serum that makes it function as a bonding agent between men and women. A Stanford graduate, McCallister has worked in both the private sector and for the military for some time. Recently, he has defected to the Soviet Union, although there are reports that he's no longer in their care. Cause of departure, also unknown.

The Exiled (House of the former Mrs. McCallister)

- **Dr. Eve (Evie) (McCallister) Merriweather** – Adam's former wife, a very smart biochemist in her own right, who fled Adam's company in Russia and made her way back to the States. Probably knows more about DuoHalo and Quaranteam, both professionally and intimately, than anyone else on the planet. In essence, Patient Zero.
- **Sergei Petrov** – gay man in possession of a mutated biology, whose sperm functions as a sort of 'pairing reset' for women, and also allows men to pair with other men, although the resistance to the virus is much less strong than the standard Quaranteam serum. Could be the Rosetta Stone in terms of finding offshoots and variations from the serum to enable further options.
- **Andrei Ivanov** – Sergei's boyfriend, a former military man who aided in their escape from Russia. Andrei was responsible for Eve and Sergei's flight from a remote Soviet testing facility and agreed to come with them to the States, as long as he and Sergei could openly be together.
- **Master Sergeant Kathy 'K-Rod' Rodriguez** – A member of the military detail assigned to keep watch on Eve by Captain Linda Hayes. Friend of Niko's.
- **Second Lieutenant Kiki 'Pakky' Pak** – A member of the military detail assigned to keep watch on Eve by Captain Linda Hayes. Friend of Niko's.

Staff on the Quaranteam Project

- **Major General Fielder** – military commander in charge of the base managing the Quaranteam serum. When he came on to take over the project, he saw potential, and has been one of the guiding hands on every step they have taken thusfar. Currently removed from the project and facing charges of willful endangerment and abuse of power regarding his direction of assigning women against the direction of the Oracle system.
- **3 star Lt. General Bonner** – military commander responsible of taking over control and oversight of the

program formerly headed by Major General Fielder. When Fielder's horrific actions came to light, the Air Force responded by sending in new management. Bonner is a no-nonsense General who is determined to make sure things are being done the right way.

- **Major Monica Peters** – *See House of Haunton*
- **Adam McCallister** – *See House of McCallister*
- **Phil Marcos** – *See Team Marcos*
- **Charlotte Varma** – *See Team Marcos*
- **Rachel DeMarco** – *See House of Covington*
- **Matt Cunningham** – division chief (electrics half) of Project Impulse, the precursor to the Quaranteam project. Specializes in electrical signal transmission, both mechanical and biological.
- **Charles Daniels** – section chief (biofeedback engineering), discoverer of the Daniels effect, where a bonded group of individuals find their neurochemistry adapting to work better as a cohesive unit.
- **Wes Bridges** – division chief (bio half) (dead) – died in the accident with Dev Varma and several others, which only Adam McCallister survived.
- **Hunter Wilson** – section chief (electronics interface) (dead) – died in the accident with Dev Varma and several others, which only Adam McCallister survived.
- **Martin Grant** – section chief (weapons engineering) – brought in late to the process but was first to discover that the Quaranteam provides a baseline resistance to most forms of toxins, including alcohol. Also discovered the occasional large-scale regenerative effects sometimes associated with an imprinting.
- **Bill McKenna** – Phil's friend and coworker, has perhaps the most knowledge about the base serum in existence. He and Phil co-developed the original base serum together, the two of them both taking some wild swings with the other's work to piggyback onto building something great and adaptable.
- **Nate Campbell** – section chief (aeronautics engineering) – one of the first successful test cases of the Quaranteam serum, with his wife Sharon.
- **Dev Varma** (deceased) – former husband of Charlotte Varma, died in a lab accident at the base, which exposed him to DuoHalo. One of the key researchers behind the Quaranteam serum, at least in the early days of it.
- **Miguel Cunningham** – One of the people brought on late to the Quaranteam project, when it became clear they were going to be needed to do social and emotional matchmaking of people on an unprecedented scale, the Air Force brought in Miguel Cunningham to design the system known as The Oracle, which quizzes all men and women as to their conscious (and subconscious) mental, emotional, sexual and physical wants and desires, then does the best it can to pair people up within the realm of possibility. The project seemed like a Hail Mary when conceived, but so far has been wildly successful, although the stress of maintaining and scaling the project up has certainly taken a toll on Miguel, who often looks exhausted and in desperate need of a vacation. Still, he's being hailed as a hero for developing a workable solution under such a short deadline.

Linda's Girls

- **Captain Linda Hayes** – *See Team Marcos*
- **2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf** – *See Team Rook*
- **Master Sergeant Violet 'BigTits' McGuinness** – *See Team Marcos*
- **2nd Lieutenant Rita Arroyo** – *See Team Yang*
- **2nd Lieutenant Samantha Percy** – *See Team Baker*

The Politicians

- **Senator Caroline Giancola (D, KS)** – One of the two Senators from Kansas, Senator Giancola has made it a point to be on the front line, determining what's going on with the DuoHalo crisis, the Quaranteam serum, the Oracle selection system and the restructuring of America under the new system.
- **Representative Madeline Engle (R, ID)** – A Representative for the House from Idaho, Rep. Engle feels that the entire Quaranteam process has been manipulated and corrupted from the very start, and has been on the warpath looking for everyone she feels is to blame for the dire straits the country is in.
- **Senator May Collins (D, CO)** – One of the two Senators from Colorado, Senator Collins is a member of the committee reviewing and advocating for the Male Protection Act. Senator Collins is a new appointee, replacing a male senator who died.
- **Senator Evelyn Yang (D, NY)** – One of the two Senators from New York, Senator Collins is a member of

the committee reviewing and advocating for the Male Protection Act. She has been a senator from New York for the last six years.

- **Senator Ruth Hadaway (R, IA)** – One of the two Senators from Iowa, Senator Hadaway has long been one of the bastions of the far-right conservative movement within the Republican party. She was elected with the support of the Tea Party in 2002, and moved to become a strong MAGA supporter in 2015.

Staff at Opprimo Research (Valhalla Shores)

- **General Teagan Ibanez** – The head of the Opprimo Research facility at the center of Valhalla Shores.
- **Doctor Abernathy** – One of the head researchers at the Opprimo Research facility at the center of Valhalla Shores focusing on nanobot communications.