

Quaranteam: North West

Chapter 9 (Beta)

By BreaktheBar

The following story is based on the fantastic [Quaranteam](#) series by CorruptingPower over on Literotica. You can continue to expect general themes of light Mind Control, bonding and Harems from the original, but with a slightly edgy and alternative cast. In this chapter you can expect a reunion, a grocery run, a dead body and meeting a spy.

I stretched, feeling several somethings in my back and shoulders pop, as I got out of the back of the nondescript black SUV and felt the gravel of the construction site crunch under my boots. The place was bustling since we'd arrived mid-morning, and I saw more than a few of the workers taking looks over at me and starting to talk to each other. The rumour mill must have been burning hard since Vanessa had gotten carted off in a military helicopter and flown away.

First things first, however, was to not unload two vaccinated-but-unbonded women into the middle of a construction site. I flashed a quick thumbs up through the passenger side window at whoever my driver had been - I'd never seen a face or heard a voice - and jogged up to the other vehicle and knocked on the passenger window.

Agent Sourpuss rolled it down a moment later, scowling at me from the driver's seat. "What?"

"I know you haven't been here for a bit," I said. "But if you drive around to the right over there you'll see our RVs and our little compound. Dropping the ladies off there would probably cause less of a, uh, scene."

I could tell she wanted to argue with me but knew I was right. Instead of answering she just stabbed her finger down on the window button beside her and closed it in my face, then pulled the SUV around and headed in the direction I'd pointed. I walked along behind, and we rounded the second big bunkhouse building that was looking just about finished now and headed towards our compound.

By the time Agent Sourpuss put the vehicle in park Erica and Ivy were already ducking out from behind the sheets hung between the corner of the RV and the storage container that we'd deemed the 'front door.' Leo and Danielle were right behind them.

I wanted to go to my women, but I held myself back and instead opened the rear door of the SUV. Inside I saw that Vanessa was sitting in the middle row bucket seat, and I leaned in and kissed her quickly before offering her a hand down.

“Don’t go getting all chivalrous on me now, Harri,” Vanessa grinned as she accepted my hand and swung out onto her feet. She looked back into the vehicle. “Come on, ladies. Leo’s out here waiting for you.”

The two women, practically swimming in their baggy, hooded coveralls and masked up to boot, unbuckled and started climbing between the seats. I, however, was suddenly a little busy as I was hugged from behind by a small form that could only be Ivy. Beside me, Erica was pulling Vanessa into a hug as well.

“I’m so sorry, hon,” Erica said, squeezing the shorter woman tightly. “If I’d had any reasonable idea that this would happen-”

“It’s fine, Erica,” Vanessa said, squeezing her back and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Seriously. We’ll talk about it, but I’m OK with it if you are.”

“Hey you,” I said in the meanwhile, turning at the waist to wrap my arm around Ivy’s shoulder and hug her to me.

“Hello, mon amour,” Ivy sighed. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Ive,” I said, and leaned down and gave the short blonde a quick kiss. The first of the women had reached the door of the car, and Ivy let me go so that I could offer her a hand down. All I could see of her were her eyes and the skin around them - she was white but tanned heavily, and had soft grey eyes that were flicking around.

“Let me help, miss,” I said. She accepted, her gloved hand taking mine for a moment to step down, and I ushered her directly towards Leo and Dani. “This is Leo, and his better half Danielle.”

“Hey,” Leo scolded me playfully, giving me a little punch on the arm as he grinned.

“Hey, hon,” Dani said, pulling the woman into a hug that seemed to surprise her.

I turned back and Erica was helping the next woman down - she was white and paler than the first, and had dark green eyes. Soon she was getting the same hugging welcome as the first from Dani, as Leo looked both a little bashful and a little excited.

“How about we head in and talk?” Erica suggested to everyone. “Ladies, Leo is my brother so I might be biased, but you’re in good hands. And if he ends up sucking, then Dani’s got you.”

“Hell yeah I do,” Dani chuckled, nudging Leo with an elbow.

"I wouldn't mind getting handled by either of you," the tan woman said through her mask. "God damn, girl. Your tits don't quit."

"Thanks for noticing," Dani grinned and winked. She took both women by the hand and started leading them into the compound. "Come on, let's get you two fucked and settled."

"Now that's one hell of a welcome offer," the other woman laughed.

I laughed a little too, hearing the two as Leo quickly jogged ahead to hold the fabric door open for them.

"Seriously, those two are gonna be something else," Vanessa said, shaking her head.

"You got to talk with them?" Erica asked.

"The whole ride here," Vanessa said. "Their names are Aria and India. Aria seems a little sweeter and the more rational one, while India is a hippy kid from hippy parents. They said they've been girlfriends for three years, and up until last year they 'worked' as sugar babies while Aria was finishing up her master's of communications."

"Jesus," Erica sighed with a rueful smirk. "They're going to eat Leo alive."

"Can one of you shut the goddamn door, please?" Agent Sourpuss called from inside the vehicle.

"Nice seeing you again too, Agent," I said, and slammed the door. As she pulled away I turned to my girls. My *three* girls. "Vanessa, I'm not sure what you need to do now?"

She sighed. "Well, I'm going to need to get my stuff from the motel, and catch up with my Dad. Last I talked to him he was still pissed but is happy I'm alright. Getting back to work will probably make him accept it all faster."

"You're going to live with us for sure?" Ivy asked, reaching over and taking Vanessa's hand in hers as she flashed one of her patented naughty grins.

"I am," Vanessa laughed and pulled the blonde into a quick hug, Ivy nuzzling her cheek against Vanessa's chest with a happy smile. "But, maybe let's take this conversation inside? There are about a hundred eyes staring at us right now."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw easily two dozen construction workers all lurch into motion at once, trying not to get caught staring. Another two dozen didn't even bother and kept watching. "Good idea," I said. "Ladies?" I gestured towards the RVs.

Inside our compound I quickly rearranged the chairs so that the three good ones, and one of the lesser lawn chairs, were arranged in a square for us to sit while Erica and Ivy went into the RV to grab the breakfast they'd prepared for us. Vanessa and I had both texted ahead to let them know we were on our way, and soon the four of us were sitting under the midmorning sun while my latest partner and I shovelled our faces with eggs, bacon and toast.

Vanessa and I had just started filling Erica and Ivy in on how things had gone at the Testing facility when we were interrupted by a very loud, very long moan from inside Leo's RV.

"Think that was a primer or an imprinting?" Erica smirked.

A second moan, higher pitch and shorter but just as loud, followed the first.

"Definitely la première," Ivy giggled.

So Vanessa and I told our parts of the story, trying our best not to get interrupted by the occasional shriek, laugh or moan coming from the nearby RV.

"You know, I think Miriam has a crush on you," Erica interrupted me as I mentioned our quick goodbye.

"I said the same thing!" Vanessa said.

"Me too," Ivy said.

"You three don't get it," I said, shaking my head. "Miriam and I are friends. Distant ones, since we've barely seen each other in years."

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder," Erica said.

"And the fantasies stronger," Vanessa nodded. "I know late at night on a long stretch of shifts on site, I liked my high school boyfriend a hell of a lot better than I ever did when we were together."

That got Erica and Ivy laughing, and I just shook my head until the sound of the RV door opening had us all turning. Dani stepped out dressed in just a bikini top and daisy duke jean shorts and was wiping her mouth in a way that said there was definitely something that had just been on her lips.

"Those two are hot as hell," she said, coming over and leaning her hip against Erica's chair. "I mean seriously, the tits of both of them." She held her hands out larger than her own impressive cleavage. "Leo passed out right in between them."

"I think we're going to need to get Leo to make us some more good deck chairs," Erica said. "Soon we're going to have a whole pool worth of hot babes tanning out here."

"Speaking of which," Vanessa said, leaning forward and taking my hand in hers. "Mind if we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," I said. "Dani, I'm sure Erica and Ivy can fill you in."

"Sounds good," she grinned and winked, slipping into the chair Vanessa had vacated and leaning back.

Vanessa and I headed into my RV, or rather *our* RV, and she hesitated looking at the bench where just yesterday we'd had our fateful foursome that had tied her to us. Instead of sitting, she grabbed my hand and pulled me deeper into the RV, back into the bedroom.

She turned, practically in my arms, and pulled both of her shirts over her head so that she was topless and then grabbed my collar and pulled me into a kiss. I responded happily, wrapping my arms around her and inhaling through my nose, smelling everything about her, as our tongues duelled.

"Fuck me?" she asked as our kiss broke apart.

"How do you want it?" I asked her.

"Quick," she said, then hesitated and smirked a little. "And hard. Please."

I picked her up and tossed her on the bed much like I did Ivy, then pulled her jeans off of her just rough enough for her to know I was insistent. Once she was naked, I tore off my own clothes and pulled her to the edge of the bed by her legs and felt between them with my fingers.

"You're already wet," I noted casually.

"I did say quick and hard," she pointed out.

I spread her legs and entered her. We both gasped, and soon I was pounding her as I leaned down over her, my arms wrapped around her body as she clung to my shoulders. We panted together, her rolling her hips to meet my thrusts, driving each other towards our mutual orgasm.

It was fast and efficient. Neither of us got particularly dirty with our words. I didn't get creative. She wanted a quick fuck and a hard pounding, and that's what we did. I'd perfected that practice with Erica and Ivy over the last few weeks when we were stealing a quickie out in the woods.

Once I was spent, my cum plastering the insides of her pussy, I collapsed on the bed next to her and rolled her onto her side so that I could spoon her from behind.

“Fuck,” she sighed, a little more agitated than I’d expected.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“This feels as good as I was worried it would,” she said.

“OK, that needs an explanation,” I said. My one arm was curled under both our heads since we hadn’t even made it up the bed far enough to reach pillows, our feet dangling off the end, while I placed my other hand spread wide on her stomach and felt her breathing through the movement of her diaphragm.

We were quiet for a long moment as I let her think about how she wanted to say whatever she was thinking. Finally she sighed again and placed her hand over mine on her stomach. “I need you to know something, Harri. And I don’t want you to think it’s a commentary about you. Don’t... take it personally, OK?”

“I hear you,” I said. “But I can’t exactly promise that without knowing what it is.”

“My view of relationships and - well, and marriage, is kind of skewed,” Vanessa said. “I don’t really *believe* in them, per se. I think they can be nice for a while, sure. But they can be bad, too. They can be really fucking hurtful, especially if you think they’re good first. It happened to my Dad and Mom. It happened to my older brother Derrick and his first wife. So, the thing is... Harri, I *like* you, right? Like, obviously that’s true. But I don’t know if I’m ever going to *love* you like Erica and Ivy do.”

“Ivy and I aren’t in love,” I said, and then realized I’d focused on entirely the wrong part of what she’d just said.

“Are you kidding me?” Vanessa chuckled. “That girl is smitten with you. You’re everything she could ever want, you don’t judge her for her past but but also aren’t an obsessed and pervy strip club customer. You provide, you care. You’re tough.”

“That’s not love, Vanessa,” I said. “That’s infatuation and lust. Love takes time.”

“She literally calls you ‘mon amour.’ That means ‘my love,’” Vanessa pointed out.

“It’s also just an affectation for someone you’re with,” I pointed out. “I could call you ‘my love’ casually and it would be the same thing.”

“Yeah, it would be the same thing, but that’s because you’d say it in the same earnest way she does and not because you think it would be casual,” Vanessa said. “And I need you to know, I don’t think we’ll ever be like that. I’ll never be the Girlfriend. I’ll never be the Wife. OK?”

“OK,” I said lightly.

“Really?” she asked, half-turning to look over her shoulder so she could see my expression. “Just like that?”

“Vee, did I ask you to be those things?” I asked. “I mean, seriously. You are who you are. And now you’re tied to us by sex, but that doesn’t mean you need to invest your heart in us if you don’t want to. You’re your own person.”

She softened a little in my arms as she let the tension leak out of her. “OK,” she nodded. “Then let’s do this. I’ll be the horny, sex-hungry bi-curious roommate to your threesome.”

“Um, first, bi-curious? Really? After all that?” I gestured to the front of the RV, and she flushed a little and smiled. “Second, we never got to the end of the story out there. Turns out it’s not just going to be the four of us...”

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Vanessa ended up taking a nap in bed after we snuggled a bit longer. Well, also after she scoffed at the ridiculousness that I was getting a fourth woman assigned to me.

I didn’t tell her about the deal with Agent Greerson, and I had to tell myself it wasn’t because I was a little hurt by her. Sure, I’d fronted that I was fine with her not knowing if she could, or would, love me, but it still fucking hurt. Especially knowing that not even twelve hours earlier I’d almost blurted it out to her myself. *God, that would have ended badly*, I thought.

I left her in the RV and went back outside and joined the women at the chairs. They all gave me little teasing smiles, knowing just what had been going on. Leo eventually joined us, and I took the opportunity to let them all know that we were going to have another vaccine partner joining us. Ivy, being her bubbly and horny self, of course was excited by the idea of another person to play with. Leo just laughed, shaking his head at the idea that I had to stay one partner ahead of him. Dani asked if I knew who it was, and I told her I didn’t.

Erica knew I was lying. I don’t know how she knew, but I saw the look on her face for a brief moment. I had two options - fess up right there with everyone, or tell her later. Keeping the full secret from her didn’t even cross my mind. Not when she saw it was sitting there.

Technically I barely had the clearance to know what I knew. Erica *definitely* didn’t. But still, I couldn’t keep it from her.

Eventually, as the morning wore on and Leo decided to fire up the grill to make some lunch, Erica mentioned that I hadn’t done a tour of the property in the last few days and that she’d go on an ATV ride with me.

“You just want some Harrison alone time,” Ivy laughed, poking Erica in the side. “And Vanessa is hogging the bed.”

“Can you blame her?” Dani asked. “Cause I’m sure I’ll be hearing *you* moaning like the buttslut you are sooner than later today.”

“I am *not* a buttslut,” Ivy said. “I am Harrison’s *pute anale*.”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

“Anal whore,” Ivy giggled. “But the important part is Harrison.”

Sometimes I ended up blushing just hanging around the compound and not even participating in the conversation.

I agreed with Erica that I should do a quick tour, and soon we were both appropriately dressed and I was kickstarting the ATV. Sometimes on rides like these Erica would ride the other one, but this time she hopped up behind me and hugged herself close.

The tour, if we didn’t stop, would have taken about forty-five minutes last month to drive around all the major accessible trails. With the tree-clearing crews working overtime that was already cutting the time way down to reach the far corners of the property and we ended up deep into the west side after about fifteen minutes. Erica squeezed my side slightly as we were passing by one of the smaller trails, and I nodded and turned down it heading towards a grove of trees that we’d used for some privacy in the last couple of weeks.

“Alright, hon,” she said as I parked the ATV and keyed it off. “What’s the deal?”

I carefully dismounted from the ATV without kicking her, then stood beside it and put one foot up so I could look her in the eye. “I’m not supposed to tell you this,” I said.

“Not supposed to, or not allowed to?” Erica asked.

“Both,” I shrugged. “But I’m not keeping secrets from you.”

She leaned forward and kissed me. We were surrounded by trees, and out here where the crews hadn’t reached yet it felt like we were back a month ago surrounded by the calm of the forest. Except we were also together now.

I really hoped I could get that feeling back in the future.

“The new woman coming in tomorrow wasn’t just lined up with us through the system,” I told Erica. “Agent Greerson set it up and asked me to keep an eye on her. She’s... well, she’s technically a spy.”

“Like ‘James Bond, license to kill’ sort of stuff?” Erica asked.

“I don’t... think so?” I hedged. “She’s Filipina, and the daughter of their Ambassador here in the States. Apparently she was working for their version of the CIA setting up professors while she was in University. Stealing academic research stuff, I assume. So probably not ‘license to kill.’”

Erica pursed her lips, frowning. “And you agreed to this?”

“I couldn’t really say no,” I sighed. “Greerson’s done us a couple of favours already. The land lease is just the first.”

“What was the second?”

“Miriam getting assigned to the project,” I said. “She was supposed to be doing something else, but mentioned she got reassigned and I put it together that it was him. He didn’t admit it, but he definitely inferred he had that kind of pull.”

“So what are we going to do?” Erica asked. “We don’t know anything about her. What if she doesn’t mesh with the rest of us?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “I don’t get how we’ve been so lucky so far, honestly. You and me and Leo, sure. Makes sense. Adding Dani to the mix? OK, she fit in well. But Ivy working out like she has, and now Vanessa? What are the chances?”

“And now we’ve got Leo’s new partners to figure out, plus this chick,” Erica sighed. “Do you know anything else about her?”

“Um, her name is Kyla B-something,” I said. “And she recently graduated from a dance program at one of the colleges down south. I missed some of the smaller details considering the topic of conversation and how tired I was.”

“She graduated from a University dance program?” Erica raised an eyebrow. “And was doing CIA spy shit to steal from professors? You realize she’s probably going to be ridiculously hot, right?”

“I don’t think that matters,” I chuckled. “Though Greerson did mention I’d be thanking him.”

“Pervy old man,” Erica smirked. “Think she’s bi?”

“Oh, so now you want to sleep with the potentially dangerous, sexy spy lady?”

Erica scoffed. “Of course I do.”

I kissed her again, and soon she was stepping off the ATV. We fucked standing, with her back to a tree, and she had me finish inside of her. The first one of the day with Erica always went there, then it was any guess where she'd ask for the next one to go.

"So we just be a little careful," Erica said as she pulled up her panties.

"Hmm?" I asked, buckling my belt.

"With the spy," she clarified. "We treat her like we would anyone else. Like we did Ivy. We sit her down and talk to her to make sure she knows what the vaccine is all about, and what she should expect and what she likes. She's not some political prisoner or something, right? So she's choosing this to some degree just like anyone else."

"Anyone but Vanessa," I sighed.

Erica came over to rub my back. "Did you two get to talk, or did you just fuck?"

"Talk," I said, then smirked. "After fucking. She's fine with everything. Happy about it, kind of. She just doesn't want to consider us in a 'relationship' or anything. More like a fuck buddy roommate."

Erica snorted softly. "Yeah, OK. Whatever label she wants to put on it. She'll still be sleeping in our bed."

We finished the tour and returned to the compound. Vanessa was up and around, and as we all ate lunch together we came up with a plan for the afternoon. She needed to head to the motel to get her things, as well as check in with her father to let him know she could start work again tomorrow. We were also running low on food, especially with three more mouths to feed and another scheduled to arrive (though technically, I pointed out, we'd been feeding Vanessa half her meals anyways between breakfasts and some lunches so it was more like three and a half more mouths). I shot a text over to Mrs Branston that we'd be coming by for our egg pickup, then down to Mason Fuller who ran the local butcher shop to ask what he had in stock. He'd set up a system that he'd text us what he had available and as long as we gave him twenty minutes he could have our order wrapped in paper and ready to set outside on a picnic table when we pulled up, and we'd Venmo him our payment.

Fruits and veggies and other staples were harder to manage. There weren't any bakeries in the area, at least not that I'd ever made a relationship with, and I didn't know any actual farmers. That meant we'd be doing the Bundle Up routine to brave the supermarket.

After lunch we went about getting ourselves ready. We were going to take my truck so that we could haul Vanessa's luggage and the meat and groceries in the bed. Dani decided she wanted to get off the property as she hadn't had the chance to since arriving, so Erica gave up her usual

spot, which meant Vanessa was going to be riding bitch in the small back seat of my truck cab since she was shorter than the Australian.

We bundled up. I was back in a thick hooded sweater with work gloves and snow goggles. I used the medical mask that the Air Force guys had given me, and put a bandana over it for good measure. Dani and Vanessa had to borrow from Erica since neither of them had much to work with - Vanessa since we were going to get her stuff, and Dani because she had one piece of luggage worth of belongings since she'd been planning to just travel down the west coast stripping before the pandemic. She still had a condo full of her belongings back home, but there was no way of knowing when she could ever get access to it. Or go back, if she even wanted to.

So Erica's heavy winter clothing got divided between Dani and Vanessa, and we loaded into my truck. First stop, the motel.

Vanessa gave me directions based solely on her memory of the daily drive. The place was about thirty minutes down the highway, and as we pulled in we were waved down by a couple of soldiers in national guard uniforms. They were masked, and they stood about six feet back from the truck as I lowered the window.

"This location is restricted access," one shouted. "You need to go somewhere else."

"We're here to see Brent Peters," I said, muffled by my own mask.

"We don't have anyone on the schedule," the guardsman said. "You'll need to make an appointment."

"Can you get him on that radio?" Vanessa asked, leaning over from the back seat to look out the window and pointing at a two-way on the guard's belt. "Just tell him his daughter is here."

The two guards glanced at each other, and then one visibly sighed and walked a few steps away to use the radio. He very quickly turned back and waved us into the parking lot. Vanessa directed us to park near the front end - she had a room on the second floor directly above the one being used by her father as an office. The door to that one burst open as I put the truck in park, and the big form of Brent Peters loomed in the doorway.

"You should probably wait here and let me talk to him again," Vanessa said.

I sighed. "Alright. I do need to talk to him eventually though."

"Sure," Vanessa said as Dani slipped out of the truck and moved her seat to let Vanessa out. "I'm sure he'll calm down sometime in the next decade."

I watched Vanessa approach her father, and I guessed she explained she hadn't been anywhere other than the site yet so she wasn't compromised because Brent pulled her into a hug and then ushered her inside his office.

Dani climbed back into the truck and shut the door, leaning back on it as she lowered the gaiter she was using as a mask and looked at me. "So, " she said. "You've had a long couple days. How are you doing, Harri?"

"Honestly?" I asked her rhetorically. "I'm feeling stretched a little thin."

"I can't blame you," Dani said. "I mean, Erica is a rock and Ivy is more concerned with your cock than anything else at the moment, but two girlfriends are still a lot to worry about. Now you're adding Vanessa, plus this new girl? You need to start guarding your heart a bit, big guy. I don't want to see you burning out."

"Heh, maybe," I sighed. "What about you, though? You had Leo all to yourself, now there are two more women in his bed."

"A couple," Dani pointed out. "They'll be with each other more than him. And Leo is my guy, obviously. And I know he's good for me. He's just not my usual type. I love him to death but I don't know if I'm *in* love with him yet, or if I ever will be."

I blinked in surprise. "That's kind of close to something Vanessa said to me," I admitted. "Not the type thing, but about love."

"Really?" Dani asked. "Well, I guess you two were more friendly than flirty before now, so that kind of makes sense."

"I can live with friends," I said.

"With benefits," Dani smirked.

"That too," I laughed.

Vanessa spent about fifteen minutes in the room, and Dani and I swapped to listening to the radio and talking about music as we waited. At one point there was some shouting from the motel room, and I had my seatbelt off and was half out the door before Dani caught my arm and reminded me Brent was her father, not just her boss.

When Vanessa eventually emerged, she waved us to follow her as she moved towards the stairs. We followed her up to the second story and she was a fast whirlwind of stuffing her things into her bags. Soon I was carrying her two big pieces of luggage with all her clothes and toiletries, while Dani was carrying her backpack with electronics and a dog-eared copy of the Fellowship of the Ring that I had noticed on the bedside table. Vanessa handled her big toolbox,

which rattled as she deftly hauled it down the stairs and into the back of my truck. I slammed the gate of the truck closed, hopped into the cab with them, and we were out of there less than twenty minutes after we'd arrived at the motel.

"How'd the talk go?" I asked as I pulled back out onto the highway, giving the guards a nod on our way by.

"He thought for sure I would still be living at the motel," Vanessa said. "He's also pissed because I reminded him I'll be living with you for the foreseeable future, which means if he fucks with your house he's fucking me over as much as you. He got himself worked up again in the middle of talking about work, and I had to remind him that I'd gone to you for sex, not the other way around. That shut him up."

"Hmmm hmm," Dani hummed her laugh. "Pops doesn't like thinking of his little girl as a sexual being."

"Something like that," Vanessa said, and I could hear the eye roll in her tone of voice.

Based on the direction we were coming from, it was going to be easiest for us to stop at Fuller's for our meat order, then the grocery store, and we'd end our little tour of the area by visiting Mrs Branston for our egg hook up. I passed my phone back to Vanessa, unlocking it with my thumb. "Tell me what Mason Fuller sent me," I said.

"You're trusting me with your phone?" Vanessa asked.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. Usually guys are protective of this kind of stuff," Vanessa said.

"You're forgetting that Harri is Harri," Dani said.

"Oh," Vanessa said. "Right."

I waited for one of them to explain, but apparently they both knew what that meant. "Someone want to clarify that for me?" I asked.

"I just mean that you're you," Dani said. "You're... well, you're not straight-laced, but you might as well be. Most guys would be worried about someone he was with seeing his dating apps or private messages. Leo doesn't like me using his phone because he's embarrassed by the porn he follows on his Reddit account. But you don't exactly strike me as a porn kind of guy, or a dating app or Instagram guy."

"And even if you were, you'd probably be smart enough to delete your history," Vanessa filled in. "And you would have deleted all your apps when you finally hooked up with Erica anyways."

Fuller says he's got his usual pork offerings, as much ground beef as we want, a half dozen full chickens, and a handful of something he's calling a London Broil."

"Text him back that we'll take four pounds of the ground beef - actually, make it five. Four of the chickens and all the London broils, plus two dozen sausages, ten pork chops and a couple of big tenderloins." I decided to ignore all the talk about why my phone was accessible. Especially the part about Leo's interests hidden on his own phone.

"Jesus," Vanessa muttered. "That's going to be a big grocery bill."

"Well, if the new girl shows up tomorrow there's going to be nine of us to feed," I said. "It's a good fuckin' thing my bank account sprouted a few extra zeros on the end recently or else you'd all be eating me out of house and home."

Mason Fuller had the order ready when we pulled up and he stood in the door to his little shop as I hopped out of the truck and went to gather the two big paper bags that held the paper-wrapped meat. "Don't tell me you're hosting a cookout in times like these, Harri," he called to me.

"Nope," I said. "Honestly, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," he said.

I thumbed back towards the truck. "I'm picking up strays."

Mason chuckled when he saw Dani and Vanessa waving from inside my truck. "Where'd you find them?"

"Would you believe the government sent me them?" I asked.

"You're right, I don't believe you," Mason said. "Wanna try again?"

I shrugged. "Maybe next week, buddy. Let me know if you get anything interesting in. I've got mouths to feed and variety is the spice of life."

Mason waved me off, and when I got back in the truck I Venmo'd him the hefty price on the receipt he'd stapled to one bag. I don't think I'd ever paid that much on a grocery bill in my life, and that was just the meat for the next week.

We hit the grocery store next, which ended up only allowing two people inside in a party at once. Dani wanted to look for some specific stuff, and Vanessa hadn't had her own kitchen to cook in for almost two years since she'd been eating cafeteria food on industrial construction sites, so I decided to hang out in the truck while they went in. I sent them with my credit card and reminded them of the staples we needed.

They got in line outside the store, and I decided to enjoy the warmth of the afternoon and open the gate of my truck so I could sit outside. I watched Dani and Vanessa from across the parking lot, keeping one eye on them while I could. I could tell they were talking from the small hand motions. Neither of them talked with their hands like Erica or Leo did, but everything seemed friendly between them.

“Excuse me?”

I turned and realized I’d tunnel-visioned and completely lost track of my surroundings because a woman was standing about ten paces away from me. That wasn’t like me at all. She was nervous, wringing her wrists as she stood awkwardly. She was a little scrawny, her clothes hanging off of her, and the eyes above her rough-looking mask were... not sunken, but sort of sad. “I’m sorry to bother you, Harri,” she said. “I was just wondering if maybe you could spare a couple bucks? Things aren’t really going well right now, and I’ve got my kids...”

Living in Portland, I’d seen my fair share of homeless folks and beggars. Some of them were pushy and agitated, and others entirely shut down from their addictions. This woman didn’t look homeless, but she definitely looked down on her luck. And down for enough time that it showed. She wasn’t wearing even basic earrings but had the holes in her ears. There was a slightly less tan ring on her finger where I assumed a wedding band used to sit, but it was fading.

Every major city in the United States had a homeless population. Some were worse than others, I knew that. The further south along the coast, the warmer it got, and the bigger the population. But out here in the sticks? In Jewell?

Sure, we had the occasional drifter moving through. I’d never seen someone *begging* before.

Things were really getting bad.

“Uh, yeah, I can,” I said, reaching for my wallet in my pocket. “I’m sorry, you know me but I’m not immediately recognizing you. Maybe it’s the mask.”

She took a couple steps forward as I said I could spare her some cash, but looked away as I asked who she was. I kicked myself, realizing that her situation was embarrassing enough as it was. “Maybe you don’t remember me,” the woman said. “I was a year ahead of you in high school. Mary Duncan?”

“Of course I remember you, Mary,” I said. “It’s just been a long time. You were a cheerleader I think, right? You did all the flips. You were really graceful.”

“Thanks,” she said, and I could tell she was blushing behind her mask.

I didn't have too much cash on me compared to what I used to carry for emergencies. I used to be a cash-only guy, at least around town. Knowing what my bank account looked like, I just pulled what I had and slipped down from the gate of my truck and set the bills on it, stepping back. "No offence, I don't think you stink or anything," I tried to joke.

Mary's eyes went wide when she saw the bills, and she mumbled something as she stepped forward and I backed off a bit more so she could take them. It was maybe seventy dollars, but as she quickly looked through the bills I saw her get teary, and then she clutched the cash to her chest and collapsed to her knees, crying.

I wanted to go and comfort her. Give her a hug. She was clearly overwhelmed and in a bad way, and back when we were in school she'd always been a cute, button-nosed girl with a soft smile and a big laugh.

But I couldn't go to her. I couldn't rub her back or pat her shoulder or give her a hug. The best I could do was squat down from several feet away to get closer to her level.

"Mary?" I asked.

She sniffed hard and rubbed at her eyes. "Oh my God, I'm so embarrassed," she said.

"You don't need to be," I said. "You said you have kids, right? How many?"

"Two," she said. "Thomas is six now, and looks like his dad. My little girl Charlie is four. She wanted to go to school like her big brother this fall but..."

But the schools were closed, and who knew how long they would be closed for?

"And their Dad?" I asked.

She sniffed hard again. "He went up to Portland to look for work after we both got laid off at the start of quarantine," she said. "I haven't heard from him since."

"Fuck," I breathed out, hopefully not loud enough for her to hear. The guy could have abandoned his family like a shit, or just been overwhelmed and trying to find a way to make it right. Or he could be dead. "Mary, I'm sorry you're going through this. And I'm sorry if this touches another sore spot, but is your phone still active?"

She nodded, touching the ragged little purse. I asked her to take it out and I immediately recognized that she'd probably downgraded her phone at a pawn shop, it was a beat-up old model barely above a flip phone. I gave her my number. "Call me the next time you need groceries, OK?" I said. "Or if there's an emergency. Seriously, Mary."

"I applied for food stamps, and welfare, but I haven't heard anything back," she said pitifully, like she was trying to explain her shitty situation. There wasn't any explaining.

"The system is probably overloaded," I said softly. "Mary. I'm not pulling your leg. Go get groceries for you and your kids. I'll figure something out for you for next week, OK?"

"Harri, I can't just- I don't want to-"

It was fucking stupid, but this woman who I remembered as that sweet girl was broken. I stood up and went to her, and pulled her to her feet and hugged her. She was tiny, and bony, in my arms. She'd probably been feeding her kids everything she could and taking the bare minimum for herself.

"Stop," I said quietly as I held her, and she cried a little again. "You're doing what you can in a terrible situation, Mary. I'm doing OK. Let me help."

"Thank you," she whispered into my shirt, then sniffed behind her mask again and stepped away. "Thank you, Harri."

"Text me," I reminded her. "So that I have your number."

"I will," she nodded. "I will."

She left, headed towards the line outside the store, and I watched her go. Hopefully I wasn't going to pay for that moment of kindness with my life. But what was the point of being vaccinated and wealthy if I couldn't help a hurting woman?

I sat back on the gate of my truck and saw the two big paper bags holding the meat I'd just bought. Hundreds of dollars worth. I could have given her some, along with the cash. One of the chickens and some of the sausages. Kids liked sausage, right?

Then I could practically hear my Mom's voice in the back of my mind. She'd been the giver in the family before she died. The volunteer. And she'd always said that you couldn't do your best for others without taking care of your family first.

Seventy dollars would carry Mary and her kids for a few days at least. I could set up an account with Mason, connect her with Mrs Branston for eggs, and cover her bill. I doubted I could do the same at the grocery store, but meat was always the most expensive part of meals anyways. I could drop a couple hundred bucks with her to help cover her other staples every few weeks.

I looked down at my sweater, hoping again that I wasn't going to pay for this with sickness and death.

What did those docs say? Eighty per cent effective, with more for each partner? I had three partners now, so I had to be like ninety per cent covered, right?

The rest of my wait in the parking lot, unfortunately, wasn't peaceful. A guy with some parking lot road rage pounded on his horn at a woman who was loading her car. A half dozen teens skated through on skateboards, whooping and hollering and skirting by too close to people. None of them were wearing masks, and I saw a few of them spitting near people or fake coughing just to get a reaction out of them.

I was trying to decide if I should call the emergency line, but they were gone as quickly as they arrived. Teens, rebellious and angry at the world, and most importantly bored and left to their own devices. Thankfully since I'd parked at the back of the lot they didn't really come near me.

I did end up calling 911 when the fight broke out though.

Two women were yelling at each other as they exited the store, both of them with full carts. I had no idea what they were shouting, but they definitely got the attention of everyone in the parking lot and the line. Then one lady pivoted and smacked her buggy into the other lady, and that one grabbed something out of the other's cart and threw it.

"911 Emergency Services. Where is the emergency located?"

"Yeah, I'm at the Green Grocer in Jewell," I said. "My name is Harrison Black. I need police services, a fight has broken out between two women in the parking lot and it's gotten physical."

I could hear typing on the other end of the line. "I've dispatched a cruiser, sir, but the arrival time is at least twenty minutes. Is anyone's life in danger?"

"Other than the pandemic?" I sighed. The women were grappled at this point, both of them trying to throw punches. "Hard to say. Neither of them are backing down and they've got a hold of each other and are swinging."

"If you can, try to keep anyone else from getting involved, sir," the operator said. "And remember to keep your distance."

"Fuck," I said as one of the ladies connected cleanly with the nose of the other. Blood started streaming down that one's face but it didn't stop her from clawing at the other with a snarl. "It's getting worse. There's blood now. Look, I'm not saying you have the authority to let me do this, but I've got my handgun in the truck and could pop one into the ground to spook them and try and disperse the issue."

There was a long moment of silence on the other end of the line. "..... I mean, I'm not going to tell you to do that.... But..."

“Understood,” I said.

I gave the operator my number, since I was sure the police were going to want to follow up with me, and then slammed the gate of my truck closed and went to the passenger side of my truck. Dani had returned the 1911 to its case thankfully, so I quickly slammed the magazine home and did a quick check to see it had one chambered before walking across the parking lot with the pistol held low and to the side.

The women were scrapping on the ground at this point. A crowd had formed, not so close to each other to be shoulder to shoulder, but closer than they should have been.

“Hey!” I shouted over the noise in my best military voice, but only the closest few people glanced over at me. One saw my gun and his eyes went wide.

I sighed and shook my head, then pointed the muzzle at one of the little end-row barriers that had a sprig of a garden inside the concrete curb and pulled the trigger. The loud popping boom of the discharge quieted everyone real quick, including the fighting ladies as they all looked over at me.

“Get the *fuck* out of here,” I shouted.

People scattered, including the two fighting ladies as they scrambled to recover their carts. I was pretty sure several items had gone missing from their shopping bags in the ruckus, claimed by other people who felt they needed them more.

I just shook my head as I flipped the safety on and tucked the 1911 into the pocket on the front of my sweater. There were still a few people in line at the front of the store, along with an employee monitoring it, so I went over. It turned out to be the same teen as that time I’d been here with Erica and almost gotten in a fight myself.

I gave him my name and let him know the police were already on their way. He said it wasn’t the first fistfight he’d seen break out this week, let alone in the last month.

“Kid,” I said. “This job ain’t worth your life.”

He shrugged. “I’m saving for college, and the bonus pay I’m getting as a front-line worker is adding up quickly.”

“College ain’t worth your life either. Just saying.”

Dani and Vanessa came out of the store a little while later. I’d already returned the 1911 to its case and was sitting on the tailgate of my truck again. I explained to them what happened, both with Mary and with the fight. And I admitted to hugging Mary despite the danger.

"I can walk home from here," I said. "We probably shouldn't get into the truck together. I'll need to-"

"Harri," Vanessa interrupted me. "Shut up and get in the car. You're not in any danger, right? You're vaccinated. We're both vaccinated."

"Yeah, but *you* are way less covered than the rest of us," I said. "It's not a big deal. It'll take a couple of hours of walking."

Vanessa took it into her own hands and practically tackled me. "Oops, too late."

"Vanessa!" I said in a panic and looked at Dani for help.

"Lady made her decision," Dani shrugged. "We can either live in fear of it, or just do our best."

So I ended up driving again, praying that Mary wasn't sick, which would mean I wasn't carrying it. I felt like an idiot all over again for hugging her, for risking everything to comfort her. But then I'd also seen that look on her face and I knew she'd needed it.

Our last stop of the trip was Mrs Branton's, but when I pulled into the front of her long gravel driveway I noticed that she hadn't put the flat of eggs I'd asked for in the usual spot. Frowning, I pulled out my phone and called her, but it went to voicemail immediately.

"That's weird," I said. "Mrs Branton is always home."

"You want to go check on her, don't you," Vanessa said, not really a question.

"Well, she's seventy and lives alone," I said. "She's not exactly ancient, but she's no spring chicken either."

"Alright, let's go see what's up," Dani said. Then turned to Vanessa. "You're staying here though."

"What?" Vanessa said. "Why?"

"Because you already took one risk today, and I'm starting to like you too much to let you do two in a day," Dani smirked, then pulled up her mask.

"Ugh, fine," Vanessa sighed. "Crack the windows for me at least."

I did her one better and left the truck running with the AC on.

Dani and I walked up the drive. It was long, but nowhere near as long as mine had been. The Branton's had built their house almost forty years ago - Victor Branton had worked at the local

lumber mill, and his wife Hailey had started their side business of raising chickens and eggs after they built their single story ranch house and barn. They'd had a son who had died in a drunk driving accident when I was still a kid, and a daughter who had moved away when I was still in middle school.

At the top of the drive I tried calling again, and with no answer, Dani and I went to the front door and I knocked, then stepped back.

"Mrs Branston!" I called loudly. "You home?"

Again, no answer. Shaking my head, I frowned beneath my mask and furrowed my brow. Her car was parked in front of the house, so she wasn't out.

"Let's check in some windows," Dani suggested. "If she fell and broke her hip or something she might not be able to reach her phone."

So that's what we did. It felt rude, peeking in her windows like that, but I let the MP side of me take over. I was looking into her kitchen when Dani gasped and motioned me to the other end of the side of the house. She was holding a gloved hand over her mask. I rushed over and looked in.

It was Mrs Branston's bedroom, and she was laying in the bed completely still. There was a dark stain around her mouth and nose and on the edge of some of the sheets. I recognized the dried blood. It looked like she'd been coughing it up.

"Fuck," I sighed, stepping back from the window. Her sallow skin. Her sunken eyes. It was haunting.

I called Emergency Services for the second time in less than an hour and reported it.

"What do we do now?" Dani asked.

"I'd say call her family, but I don't know her daughter's number. I think Mrs Branston said she moved out east somewhere," I said. "We'll need to leave that to the police. Other than that?" I shrugged and looked around at the property. Hailey Branston had lived here going on forty years. Now there was no one.

My eyes settled on the barn.

"If nothing else, we should feed the chickens," I said. "No need for them to starve to death."

"Good idea," Dani nodded and followed me towards the barn.

Now, my worry had been that the chickens might be dead. I really wasn't sure how long it would take for chickens to starve to death, so I was preparing myself for the stink of not only a chicken coop but of dead bodies.

What I wasn't prepared for was for the place to be empty.

"What the fuck?"

"This is weird," Dani said, looking at the rows and rows of empty cages.

It was obvious this was a chicken operation. Just the bird poo around was enough to point to that. But there weren't any chickens.

"How do fifty chickens just up and vanish?" I asked, wandering deeper into the barn.

"It's not just the chickens," Dani said behind me. She was standing at a big bin near the front door with a big 'feed' label on it. She'd lifted the lid. "All their food is gone too except for a bit of mess at the bottom."

I just shook my head, frowning as I looked around. Maybe there was some sort of metaphor here about Haily Branston's life, but all I was seeing was a crime scene. "Who the fuck finds out an old woman is dead, and instead of reporting it they steal all her chickens?"

"An asshole," Dani said.

"Assholes," I corrected. "This would have taken forever if it was just one person. There had to be at least two, probably more." I sighed. "Alright, we need to get out of here. We'll report it to the police when they get here."

Dani and I went back down to Vanessa, filling her in on what we'd seen, and then waited.

Thirty minutes later I called Emergency Services again on the non-emergency line, asking for an update on when we could expect someone to come out.

"I'm sorry sir, but all our services are currently dispatched at the moment with active issues," the operator said. "We've got your report on file, and an ambulance will be dispatched when police are available. We have your name and number on file, we don't need you to stay on location."

That was *definitely* not the norm for someone calling in a dead body, and it made me worried. "Alright," I said. "I just need to add something to the report then. After my previous call we checked in on Mrs Branston's agricultural livestock. Someone has stolen all her chickens."

"I'm... sorry?" the operator said.

“Someone stole fifty-odd chickens,” I clarified.

There was another long moment of quiet from the other end of the line.

“Chickens?”

“Yeah, chickens,” I said.

A long sigh. “Alright, I added it to the report. Have a good day, sir.”

“You-” the operator hung up. “-too.”

“That sounded like it went *great*,” Vanessa said sarcastically.

“Yeah,” I said, wondering what the fuck was happening to my home town. “I can’t say that it did.”

* * * * *

Vanessa came jogging down from the office portables when the black sedan came rolling around the bunkhouses.

After we’d gotten back from our big run, and Erica had berated me for taking a risk with Mary even while telling me how sweet a man I was, things had settled down. Leo’s new partners had slept through the day with their imprinting, but we’d grilled up some extra sausages in case they woke up in the night and were hungry. I’d spent some time late in the afternoon with Ivy, and that night I’d slept with Vanessa on one side of me, and Ivy on the other while Erica spooned up behind her and rested a hand on my chest. We’d all been naked, but nothing overtly sexual had happened

Vanessa had gone back to work in the morning, the first to wake up, and as she got ready and dug through her luggage Erica got up and made her coffee. The smell woke me up, and I realised it was 5:30 in the morning. It looked like our schedule was going to be changing with Vanessa in our lives.

Breakfast was a quiet affair later in the morning - at least, quiet for us. Leo’s RV was visibly rocking, and I had to assume Aria and India were up and the four of them were getting better acquainted. By the time Vanessa came back around for her breakfast break I’d already come in Erica, but Ivy had held off - apparently, the three of them had talked, and Vanessa only had about fifteen minutes for her breakfast break which meant a quicker-than-usual blowjob was necessary if she wanted some fun with her food.

By mid-morning things had quieted down over at Leo’s RV, and I’d left a platter of food wrapped with tinfoil on a chair next to the door. Ivy was just starting to get handsy with me, sitting on my

lap and giggling with that look in her eye, distracting me from my drawing, when the crunch of tires outside the compound perked us up.

The sedan ground to a halt, and Vanessa quickly came down to stand with Erica and Ivy and I.

Agent Sourpuss was the driver again, and she just narrowed her eyes at us for a moment before turning back and speaking into the back seat. The door opened, and a woman in that same hooded coverall getup stepped out.

“Hi,” I said, stepping forward and offering her my hand. “I’m Harrison.”

“Kyla,” she said through her mask, taking my hand and shaking it lightly.

“I’m not really sure what you were expecting,” I said. “I know things are weird and changing a lot for everyone, so if anything sounds like a problem just let us know and we can figure it out. The first of which is that, ah, these are my partners Erica, Ivy and Vanessa.”

“Allo!” Ivy said, stepping forward and wrapping the woman up in a hug. Ivy was still the shortest and most petite of the women, with Kyla standing around the same height as Vanessa.

“Hi,” Erica said, smiling warmly but not stepping forward, which I knew was because she knew the secret. In any other circumstance she likely would have been trying as hard as Ivy to be welcoming in an effort to dispel the weirdness.

Agent Sourpuss rolled down the window. “Hey, you need to stop being so touchy. Protocol says you need to imprint as soon as possible.”

I sighed, glaring at her a little. “I hear you. Let’s just make sure this is all OK with her, yeah?” I turned back to Kyla, whose eyes were a little wide as she cautiously accepted the hug from Ivy.

“Um, hello,” she said, looking around at the construction site, and our ridiculous-looking compound.

“There’s a lot for us to explain,” I said.

“I can see that,” she said. The more she talked, the more I heard a slight accent. It wasn’t strong, not like Dani’s, and I had to assume being the daughter of an Ambassador meant she’d grown up at least part of her life in the US or other places. Not to mention any training she’d received.

“Are you OK with this?” Erica asked her. “The idea of sharing space with a group of us?”

“For what it’s worth, I’m the newest and stumbled into it by accident, but it works for me,” Vanessa chipped in.

Kyla looked around again, then back at Sourpuss, and finally back to me. "It's the way things are," she said. "I can make it work."

"Well, if you change your mind, you have until we start the imprinting process," I said. "Just say something and we can try to find you someone, or somewhere, else."

She shook her head, then turned to Sourpuss again. "You can go."

"Fine by me," the Agent muttered, raising her window and pulling the car away. I was almost sure I heard her mutter something about never wanting to come back again.

"Come in," Erica said, gesturing to the fabric-draped entryway. "We'll show you around and can tell you what's up."

Kyla followed Erica and Ivy in, but Vanessa hung back. "I need to get back to work," she said. "I'll come meet her later if you haven't dicked her down yet."

I snorted and shook my head at her crassness. The only people who could get close to matching military folks in that way turned out to be construction workers. "Everything going OK?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. Just getting the animals back in order after being away. They're going to be moving workers into the bunkhouses in the next few days so there's a lot to get ready," she said. She reached over and squeezed my hand for a second, but didn't step in for a kiss even though I could see her glance at my lips. "See you later?"

"Absolutely," I said, and she started marching back towards the office portables.

When I ducked back into our compound, Erica and Ivy had arranged the deck chairs into a semi-circle and Ivy was coming out of our place with a quartet of beers from the fridge. Erica was just gesturing for Kyla to take a seat.

"We're all vaccinated," she was saying. "So if you want to get out of that getup you can."

Kyla sat and sighed, lowering her hood and then taking off her medical mask. She was gorgeous. Her hair was a natural silky black with that smooth quality that Native Americans and East Asian folks shared, and she had cute little apple cheeks when she smiled softly in thanks as she accepted a beer from Ivy. Her skin was naturally tan, and she'd done her makeup to accent her ethnicity a bit rather than downplaying it, and knowing what I knew about her I wondered if that was a move to try and distract or seduce me.

She had espionage training. She knew how to use her assets.

“So Harrison,” she nodded to me, then pointed at Ivy. “Ivy, and...” she looked at Erica. “Sorry, something with an E, right?”

“Erica,” my girlfriend clarified for her with a smile.

“Right, Erica,” Kyla said. “And the other was Vanessa?”

“Right,” I nodded. “Vanessa is actually a forewoman with the construction crews, so she had to get back to work.”

“OK,” she nodded. “And you all live in these trailers?”

“RVs,” I said. “And it’s just temporary. My family owned this land for generations, and recently the government leased it from me and is building a residential compound. We’ll be getting a house, and for now we’ve got these luxury RVs. But, uh, we’re actually only living in that one. The other one is occupied by my friend and Erica’s brother Leo and his partners.”

“So there’s going to be five of us in there?” Kyla asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked over the RV.

“Yes,” Ivy said with a smile. “It’s very nice on the inside. And the bed is very cozy.”

“*The* bed?” Kyla said, emphasizing the singular.

“That’s, uh, another thing,” I said. “This is a little rude but, well Erica, Ivy and Vanessa are all bisexual. Are you-?”

“I’m straight,” she said.

Erica just nodded, though I could tell out of the corner of my eye that Ivy was a little disappointed but tried to hide it.

“That’s perfectly fine,” I said. “We’ll figure out a sleeping arrangement so that you’re comfortable.”

“I-” Kyla started, then glanced at Erica and Ivy for a moment and seemed to change her mind. “Look, I’m stepping into your thing here already, so I don’t want to be a bitch. But could I just... Could I talk for a moment with the guy who I’m going to be bonding DNA with or whatever?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Erica said. “Do you want to go inside, or should we?”

Kyla glanced over at Leo’s RV. “Maybe we should,” she said and stood up.

I stood as well, patted Ivy's shoulder and met a glance from Erica as she tried to warn me to be careful without saying anything. Kyla and I went to the RV, and I opened the door for her and followed her in.

"Sorry about the mess," I said. "Vanessa just moved in yesterday and we're trying to figure out what to keep here, and what to move into the storage containers."

"It's... fine," Kyla said. She was looking down the length of the RV, through the open door to the bed. I could only imagine what she was thinking.

"Let's just sit here," I said, offering her the bench as I took the chair by the Murphey table. I wasn't going to mention that we used the bench for fucking almost as much as the bed. "Ask me anything," I said as we sat. "I know this is all weird, and you must have a thousand questions and concerns."

"I do," she said, and leaned back on the leather bench and took a deep breath. I just met her eyes as she looked me over again. Then she took a swig of her beer. "What do you do for money? How does all of this work?" she asked.

"Well, up until a few weeks ago, my family house was about fifty yards that way," I pointed. "Right where that first big bunkhouse building is. I worked remotely as a concept artist, and Erica's brother Leo was my roommate. Erica joined us out here for quarantine. The federal government came and wanted to buy my land, but I negotiated a lease with them instead and they paid me a lot of money for it, along with building me, Leo and my sister houses. So if you're worried about finances living out here, you don't need to. I'm not stingy, though I'd prefer if we don't get super extravagant. I'd rather us be wealthy for a long time than super-rich for a short one, and with five people on the team... Well, yeah."

"The team?" she asked.

"It feels a little weird to call it a family right now," I said. "What with all the changes happening so fast. I think that's how most of us will end up, but I don't want to presume anything."

She frowned, looking me up and down again. When she got that look on her face she was fierce and calculating. Focused. Then it broke and she cocked her head to the side just a touch. "Did they tell you I was coming?"

"Um, yeah," I nodded. "I got a warning yesterday that you'd be here sometime in the next couple of days."

She nodded slowly. "OK. I mean, obviously we'll need to figure some things out, but I think I can live with... this. I'd like to wait a day and get to know you all a bit more before we do the imprinting though. I'm not really a 'sleep with a guy on the first day' kind of girl."

"I'd be happy to wait as long as you like," I said. "But, ah, you may want to talk with the others about that feeling you've got. Apparently, it'll just keep getting stronger."

"Right," Kyla nodded slowly. "OK. I'll keep that in mind."

Voices rose outside. Not angry, just a little animated. "Sounds like Leo and his girls are finally coming outside," I said. "I think you'll like Danielle, she's a pretty open book. I can't make any promises about the two new women though, they arrived yesterday and I haven't had a chance to meet them properly."

"That sounds good," she said.

"Any other questions, or do you want to go meet them?" I asked.

"Um, yeah, actually," she said. She was still giving me a slightly weird, considering look. "Do you know?"

"Know what?" I asked, trying to poker face without poker facing.

She kept eyeing me. "Who I am."

I sighed a little. "I was told that you're the daughter of an Ambassador," I said, covering the big lie with a little truth.

"Does that bother you?" she asked.

"Why would it?" I replied. "I'm part Native, part Japanese, I travelled a decent chunk of the world when I was in the military. In the US, you growing up in another country is about as different as if you grew up in an east coast city."

"That's not what I meant," Kyla said, sitting forward and leaning her elbows on her knees, staring right at me. "I meant does it bother you that I'm a spy?"