

Quaranteam: North West

Chapter 21 (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.

Returning Dramatis Personae

House Black

- Harrison '**Harri**' Black - Sheriff of Black County, 'Jason Momoa-looking motherfucker' mountain man (mixed heritage), former Army MP
- **Ivy** Gauthier - Quebecoise stripper, half-tattooed, Dirty Blonde anal queen
- **Kyla** Bautista - Trained dancer, Filipino Spy, Harri's Deputy Sheriff, Raven hair
- **Erica** LaCosta - Fiancee of Harri, Leo's sister, Italian Tattoo Artist, Dark Brunette

House LaCosta

- **Leo** LaCosta - Harri's best friend and former roommate, Italian carpenter, Erica's brother

Valkyrie Falls

- Abigail '**Abi**' Jónsson - Harri's Personal Trainer, Co-owner of Valkyrie Falls women's athletic retreat, Icelandic Personal Trainer and Crossfit Competitor, Tall Athletically Muscular Blonde

Other

- Lt Col **Miriam** Abarbanel - Military friend of Harri's, Air Force Lt Col, Jewish heritage, Commanding Officer for Valhalla Hills construction and the Oregon Quaranteam research project

Referenced Characters

- **Aria** - Girlfriend of India, Stripper/Sugar Baby, Ginger, Member of House LaCosta
- Danielle '**Dani**' - Australian stripper, Brunette
- Agent **Greerson** - Senior 'OGA' that negotiated Harri's land deal and dropped Kyla into Harri's life
- **India** - Girlfriend of Aria, Hippy Stripper/Sugar Baby, grew up in a commune, Brunette dreads and braids
- **Kara** Swiftwater - Harrison's high school sweetheart that ended poorly, community leader of the local Native band, Raven hair
- **Melina** Sanzo - Harri went to Eugene for her, Professional Fitness Model, Muscular Curvy Blonde

- **Sara Sigurdsdottir** - Co-owner of Valkyrie Falls women's athletic retreat, Icelandic Personal Trainer and Crossfit Competitor, Tall Athletically Muscular Blonde
- **Spencer** - Professional Fitness Model, Apprentice Personal Trainer, Athletic Curvy Blonde

The feeling of Ivy's naked skin under my hands, especially after the day I'd had, was like stepping into a perfect pool. Every soft squeeze and caress made me wonder again at how perfect she was.

"Oooh, *mon amour*," Ivy moaned as she leaned her back against my chest, sitting a little further down onto my cock. Her ass, with just a little lube, always astounded me at how quickly it could take me.

We were naked, up the trail from the Valkyrie Falls parking lot, and Ivy had practically scattered her outfit across the small clearing as she pulled her clothes off to get naked.

"I love you, *ma cherie*," I groaned, sliding my hands from her hips. The first I brought up her smooth stomach to her tits, palming one firmly and feeling the rubbery little nub of her nipple against my palms. The other I slid down across her shaven mound, pressing my fingers against it as I slowly inched them towards her pussy lips.

"I love you too, Harrison," she mumbled, throwing her head back with her eyes closed, resting it against my shoulder as she sat that last little way down to press her ass cheeks to my hips and lap. Her thick, dirty blonde hair smelled of the shampoo she shared with Erica, filling my senses with thoughts of them both.

We fucked slowly like that, me holding her and teasing her as I sat on my knees and heels and she bounced forward and back. When she'd met me in the parking lot I'd thought Ivy would want to *fuck*, but this was making love. Anal, but still making love. I didn't mind one bit that Ivy was still holding onto her fear of getting pregnant - it had been drilled into her psyche for years due to her family situation, not by any forceful or abusive means, but just by what she'd experienced. A father who loved her and her half-sister, but had to rely on their grandmother for childcare.

I thought she would make an excellent mother herself, with how loving and emotionally attuned she was. Sure, she had a playful side that was a little immature at times, but she was still in her early twenties.

But, for the time being, I was more than happy for her to be my little anal queen.

As we sped up our fucking a just a touch, her asshole slick from the lube and squeezing my cock tightly every time she pulled away, she grunted and paused, a small orgasm already rolling through her.

“Can you fuck me harder, *mon amour?*” she asked me, looking over her shoulder hopefully. “Your leg will be OK?”

I slid my other hand up so I could grab both her tits, massaging them. “I can,” I told her. “How do you want me to fuck this perfect little ass, baby?”

“Doggy,” she grinned. She pulled off of me, her asshole winking for a moment as she went forward onto her knees, but she spun around and sucked my cock into her mouth in a slurping ass-to-mouth spectacle. It didn’t surprise me anymore after the dozens of times she’d done it, but it still struck me as such a nasty but intimate act. She kept herself clean down there religiously since we generally did anal almost every day, but it was still... It was like her telling me she would do anything for me. And I knew she would.

“Fuck,” I grunted, gathering her dark blonde curls up in both hands as I got up onto one knee and started thrusting into her mouth. She hummed a laugh around my cock, dropping her jaw a bit so I could start facefucking her. “God damn, Ivy,” I said. “You’re so fucking pretty.”

Her eyes were trained on me, and I could tell she liked the dirty-talk compliment. She pushed herself forward a little and on my next thrust between her lips she easily swallowed my cock into her throat.

“God, fuck-!” I moaned and pulled away, grabbing my slimy cock hard. “Baby, you almost got me there.”

“Hmhmhmhm,” she laughed through her broad-lipped smile as she came up on her knees as well and shuffled. She kissed me lightly. “I missed you last night,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “I missed you too. But getting time with Vanessa alone was good, too. We need to do that soon for you.”

“I would like that,” she smiled, softly kissing her way around my cheeks. “I love Erica, and I like our bed, but once in a while being alone with you would be good too.”

“Soon,” I promised her.

“*Bon,*” she said. “Now, fuck me like *ta petite salope, mon amour.*”

I wasn’t exactly sure of the translation, but I figured I got the gist of it as she turned on her knees and went to her hands, pointing her booty back at me. It took me only a moment to get back into position and start wedging my cockhead into her ass as we both groaned happily. This, I knew, was her favourite position. She liked being on top, but getting bent over and slammed from behind was peak pleasure for her.

"I fucking love you, I've," I groaned as I started to rock forward and back, getting her ass ready for a pounding. Looking down at her back I realised that within months of meeting her, I couldn't see myself without her. She was unique. She was my heart. Her pale skin, her body split in half by the thin navy line that separated her 'clean' half from her tattooed half. Her hair, sometimes shimmering blonde, sometimes golden brunette, and sometimes almost ginger, always with her thick, wavy curls.

I even loved her moans, and out here in the woods we both let loose as I sped up my thrusts and she tilted her hips and bounced them back to meet me. Our skin was smacking together, the clap a dull rhythm in the trees. We were surrounded by nature - greens and browns on most sides, warm and close. To our right was the grey-brown of the ravine wall glistening with the broken thunderstones embedded in it who knew how long ago, and the cool reflection of the waterfall.

Ivy moaned and growled loudly, letting herself go as she came again. I could feel my own coming soon, but I tried to hold it off by focusing on the tight pinch of pain in my leg from my gunshot wound. After the hike I'd made to scout the Golden Beaver bar and the sovereign citizens who called it home, I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to put on this sort of a performance for all three of my girls at the Falls.

But I didn't have time to think of Erica or Kyla, because Ivy was moaning and mewling as she went from her hands to her elbows while I drilled her ass.

"Fuck, Ivy," I gasped. "God, you feel so fucking good. You're so fucking- ungh, amazing!"

"I'm yours, Harrison. All yours. Take my ass. It's yours forever," she groaned. "Yes! Use my ass. I love you. Use my ass, *mon amour*."

"I'm close," I gasped.

"I want it," she begged. "I want it, I want it."

"Where?" I asked.

"On my face. In my mouth. I want to taste you."

I pulled out of her roughly, giving her ass a hard smack on the tattooed cheek with enough force to leave a red handprint, and she turned and sat on her knees, putting her beautiful face right under my cock and opening her mouth as she stroked it with both hands. Her wordless sounds of pleading, and the eagerness in her eyes, pushed me over the edge as I exhaled with a heavy grunt and came, one ropey glob after another spurting onto her face. Her aim was a little rough, only two of the five strands of cum landing on her tongue and the rest dripping across her cheeks and nose.

“Huhuhuh,” she laughed as the taste of my cum made her body lurch and rock, rolling into a fresh, chemically-induced orgasm. As soon as it finished, she pulled my half-wilted cock to her mouth and sucked, getting trace spikes of pleasure with every new taste. Then, keeping one hand on me, she used the other to fish the cum on her face between her lips.

It was a vulgar, disgusting display of love, and I was 90% sure it was Ivy being her filthy, perverted self rather than it all being the vaccine.

When she was done, cleaned up as well as she could without a mirror, I scooped her up from the ground and carried her over towards the edge of the overlook. I swept some loose stones and pine needles out of the way with my booted foot - we were both still wearing our shoes - and then laid her down and spooned up behind her as we looked out at the little waterfall.

“Now, *mon amour*,” Ivy said quietly. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She laid her head low and turned it so she could look back and up at me. “I could tell something was bothering you when you got out of your truck, Harrison. You were... how do you say it- Melancholic. Your smile when you saw me, I love, but before that something was wrong.”

I sighed and leaned in to kiss her cheek softly. “You know me so well, *mon cœur*.”

“That one is new,” she said with a smile and snuggled back at me a bit firmer. “I like that one on your lips. My heart.”

“*Mon cœur*,” I said again with a soft smile.

“Now, tell me,” she urged.

I told her. About the idiots at the bar, and the kids I’d seen there. I didn’t care so much if the adults suffered from their own delusions and stupidity, but when it finally hit them the kids would be in danger. And I told her about how my investigation was stalled - the easy leads had already run out. If I was going to find any of the people who attacked the construction site, my land, *our home*, it was going to take a hell of a lot of luck, risking myself by going back to the Golden Beaver and sitting ‘undercover,’ or piecing together the fast food receipts and hoping to track down security cam footage to put together faces and start tracking names.

And then I told her about the Rez, and Kara, and the outbreak.

“You need to help her,” Ivy said.

“I know,” I said.

“No, Harrison,” Ivy said pointedly. “You know, but you are hesitating.”

“She won’t let me save her if it means leaving her people behind,” I said. “I can’t make her take the vaccine and pick someone.”

“She doesn’t need to pick someone,” Ivy said. “She would have you.”

“She would pick a man from the tribe,” I said. “Someone who needs to be saved.”

Ivy just sighed and shook her head. “Then what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve been trying to think of something, but nothing... nothing I can do, no favour I can call in successfully, would stop their outbreak.”

“*Mon amour*,” she said softly, turning on our rocky bed so that she was facing me. She put her fingertips on my chin and jaw, making sure I was looking at her. “You are trying to save the day, when you can only save the hour. What can you do for her?”

I took a breath, thinking of what Kara had told me. She was holed up in her place with her second cousin and her neighbour. Half the places on the Rez were double-wide trailers, and the other half were small homes; I wasn’t sure where she was living now, but either way, she was in tight quarters with three women. That meant three people living off of whatever supplies she had, and knowing Kara she would have been donating anything extra she had to the Rez relief funds. Especially after the fire took out their community centre.

“Food,” I said. “Water. Other supplies.”

“You can bring those to her at least,” Ivy nodded. “Then come back to me. To us. Just to be sure.”

“Just to be sure, or because you want another round?” I asked with a little smile.

“Maybe both,” she grinned impishly. I kissed her and she moaned softly and then patted my chest. “Kyla next,” she said.

“What if I want you again?” I asked. “My little minx. My sexy Quebecoise queen. *Mon cœur*.”

“I could never say no,” Ivy sighed, smiling sadly. “But it wouldn’t be fair. Go to Kyla.”

“OK,” I whispered and kissed her again.

We almost didn’t get up. Almost.

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"It's dinner time," Kyla said, groaning as she stretched. Her bed was a little small for the two of us, just a twin since Valkyrie Falls wasn't exactly built with the expectation that people would be sharing rooms. I had no idea how Leo, Dani, Aria and India were making it work. Still, after our time in the RV, two people in a twin bed was comfortable and cuddling with my naked girlfriend was always welcome.

"Guess that means we should get dressed," I sighed.

She smiled and shifted so she was on her hands and knees overtop of me, looking down to kiss my lips lightly. "Well, I think *I* need to get dressed. I'm not sure how many people would complain if *you* came down naked."

I snorted and shook my head. "Well, Leo would for one."

Kyla smiled and gave me another peck on the lips. "That's fair."

We got dressed, me in the loose clothes that I'd arrived in and Kyla in a cute, comfortable outfit of loose sweatpants that hung low on her hips and a simple tank top with an unlined bralette that supported her tits but left them basically loose under the thin, stretchy fabric. Just hugging her from behind before we left the room made me smile as I squeezed her breasts and could feel her nipples through the two layers.

"Pervert," she snorted and laughed.

I kissed her neck and she groaned, pushing her ass back at me. I felt like a horny teenager again, first with Ivy and now with Kyla, dreading the need to stop the intimacy.

We made it downstairs without too much more groping and kissing and found that the open cafeteria area with the big exposed kitchen and the big bench seating was almost full. With the addition of Leo's family and my own, Valkyrie Falls was almost at its regular capacity even if we weren't taking up all the rooms.

Dinner was an interesting affair - many of the women were on specific diets and Sara, acting as the nutritionist, had weighed and plated their portions. Some meals were vegetarian, one was even vegan, and some had no qualms about what they ate. Our families were also spread out around the room, not congregating together, which was nice to see. Kyla grabbed a seat talking with Spencer and another woman, and when I passed by Ivy at a table with Aria and two of the athletes I felt myself flush and didn't look over because I could hear her discussing anal sex, which probably meant she'd either been teased or asked about our time up in the forest. Other than Ivy's conversation, however, I got the feeling that the general emotional climate was a little depressed compared to most of the times I had seen the ladies in a big group. Many of them were at least trying to put on a good face for the others, but reality was hitting the group hard again - the last time that had happened it was after we'd had to tell them about how deadly

things really were out there. Now, after the bad news from my trip down south for Melina, and the looter attack on the construction site, and probably me getting wounded *again*... I couldn't blame them for getting some emotional whiplash. They lived here at the Falls in relative safety, but their homes and families and communities (not to mention country and world) were in chaos. Anyone they couldn't get a hold of for a call or who didn't reply to a text was another person who was more likely dead than alive. We'd brought that reality to them again, and morale was suffering.

I ended up sitting down at the end of a table with Erica, Leo and Abi. Erica welcomed me with a sweet little peck on the lips, which brought a faux-disgusted gag from Leo, which just encouraged Erica to kiss me more fully as Abi smirked at their sibling antics.

"Ivy told me about the Rez," Erica said quietly once the kiss and teasing was over. "I'm sorry."

I sighed and nodded. "I'm going to try and at least do a supply run for her. I don't know what else I can do for them."

"That's more than you *should* do," Leo said but held up his hands when I looked at him with a furiously confused expression. "Not like that," he clarified. "I mean you shouldn't be driving into an outbreak area at all. Wasn't the outbreak on the site enough to see how dangerous that is? And just because you have the vaccine doesn't mean you're immune."

That... was something I hadn't considered. In my head, I'd been thinking of being vaccinated as being safe, but that wasn't what that meant. Probably. I needed to call Miriam for more info on that.

"Abi, that face right there is my man realising he's going to do something heroic even if it's more dangerous than he thinks it is," Erica sighed, gesturing to my expression.

Abi smiled a little and shook her head. "Harrison, if you were not a Sheriff, I would say you should leave such things to the police."

I hadn't had a chance to talk with Abi really about what she thought about everything we'd revealed to the Valkyrie Falls women last night about the vaccine and our relationships. My girls liked to tease me that she was interested in me, based solely on the fact that she showered with us after our workouts, but I still thought it was just her being more European, or even Nordic, in her temperament about nudity.

"I would have been helping even if I wasn't a Sheriff," I said.

"Hell, he was helping people before becoming a Sheriff," Erica pointed out, then turned to look at me full-on. "Just be careful. And, actually, if you're doing a supply run, we're going to need more frequent runs for here, too. We just added seven more mouths to feed that we didn't account for on the last run, plus you when you eat here."

“OK,” I nodded. “I’ll do that first thing tomorrow once the grocery store is open. Just get me a list together.”

“I’ll go with-”

“No,” I interrupted my fiancée. “I’ll do it alone. We don’t know who might be around, or if I might run into the sovereign citizens. For now, I should be the one to do it.”

There was a bit of argument back and forth, with Erica pointing out that if I was taking time to do supply runs I wasn’t working on the investigation and getting us home faster, but in the end Erica reluctantly agreed when Leo pointed out that her being with me if something did happen would put me in more danger. After that she let it drop and we were able to move on to small talk. Slowly, as dinner finished up and the ladies filtered into the kitchen to help with cleanup or out to other parts of the compound, our little group became the last one sitting down.

“Ready?” Erica asked me, her hand having slipped under the table a while ago and rubbing my leg.

“One more thing,” I said, knowing what she wanted to get to. “I’m worried about morale here, honestly. Things *feel* different.”

Abi frowned and nodded. “It’s been a lot, lately. Many of the ladies are worried and starting to become stressed about...” She paused for a moment to take a breath, then gestured generally. “Everything.”

“The last thing I wanted was to make this place feel unsafe,” I sighed.

“It’s not that,” Erica said, taking my hand and squeezing it.

“Erica is right,” Abi said. “We are happy to host you, after how you’ve been helping us. And your family is doing more to raise spirits than hurt them. Your little wiener dog could do that all by himself.”

I smirked a little and shook my head. Macho was living up to his name. From what little Ivy and Kyla had told me, practically every woman in the compound was stealing him away to play or snuggle for a bit. If we weren’t careful he’d go from being a little hotdog to a bulging bratwurst, he’d get so fat from the snacks he was getting.

“Well, I was thinking maybe we could do a little more,” I said. “To make you all feel more safe, and to raise spirits in general. If you’re open to it, Kyla has most of our firearms stashed safely in Erica’s car and in her room. She could run some basic firearms safety courses for anyone interested, and some people find shooting a little therapeutic or stress-relieving. And I bet

between Dani, Ivy and Kyla you could have a pretty good beginner dance class for some more active fun. And I could grab supplies for an art class if you're willing to do some teaching, babe."

"That's a great idea," Erica said, turning to Abi. "What do you think?"

Abi nodded. "We can use the cafeteria here for the art class, and we have all the space for a dance class. I will need to talk with Sara about firearms... We weren't sure about you bringing them here to begin with."

"Whatever you're comfortable with," I said. Then I turned to Leo. "Sorry I can't bring out a full woodshop for you, buddy."

He snorted and chuckled. "I wouldn't mind teaching, but I think we only need so many birdhouses."

That made me laugh, as it had been a long-running joke that he'd started his custom woodworking career making intricate birdhouses but had moved on to furniture because the market for birdhouses wasn't actually very large. The market, he'd said, belonged to middle school shop classes and summer camps.

More ideas got thrown around - India could do a passable Yoga class, Leo could organise a Euchre tournament (after teaching the game to anyone who didn't know it.) I could have done an art class as well, but I wasn't going to be around enough.

"You could always teach sex ed," Erica said with a laugh. "I'm sure your signup list would be full almost immediately."

"And on that note, I think we're done for now," I said, standing up from the table. "Abi, I'm sorry for her. Leo, she's *your* sister, so it's partially your fault for her having the mind of a 14-year-old boy. Come on, babe."

Erica whooped as I hefted her up bodily from the bench we'd been sitting on and tossed her over my shoulder. Erica was a full-bodied woman and nowhere near as dainty as Ivy or even Kyla, but even with my leg twinging once I had her up on my shoulder I could carry her pretty well. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans and had been walking around barefoot inside so, as she laughed and shouted to 'put me down, you barbarian!' she kicked her feet playfully even while hanging on to me. We passed several of the ladies, including Melina, on our way to the stairs and got some looks and smiles. I thought, for a moment, I saw a sadness in Melina's eyes as we passed even though she was laughing lightly.

At the stairs I set Erica down, not wanting to risk my leg carrying her up just for both of us to fall all the way back down and break our necks or backs. Once I got her on her feet, though, I gave her a solid crack of my hand on her ass through her tight jeans. "Go on," I said. "Get."

In any other context, Erica would have probably bit someone's head off for slapping her ass that way. But between her being horny, our playfulness, and the fact that we were so fucking down the rabbit hole of being in love, she just darted up the stairs giggling as I chased after her. Up on the second floor in the dormitory corridor she let me chase her all the way to the room she shared with Ivy before I caught her and pinned her to the wall, kissing her firmly as we kept laughing into each other's lips. Thankfully no one was in the hall or I would have felt too embarrassed to do that in front of them. Instead, it took us a couple of minutes to even twist the door handle and work our way halfway into the room.

"Wait," Erica said, a teasing smile on her lips as she pulled away from me. I was holding her ass with both hands and she'd been pressing her chest against me - she was wearing one of my T-shirts and I'd realised quickly that she wasn't wearing a bra underneath.

"What is it?" I asked.

She smirked. "Let me go get Josie. I bet she'd-"

"No," I said, pulling Erica into the room and kicking the door shut.

"Why not?" Erica asked.

"Because," I said, scooping her up in my arms again but this time in a princess carry that only travelled the few steps to the bed, which I tossed her onto heavily. "Josie is sexy as hell and fun, but I want time with my *wife*. Not a threesome."

"I'm not your wife yet," Erica smirked even as she started to undo her jeans and wiggle out of them.

"I'd have married you the day after you asked me if my sister could get up here," I growled, peeling off my shirt and shucking my shorts.

"I know, babe," Erica said, and I grabbed the jeans and helped pull them off her lower legs and feet. She switched to taking off her shirt, revealing her glorious big tits to me. I got the jeans off and growled as I fell on her, getting my mouth on those breasts as I ran my hands from her bare waist and up to her arms, which I pushed above her head. "I would have, too."

I loved on her tits for a bit, then kissed up to her lips as we made out like teenagers, rolling around on the bed. She ended up on top, both of us just wearing our underwear, and she took a turn and pinned my arms above my head as she looked down at me with a smile and her tits hung brushing against my chest.

"Why shouldn't I get Josie to warm you up?" she asked. "She wants you, and she's been asking all three of us little questions about the vaccine and how it works. She could blow you for a bit, then watch us fuck."

“Why are you wearing your full makeup?” I countered. “And walking around in one of my shirts?” Her brow furrowed as she opened her mouth, but wasn’t sure what to say. “You’re staking your claim, babe,” I said. “You’re letting them know that, even if they’ve been allowed to look, even if they’re ripped and athletic, you’re the queen of my castle. You wear my clothes, and you do yourself up for me in a way they don’t, or can’t. God, I love you, Erica. And for all that I love the others, you were first. You’ll always be that. And sometimes, even if we have fifty women, or a hundred, in this thing that’s going on I’m still going to want just *you* sometimes.”

She kissed me, soft and deep. Her lips, painted that deep red, were soft like rose petals and she smelled a little like vanilla as her hair fell around us. Her tongue teased against my lips, asking to be let in, and I let it. We weren’t making out like teenagers now, we were kissing like lovers.

“I love you,” she said as our lips parted and she sighed, laying flat against me.

“I love you too,” I said, hugging her to me.

“Alone time,” she agreed softly. “Make love to me. Then fuck me. Fuck me like I’m your whore-queen. You know what I mean.”

“I do,” I said with a grin, kissing her cheek as my hands travelled down from her bare back to her panties-clad ass, sliding underneath to grab her bum and then lower to tease her pussy. “Jesus, you’re wet.”

“I get that way every time I see you, Harrison,” she said. “Always have, for years. It’s not the vaccine, it’s you.”

We kissed again, and I started easing a couple of fingers inside of her as she wiggled and moaned. It was going to be a good one.

* * * * *

The alarm going off reminded me, once again, that I loved Vanessa but I really hated her work hours. I got up with her, made her a quick breakfast, kissed her goodbye and collapsed back into bed. The evening before, after I returned back to the Compound with a ready-to-heat meal sent on from the women of Valkyrie Falls for Vanessa, I’d had barely an hour to myself before she came home at 9 PM on the dot just like she’d promised. I heated her food, massaged her feet as she ate, and she’d let me know that her Phone Bank ladies hadn’t turned up any immediate leads from their calls to the gun shops hunting that revolver serial number. It was just as likely that the old piece had belonged to the dead man who owned the car rather than the dead men who had been driving it, so I wasn’t hanging on the hope that something turned up there, but it was still another frustration.

Then Vanessa asked me to tell her about my day, and I did. By the time I was finished, talking in graphic detail about my sex with Ivy out in the forest and Erica in her room at Vanessa's request (but not talking about Kyla, since she was more private), Vanessa got on her hands and knees and sucked my cock, then she fulfilled the other part of her promise of 'at least twice every night.'

I woke up a second time, alone now, with sunlight blazing through the cracks in the shades of the RV back window, and got myself moving. It took me a minute, when I checked my phone, to realise that the girls were teasing me again. This time, instead of naked photos of them in bed, they were sending me thirst trap videos. But it wasn't videos of them, it was videos of the women at the Falls. Some of them were obviously planned and staged - Josie skipping rope as the video circled her, then suddenly doing the same thing topless as the camera rotated around her back; and Melina doing squats with perfect form, her amazing ass and tits both tightly encased in workout gear that would probably be illegal in several states for indecent exposure. Or causing heart attacks. Then there was one of Abi in the middle of what looked like a yoga class, smiling and a little goofy, but it was cut with clips of her lifting impressive amounts of weight and doing other super-active CrossFit exercises with grim determination on her face and a hard, pumping music beat. I doubted she knew they'd done that, and I would also bet that they'd been a little scared to ask her permission.

Those I could handle, along with a couple more of women I'd been friendly with at the gym. The one of Spencer, though, made me feel weird. On the one hand, she was extremely attractive in a wholesome, lovable way. On the other, she was barely in her twenties and had shared such an intimate story with me that it felt wrong to even think of her like the way their thirst trap video made me think. She, like Abi, didn't seem to realise she was being filmed during her workout and she did the move that made me think 'classic Spencer,' finishing a set and pulling off her bulky sweater to reveal her fit torso and big tits encased in an athletic bra. But then she seemed to notice whoever was filming her and she blushed and smiled, and then winked, at the camera.

I called Miriam.

"Later start this morning," she said.

"Yeah, well, I'm running out of the fast leads quickly and soon I'll be into the weeds for real," I said. "Any luck on the FBI front?"

"Nothing so far. And, Harri, I haven't been able to squeeze anything out yet on the vaccine front. I'm sorry."

I sighed and nodded, even if she couldn't see me. "OK, thanks for keeping me updated. I'm going to take some time today to do a supply run - the ladies up at the Athletic compound need more stuff since I added seven more people to their numbers, and I'm going to grab stuff for my friends on the Rez at the same time before I dig into the receipts. But those plans brought up some questions that I think only you can answer."

“I’ll tell you what I can,” she said. “But - and this is awkward to ask - did you re-up your vaccination with the ladies since yesterday like you planned? If you go out and you’re infected from the dumbass sovereigns, you could be spreading it.”

“That’s one of my questions,” I said. “When we’re talking about me being vaccinated, or safe, what does that actually *mean*? Like, how safe are we talking? If I have four partners, am I good to go?”

Now it was Miriam’s turn to sigh. “Technically you only have three and a half partners,” she said. “Vanessa’s numbers haven’t changed. I’ve been keeping a tag on her studies; it looks like she’s still only getting mid-thirties coverage. It’s enough that they don’t want to try re-vaccinating her unless there’s an emergency, but she’s not in a great spot and isn’t providing you with the coverage the others are. And, to answer your question, the most recent math I’m seeing is that one partner still only nets a man 70% efficacy, the same as a month ago. Each additional partner only adds a fraction of that though. The current model says the best coverage will come from seven partners, so until you hit that point you’re taking real risks. With three and a half you’re still in the 85th percentile of efficacy, I think the number was, but...”

“Seven?” I asked, a little dumbfounded. “I thought we were done adding...”

“Getting tired of all that pussy, Black?” Miriam asked. I could hear the smirk on her lips.

“It’s just a lot,” I said. “What about all the construction workers?”

“They’ll get there eventually too,” she said. “Our rollout still isn’t starting though, or else I could do something about the Rez. Harri, the death tolls...fuck, never mind, I can’t tell you that. Especially not over the phone, and probably not in general.”

“OK, don’t,” I said, though I had a pit of dread in my stomach from that small hint. Greerson and his OGA team had hinted at *apocalyptic* being the level they were responding to, and I couldn’t spend time brewing on that.

“What was your other question?”

“I’ve been having these... God, this sounds a little fucked up. Every once in a while, I’ve been having these weird possessive urges,” I said.

“Over Erica and the girls?”

“No,” I said. “More like... I feel like I’m a horny nineteen-year-old with the world as my oyster sexually, and I get these flashes of wanting to fuck people around me. Not like, violent urges or anything, but weird feelings. Like I’m jacked up on testosterone or something.”

Miriam was quiet for a long moment, and then I could hear the telltale sound of keyboard keys from her end of the call. "Alright," She said. "I'm not seeing any reports about that in the studies I have access to. I'll put in a call, see if I can get one of the head brainiacs on the phone and run it by them. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "And it's not an urge that I start to act on or anything. It's just a sort of animal feeling that I've been equating to my lizard brain."

"Well, we've seen a general uptick in libido for men as well as women from the vaccine," Miriam said. "You might just be having a bigger reaction to that than normal. Are you, um, getting enough? Sex?"

"I would have thought so," I said. "I mean, to be frank, Miriam, it's more than I could have accomplished in a day when I was a horny nineteen-year-old fucker."

She snorted softly. "Well, keep it in your pants unless it's one of your partners. We still don't know what set of circumstances specifically caused Vanessa's situation and whether something about you was the catalyst or not."

I gulped a little, thinking of the blowjob from Josie. I hadn't come in her mouth, and my cum had hit her ass and back and washed off in the showers. I'd need to be extra careful with Erica's machinations.

"Anything else?" Miriam asked.

"Are you OK?" I asked in response. "Safe?"

"I'm in the middle of a military installation focused on the vaccine," Miriam said. "I probably couldn't be *more* safe right now."

"I know, I meant, like... are you vaccinated? We've never talked about that."

There was a long moment of quiet on the phone. "The brass are going to pull the trigger any time now on mandated vaccinations for everyone in the military," she said. "There's just political pushback happening somewhere up there, too. I've been putting it off."

"Not sure who you'd want to match with?" I asked.

"It's just complicated right now," she said. "I'll un-complicate it when I need to, and I'm too busy to do it properly until that need becomes immediate."

"OK," I said. "If you need to talk it out, just let me know."

"I will," she sighed. "Keep me updated on everything."

"Will do," I said.

We hung up and I grit my teeth a little. Seven women? My life was completely full already with four. How could I adapt to three more?

Hell, I couldn't even *fit* three more in the RV. Maybe once the house was built that would be more realistic, but how was thinking of *seven partners* realistic to begin with? Or realistic for every man in America? And how the hell would our relationship keep working with that many more people just... injected into it?

I also had a... not a twinge, but maybe a wince, deep inside that Miriam was going to partner with someone. If she had to uncomplicate it I assumed she had someone in mind that was actively deployed. Maybe it was a guy from the pararescue crews that she'd had a thing for but couldn't get involved with being in the command structure. Or maybe it was even more complicated than that and she *had* been involved but it was a secret, or the guy was married or something and she needed to make contact to get things clear with the couple.

If she had someone she trusted, I would be happy for her. But that didn't change the fact that I was still feeling that weird feeling. That '*It should be me*' feeling.

Shaking it off, I got myself together and kicked myself into gear. After a quick check-in with Vanessa on my way out, and introducing myself to the airmen who were on duty at the gate to the site, I headed into town. The grocery store used to open at 9 AM every morning except Sundays, but now it had reduced hours so I was showing up a little early.

That didn't stop the parking lot from already being half-full and the entry line from winding down the side of the building.

Part of me hesitated, not wanting to risk getting spotted with my Sheriff's truck if the sovereign citizens came by again, but I wasn't otherwise in uniform. I made sure I had my badge tucked under my T-shirt and got out, heading for the back of the line.

It took almost an hour for me to get into the store. They were limiting how many people they had inside at once even more now, which was a good thing in general. I also realised I was one of the only people who wasn't buttoned up completely - I had a medical mask on, but I wasn't wearing long sleeves and goggles and shit like we used to.

I looked like one of the people who didn't care or didn't believe the pandemic was real. I'd gotten comfortable.

That explained why the people in front and behind me in line weren't even willing to spare me a glance and a chuckle when I made a little joke about bread lines.

A woman was working the front door instead of the pimple-faced teenager that was usually there, and she had me wait almost ten minutes for a couple of people to leave with their shopping before she let me in. I grabbed a cart, its handlebar freshly sanitised by a worker, and started walking around, running through the list that Erica had sent me and adding extras that I would bring up to Kara on the Rez.

The problem was, as I walked down the aisles, I realised there were big holes in what was on offer. Shortages of one thing or another had been happening since the start of the lockdown, but they'd always come back in. Toilet paper had been hard to find for a few weeks, and sanitiser had been almost non-existent. Now, though, it was whole sections in the food aisles and it almost felt like it was at random.

With my cart only half-full, I wandered towards the front of the store and went to the customer service desk, hitting the little bell since no one was there. One of the cashiers, pretty much locked in behind a booth of plexiglass at her till, called over asking what I wanted. It took a couple of tries to understand each other because she was even more bundled up than the customers.

When I finally got the manager to appear he looked haggard. It was the same guy that I'd seen arguing with the Sovereign Citizens in the past, except his shirt was untucked, his tie was loose around his collar and I doubted he'd shaved in a week or so behind his heavy N95 mask. Part of me wondered if he was sleeping up in his office that overlooked the cashier area.

"What?" he asked curtly. It looked like the 'customer is always right' attitude had been left behind.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," I said. "I just noticed there's a lot of stock missing and was wondering if you've had shipping problems or something."

"We have what we have," he said. "Everything is out there, we don't have anything in the back. Alright? No one is going to check the back area for you."

"That's not what I was asking," I said, reaching under my shirt and pulling out my badge on its chain. "I was just worried that robberies are getting more common, or if your trucks are getting hijacked."

The manager looked at my badge, blinked and raised his eyebrows, then looked at my mask-covered face again. "You're a cop?"

"Sheriff," I said. "And from another county. But this is where I come to get my groceries, and sometimes my fiancée calls ahead for big orders because we deliver to other people. Erica?"

"Oh!" The manager said. "That's you? Alright, um, sorry. I- Fuck, where do I start? The robberies are off and on. When we see them coming, whoever I have on the door tries to get it locked;

that's worked a couple of times. It's always a group of guys, and they make off with a few carts worth of food. Other people are stealing stuff too, but I've given up on trying to stop them all. We did lose a shipment to a hijacking a couple of weeks ago, but only the one that I know of for our location."

"So you're just not getting everything in the shipments?"

He hesitated. "Partially," he said.

"What's the other part?" I asked.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment. "You really deliver food to other people in the area, and that sort of thing?"

"You think I need the amount of produce my fiancée calls in just for us?" I countered.

"Fair, OK," he nodded. "We don't put everything out."

I frowned. "Why not?"

"There's a... it might be easier to just show you, actually," he said. "When you're done shopping, ring the bell again."

"OK," I said, my brow still furrowed. He assured me he'd be listening for the bell and headed back up to his office. I went back out into the store and gathered everything I could, or found substitutes for what I couldn't. Once my cart was full to overflowing I went through the cash, fitting about half of the groceries in the reusable bags I'd brought and trying to sort out some of the other stuff into paper bags that I could drop off with Kara easily.

The manager must have been watching for me because he came back down from his office before I was even done paying, and he asked me to meet him out back of the grocery store when I was done loading up my groceries. I agreed and did just that, slowly driving my truck around into the loading area of the store. He was waiting near a beat-up red Civic and waved me over.

"Alright," I said as I got out of my truck. "What's the deal?"

"This is off the record, right?" the manager asked me.

"That's for journalists," I said. "But yeah, you've piqued my curiosity. What's going on?"

"Well, with the way things are, not everyone who needs food can pay... conventionally," he said "So every shipment I get in, I've been skimming off goods and selling it at a huge discount to

these guys. I write off some of it as shrinkage, and everyone in corporate knows that stealing and looting is happening so it's not even questioned."

"Who are 'these guys' you're selling it to?" I asked.

He looked nervous. "Local guys. They've set up, like, a market where people can go when they don't have straight cash."

I blinked, a whole lot of things going through my mind all at once. "Alright, well, how about you tell me where it is? Because I don't care what you do with your stock as long as people aren't going hungry, but this sounds shady as hell and I want to make sure these guys aren't... fucking evil, I guess."

"I figured," he said. "And I've wondered a bit, too. They operate out of that warehouse over there." He pointed out beyond the back of the grocery store shipping area, across an undeveloped green space and past an old hardware store. Now I realised why he'd been standing by the car - the warehouse was only really visible from that point of the parking lot. It wasn't very far away, only a couple hundred metres, but with the way even 'downtown' Jewell was things were forested and spread out. "If you want to go check it out, you should just walk from here," he said. "And you probably don't want to bring your badge, they pat everyone down as they go in."

"Alright," I said. "Am I good to leave my truck here?"

The manager agreed and I waited as he headed back into the store before taking a breath. Erica's admonishments that I needed to be careful were running through my head. Was this one of those 'I don't need to do this' things? On the one hand, this wasn't my county and I didn't actually have any proof of a crime beyond the manager possibly defrauding his chain - and considering the state of the world, I could give a fuck about that. But this was still my fucking town, and this was a literal black market. It was entirely possible that it was just some little community effort put on by caring folks trying to make sure everyone had enough to eat, and if that was the case I'd give them some tips to keep everyone safe and try to help them out as best I could.

The likelihood of it being entirely innocent felt really low.

I made the quick walk through the green space to get to the back road and then trudged down the gravel shoulder. This was an unused area of Jewell, one of those forgotten nooks and crannies of the village that had been left to rot as a business became a gravestone to the prosperity that had once been possible. The warehouse was the old Lumber depot that had closed over a decade ago, and as I approached I saw that there were half a dozen cars parked at one end. At one point the warehouse would have been visible from the main drag of the highway through town, but now it was hidden by the trees and the facade that the grocery store put up, separating it from the clean street and bustle of people's lives. The whole place was

overgrown from lack of use, and rust was setting in thick on the upper reaches of the corrugated metal walls of the building. Most of the windows were filthy and too high for me to look in anyways, but there was no way that I was just walking in without taking some precautions.

Instead of heading directly for the man door near the cars that looked like the most likely point of entrance, I walked past the warehouse on the opposite side of the pothole-filled road. Short glances helped me pinpoint that someone had installed a new security camera high up in the overhang of the roof overlooking the parking lot area, and while there wasn't one covering the long side of the building facing the street, there was another one at the far end of the building covering where the load/unload docking area used to be for the depot. I kept walking until I was sure that I had passed out any meaningful view of the security camera, then crossed the road. The forested area beyond the warehouse that backed onto an overgrown hill was thick, and I used that to my advantage as I slipped into the foliage and circled around, following the curve of the hill back towards the loading area.

As I neared the building, I found that someone had taken a heavy weed whacker to the overgrowth at this end of the building, cutting a path and a clear area hidden away from the road. At one point it looked like there had been a gravel pad, probably for utility access or some sort of work area, back when the lumber depot had been operating. Now it was a parking lot of a different sort - six motorcycles, clean and gleaming with chrome, were backed in and resting on their kickstands.

I blew out a breath. Unless this was some sort of Bikers for Tykes charity organisation, things weren't looking up. Bikers were a subculture that permeated America, even if most people didn't ever really interact with it. They were everywhere. I'd even seen and interacted with some of them overseas, particularly while I was stationed in Germany. Most people who rode motorcycles were completely innocent, but biker gangs were real and the first thing I thought of looking at those bikes was a guy pulling up and opening on me with an Uzi less than a week ago.

More likely than not, these bikes had nothing to do with those guys. Still, I had to forcefully remove my hand from the grip of my sidearm at my hip.

I snuck down the side of the building, looking for ways that I could get a peek in, but found none. My options were quickly getting limited, and it was obvious that whoever's operation this was, they had done their homework. The location felt remote even though it was good access to the grocery store and the highway. The building was secure, and if they were smart enough to install the cameras then I had to assume they were smart enough to have someone watching them. I could either walk in through the front door and act like a customer, or I could use the small access door near the bikes to sneak in.

Neither option seemed particularly careful. I could always back off and try to get some reinforcements, but I doubted I'd get back up from the Staties for something like this. The next best option was calling Miriam and trying to get her to lend me a couple of her Air Force goons,

but this was completely out of their jurisdiction as well. That left me with the option of getting Kyla down here, and there was no shot I wanted her to be involved in this after everything else that-

“Who the fuck are you?”

I'd been slowly working my way back through the overgrowth towards the bikes as I'd been considering my options and hadn't realised that the access door there had opened. There hadn't been a bang of the door bursting open, or a squeal of rusty hinges, so I had completely missed the woman opening the door and stepping out into the shade.

She was immediately eye-catching for two reasons; first, she was gorgeous. She had to be in her early or mid-twenties, had a broad face with a sharp jawline and pointed chin, and big eyes that she had done with thick black makeup. Her hair was a silky black, long and wavy, and based on her skin tone I would have immediately assumed she was at least part native considering the nearby Rez if it wasn't for something about the shape of her eyes, nose and lips that reminded me of women I'd seen overseas. She was either Arab or Persian, the cultural difference of which had been drilled into me by an interpreter while I was deployed.

The second thing that was eye-catching was her hourglass figure and absolutely astounding tits. She was wearing a tight, beige turtleneck that hugged her body and highlighted her bust in a way that actually cast a bit of a shadow under it on her stomach. She was also wearing a thin black leather jacket, black skintight jeans and black boots.

And she was looking right at me.

“Just passing through,” I said, not stopping my walking.

“Bullshit,” she said with a bit of a snarl. She darted back into the darkness of the warehouse, clearly going to fetch someone.

I had a moment where I could run; it wasn't that far from the grocery store back lot, and I could cut through the green space. They would chase, but the motorcycles wouldn't do them too much good so it would be a footrace. Once I was in the lot they would see my truck and that could dissuade them, and the store definitely had cameras so they probably wouldn't want to shoot me up.

Probably.

Or I could stay and figure this shit out.

I quickly yanked my badge from around my neck and dropped it on the ground under a bush, kicking some dirt over it, then headed towards the open doorway as I muttered and thought of Erica. “Sorry, babe.” I made it past three of the six motorcycles when a guy came rushing out,

his mouth pulled into a grimace as he was already reaching to grab me with both hands. He was big, he was burly, and he smelled like cigarettes as he got his hands on my shirt and yanked me around a bit.

“Hey, whoa,” I said, holding up my hands.

The first guy was followed by a second one, somehow even bigger than the first, and he was carrying a shotgun. They were each dressed roughly, standing out as rough-and-tumble sorts rather than street thugs or rednecks. ‘Biker’ was definitely the right word for them. They both also happened to be wearing leather vests, called cuts, with patches on the front. Only one of them stood out to me in that moment - black diamonds with 1% stitching.

Definitely not a charity group.

I got spun around, not fighting it, and slammed against the side of the building. “Gun,” the one with the shotgun grunted, and my pistol was yanked from its holster at my hip.

“Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing here?” growled the guy who had grabbed me. He had a neck tattoo of an American flag clutched by an eagle, and my mind quickly sifted through the notes I’d taken of the raiders but didn’t find anything. The good news, if I could call it that in my current situation, was that they were both wearing gaiters pulled up over their noses, mouths and chins. The bikers were at least a little health conscious. How could *bikers* be more concerned about a pandemic than sovereign citizens?

“I’m just a guy trying to figure out what the deal is here,” I said, mostly honestly and keeping my hands raised. “I heard there was a sort of market going on.”

The two of them glanced at each other, the one with the shotgun grunted and nodded, and the one with the neck tattoo grabbed me and hauled me into the warehouse. The quick transition from outside to inside had me blinded for a moment as I got manhandled, but I quickly saw that I was in what must have been the office area of the depot before it closed. It was mostly empty except for a few old desks and chairs, and I got yanked into the centre of the space and slammed down into a wooden chair that creaked from the strain.

The only lighting in the area was a couple of white, battery-operated lanterns closer to the door that led deeper into the warehouse. They cast a sort of ghostly pale light over the two bikers and the woman, who was grimacing at me as she eyed me up and down.

I decided, instead of trying to stammer an explanation and make a show of it, I’d just keep my mouth shut until I was asked a question. A couple of moments later I was glad I did, as Neck Tattoo turned away while Shotgun kept me covered, which gave me a look at the patch on the back of his vest. It was big, bold and I recognized it immediately, though I hadn’t seen one in years.

The Guns of Thunder were a small biker gang that had sprung up in the back regions of Oregon. In the 90s and 00s they'd been a growing criminal element and had started to gain traction running opioids and knockoffs. Then they'd gotten into a short and bloody war with the other major biker gangs in the state, namely the Gypsy Jokers and the Mongols, and had dropped off the face of Oregon after a summer of killings that had spiked the murder rate for the state dramatically.

"He's clean," grunted Neck Tattoo as he reached the far door.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" asked the other guy with his shotgun still trained on my chest.

"Like I said, I heard you guys had a sort of market going on here," I said. "I just wanted to check-" I cut off as another man entered, pushing past Neck Tattoo.

This new guy was older and walked with the confident swagger of a man who had earned every ounce of his ego but didn't let it control him. He had a sort of long face, though the gaiter he was wearing obscured most of his features. He was wearing a red flannel shirt under a dark denim cut, and his sleeves were rolled up to reveal his arms were peppered with a variety of small tattoos and his fingers had a half dozen chunky rings spread across them.

"He was out there skulking through the brush," the woman said. She'd put on a medical facemask much like my own at some point while I'd been getting grabbed.

"Well, I guess I'll need to have a talk with him then, baby," he said, his voice gravelly as he rubbed her shoulder for a moment before turning to me. He grabbed another chair and dragged it over, setting it down with a thunk in front of me before sitting down and staring into my eyes. "Do you know who I am?"

"No clue," I said. "Well, specifically. I recognize the patches."

"Hmm," he grunted, then leaned back. "Swear allegiance to the flag."

"What?"

"If you aren't one of those fucking hicks spouting off that dumb shit in the woods about not being an American, swear allegiance to the flag," he demanded.

Shaking my head, I sat straight and cleared my throat before putting my right hand over my heart. "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

"Well, that's one question answered," he said. He glanced at his brother with the shotgun. "What did he have on him?"

“Handgun,” Shotgun said, nodding towards Neck Tattoo, who showed off my sidearm.

“So what the fuck are you doing walking around my building with a weapon like that?” the bossman asked, turning his attention to me again. As my eyes were adjusting to the light I could see that his hair, shorn short all over her head, was more silver than black, and he had crow's feet heavy at the corners of his eyes. I would have placed him in his late fifties if I had to guess.

“I heard about your market and wanted to see what was going on,” I said. “And my sidearm is for my protection.”

“‘Sidearm’ sounds a lot like you’re a cop,” he said.

“It’s also just the correct term for it,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, looking me over again. “Military.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Navy?”

“You think I’d fit on a ship?” I snorted. “Army.”

“Not everyone who served in the Navy was on a ship the whole time,” the guy said and turned over his arm. His inner forearm had an eagle gripping a globe, a K-bar knife stabbed through.

“Kuwait?” I asked.

“And Afghanistan,” he grunted. “You?”

“Afghanistan and Iraq,” I said.

“Hmm,” he hummed, though it came out more like a growl. Then he asked me something in Farsi.

“I only ever got a bit of Farsi, and I’ve lost most of it,” I said. “I only caught a couple of words.”

“Well, at least you could *tell* it was Farsi and not Arabic,” he said. “What are you really doing here, Dog Face?”

“I told you, I heard there was a sort of market. I wanted to figure out what was going on, see if it was something I should be interested in or not.”

“Interested for what?”

“Buying things,” I said.

“We aren’t a cash business,” he said. “We deal in trade. You got anything to trade beyond that firearm?”

“Well, what are you looking for?” I asked.

He grunted. “We’ve got food, fucker. Fresh, preserved, all sorts of shit. And chickens, if you’ve got half a brain to be able to keep them, and plenty of gardening supplies if you’ve got the space to start a garden and feed yourself or bring what you grow here. We take goods-for-goods or other valuables. We don’t ask questions, but if we find out you killed someone for what you bring in then you’ll get whatever you gave. We’re also interested in useful skills. Auto work, carpentry, sewing, that kind of shit. So now you know.”

“Now I know,” I said.

“And now you need to give me a reason not to tell Georgie Boy here to fill your chest with lead and toss you into the woods, cause no one is going to come looking for you.”

I clenched my jaw to stop from reacting outwardly. “Do I look like a piece of shit?” I asked.

“Seriously. I clearly am not hurting for food right now, so I’m doing something right, and I’m not desperate enough to try to roll you guys over for eggs and bacon. I grew up in this town, I heard a rumour, and I came to check it out. Now I know that this is your turf, and what the deal is. And I didn’t walk the fuck on in your front door because I *didn’t know who you were*. I’ve had more interactions with the fucking sovereign citizen idiots than I would ever care to, and if this was one of their things I didn’t want to even start with them.”

He stared, or maybe glared, at me for a long and silent minute. “What do you do for work?” he asked.

“I’m an artist,” I said. “Movies, video games, that kind of shit. I wanted to create things after I got out, so that’s what I did.”

“You don’t look like an artist,” he said. “Those aren’t the arms of an artist.”

“Yeah, well, four years of high school football and eight years in the service got me used to working out. I’m not as big as I used to be.”

“You looking for work now?” he asked.

“You want me to draw you something?”

“No,” he said. “I want to know if a man with eight years of service is looking for *work*. If it comes around.”

“Depends on the work,” I said.

He looked me up and down again, then narrowed his eyes. “Here’s the deal. You aren’t getting out of here without taking a beating. The principle of the thing, sneaking around like that. But instead of one of us just laying into you a bit, you can fight Georgie Boy there straight up. He’ll clobber you, I’m not going to lie, but if you can put up a decent fight maybe we keep your number and give you a call in a couple of weeks if we need something done. This shitstorm out here, it’s better to make some friends, right? We just make sure our friends are worth having.”

Fuck me, I groaned internally. Georgie Boy was the big guy with the shotgun.

“If I’m going to take some shots, I might as well give some of my own,” I said.

“Just like a grunt,” the biker said, grinning behind his gaiter. He stood up and grabbed his chair, pulling it out of the way as he looked at Neck Tattoo near the door. “Go find Garret and Chuck. They’ll want to see this.” He followed Neck Tattoo through the door into the warehouse.

The woman, who had watched the whole conversation silently, strode up to me. She was short, maybe five-foot-three at best, but gave off the sort of presence that made her seem eight feet tall based on her ego. She stood in front of me, glaring at me through half-hooded eyes as I made certain not to glance down at her tits. “You might have found my father’s soft spot, you fuck, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t leaving here broken and busted. Georgie doesn’t stop punching until something goes snap.”

“I’m guessing you aren’t single then,” I said, not able to resist the chance to tease her.

Her glare sparked angrily as she sneered behind her mask. “I’m not. And I guarantee my boyfriend has a bigger cock *and* gun.”

“Those are some weird things to compare,” I said. “You sure he’s OK with you talking about how big his gun is?”

She scoffed and looked over at Shotgun, who was still covering me. “Do me a favour and break his jaw,” she said.

“We’ll see,” Georgie mumbled darkly. Based on the size and gnarled nature of his hands along with the cauliflower ears he sported, I had a feeling no matter how good a fight I put up, this was going to hurt.

“I’ll make you a bet,” I said to the woman. “If I can make Georgie here give up during the fight, I get to take you on a nice, relaxing date and treat you like the lady you are, دخترزيبا.”

Her eyes widened and she sniffed as I called her 'beautiful girl' in Farsi. The Persian language wasn't as popular in Iraq or Afghanistan as it was in western Iran, but I'd picked up enough during my tours that I could give out a basic compliment to a woman - always a handy thing to have in my back pocket.

She didn't answer, or maybe just didn't have time to, before her father, Neck Tattoo and another guy came in from the warehouse. That meant there were still two other bikers around somewhere, unless the woman rode her own bike, and I had a feeling she could but she was more of a ride-on-the-back gal if her boyfriend was in the gang.

The new biker was older with long grey hair past his shoulders and I immediately got the vibe that he could have been a hippy trying to sell acid at a music festival, if it weren't for the pistol stuck into the front of his pants and the knife hanging from his belt that looked more like it was the size of a machete.

"Where's Chuck?" the woman asked.

"He'll come around," the boss said, somewhat cryptically. He turned his attention to me. "You ready to take your medicine?"

"That depends on if Georgie is going to put down that shotgun and make this a fair fight," I said as I stood from my chair.

The boss gave a nod to the big beefcake of a man, who lowered his shotgun and set it down on one of the old desks ringing the room. He turned back to me and cracked his knuckles with a loud pop.

I looked at the boss again. "I fight, I have the chance of walking out of here with your respect?" I asked.

"I doubt you'll be walking," he replied.

I grabbed the chair I'd been sitting on and swung it like a fucking baseball bat at Georgie. The big guy was quicker than I hoped he would be, getting his arms up to block the swing. The chair, an old wooden thing, proved to be a little less sturdy than it had felt as I'd been sitting on it. The back snapped off of the seat as the legs cracked against Georgie's arms, splinters shooting out in every direction.

The big guy grunted and stepped towards me, already reaching to try and grab me, but I managed to slide sideways away from his grasp and I tossed the rest of the chair back I was still holding at his head before snapping a kick at his knee. I connected, though not as hard as I wanted, and Georgie grunted again but didn't collapse as I'd hoped.

He was a solid slab of muscle and bone. I was in trouble.

I had two options, just the same as every fight really. Be defensive, try to wear out my enemy while taking as little hurt as possible; or be aggressive and try to do as much damage as quickly as possible. With a guy as big and sturdy as Georgie, it was entirely possible that I could have played it back and let him tire himself out, except that I could already feel the stitches in my leg aching and for all that I'd been trained in hand-to-hand combat it was pretty unlikely I had the pure experience that the big biker did.

If I was going to win, or at least survive this without being turned into a bloody pulp, I had to cheat and cheat fast.

People were shouting behind me, encouragements for Georgie or curses at me, but it was all a wordless ringing in my ears as I followed up my kick to his knee with a hard, toe-forward kick to his nuts. He exhaled heavily, collapsing forward in shock and pain but still grabbing for me. He got a hold of my arm and wrenched me forward, but instead of trying to pull away from his strong grip I stepped into it, slamming my forehead into the big biker's face. There was a distinct crunch of his nose breaking and the big man roared.

I was in his grasp now though, and he proved just as tough as I thought he would be as he wrapped his arms around me and squeezed, lifting me off my feet. He had my right arm trapped, but my left arm ended up sort of over his shoulder as I was kind of looking behind him. My ribs immediately felt like they were groaning and threatening to give and my vision tunnelled.

Without any leverage, the best I could do was heave myself against him, and with my own considerable size, he bent backwards a bit. I stretched, reaching through the black tunnel of my vision as my lungs strained for another breath, and my fingers found the cool metal.

One-handed, I raised the shotgun as I held it by the end of the barrel and I hammered the pistol grip down right on Georgie's tailbone. That made him grunt in a shock of pain as he stood straight up and arched his back in reaction. My next blow was able to reach lower and I slammed that grip into the side of his knee, which buckled this time and we both went over.

His grip loosened and I was able to suck in a breath, my head and leg both pounding in pain, and I blindly threw a backwards elbow towards Georgie's head. It was a glancing blow, and he wasn't done yet either as he scrambled to grab me. His huge hand found my leg and I growled a scream as he gripped my thigh right on the stitches.

"He's a fucking cop!" cut through the ringing in my ears.

I kicked, hitting Georgie in the chest as we scrambled on the ground instead of his face like I'd been planning, and he snarled behind his gaiter and reached in and grabbed me by my throat, his steely fingers tightening quickly. I clawed at his hand for just a moment but realised quickly as he leveraged himself up onto one knee that there was no way I was prying it free. Instead, I

swung the shotgun I was still holding around and clocked him right in the side of the face with it, though it was just with the flat instead of the hammer-like grip. He growled and I saw real violence in his eyes as he raised his fist and brought it down in a hammer blow. I managed to roll us both slightly, his fist glancing off the side of my skull instead of straight into my face. We naturally rocked back to flat and I used that bit of momentum to swing the shotgun again, this time landing the grip hand on the side of his head. He staggered and his eyes went glazed, his grip loosening enough for me to get in a gasp, and I pulled up my feet and kicked him off of me.

Georgie rolled backwards and I jumped to my feet, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, but I only got one step towards him before movement out of the blurred side of my vision made me reel backwards.

I felt the whoosh of air as someone in a Guns of Thunder cut swung a wild haymaker and missed me by inches. My instinctive reaction was to swing back, both hands on the shotgun in what would have been a home run hit on the baseball diamond. The crack of this guy's nose was sharper than Georgie's and he stumbled past me with a wail, falling right on top of the big man as he was trying to rise. Georgie, wracked with his own pain and deep in Fight brain, immediately wrapped his thick arms around his perceived attacker and got him in some sort of choke hold.

The shouting was loud - the three bikers not in the fight all yelling at once, and the woman screaming bloody murder at the theatrics. It was her voice, sharper, that drew my attention to the fact that she was a few steps behind me.

"Sorry about this," I grunted as I took two fast strides and grabbed her across her upper chest, yanking her around in front of me like a shield as I flipped the shotgun around and pressed the mouth of the barrel to her side, jamming it into her leather jacket somewhere between her waist and her tit.

The room didn't exactly go quiet, though two of the bikers stopped shouting, including her father the boss, as they took in this new situation. Garret, the older hippyish guy, was trying to stop Georgie from choking the life out of the one that had tried to sucker punch me as he shouted, "It's Chuck! It's Chucky!" at the big man. Chuck, for his part, was scrambling and writhing, caught in the rear naked choke, tapping like a madman and getting little response. Chuck was younger than the others, slim and not quite as imposing, though that may have been because of how much of a ragdoll he seemed to be in Georgie's arms.

Garret ended up pulling out his handgun and pressed it to Georgie's temple. That seemed to get the big man's attention and he let go, Chuck falling to the side limply but still breathing.

"So," I said, feeling like absolute shit as I kept a tight hold on the woman, who had frozen in my grasp. "I think I win."

“Let go of her and we can talk this out,” the boss growled with the ice-cold voice of someone who was very sure of his ability to commit murder.

“That sounds like a bad idea right about now,” I said. “But I don’t *want* to hurt a hair on her head.”

“می توانم بیضه هایش را لگد بزنم” the woman said, her voice thick and melodic as she spoke in Persian.

“Don’t try it,” I grunted, pulling her tighter against me. I didn’t know what she’d said, but I could tell by her shifting her weight she was going to try and kick backwards and catch me in the nuts.

“What now, then?” the boss growled.

“Now, you,” I looked at Neck Tattoo, who was currently pointing my sidearm at me. “Are going to eject the clip from that and hand it to him.” I looked at the boss. “And you’re going to pick up my badge there from the ground. Then we’re going for a little walk.”

My badge, which was in fact on the ground of the office area, must have been found by Chuck outside and he was the one that had yelled I was a cop. I wasn’t sure what they had all been shouting during the fighting, but I’d definitely heard that.

At a nod from the boss, Neck Tattoo ejected the clip and handed over the pistol, and then fetched my badge from the ground. Part of me wanted to try and push the woman through into the warehouse so I could get a look at their operation but second-guessed that plan since there was still a sixth biker somewhere. Instead, I started to slowly pull her back towards the door that led out near the motorcycles.

“Alright,” I said. “We’re going to take it nice and easy as we go for a walk.”

“You hurt her and I kill you,” the boss said.

“You come at me and I shoot her,” I replied. “Neither of us wants that, but I’m not fucking around.”

She followed me and we stopped at the door.

“Alright, sweetheart,” I said. “You might as well tell me your name so I have something to call you.”

“Kashm,” she said.

“Beautiful,” I said. “OK, Kashm. We’re going to step outside and head around the side of the building. We’re going to go slow, and your father and one other guy is going to follow us. When we get to my truck I’ll be happy to let you go.”

“You’re an asshole,” she grunted.

“You get that, Pops?” I asked.

“I got it,” he grunted.

I took the step back and down, and she followed.

“Can I say something?” I asked as we took one slow step after another, followed at about ten yards by her father and Neck Tattoo.

“Is it you begging for your life?” she asked. “Because if you grovel, I might just decide to only leave you paraplegic.”

“Jesus, you’re a nasty one,” I said. “But no. I was going to say I hope Chucky in there isn’t the one you’re dating, because there is no way that a sucker-punching runt like him could handle a woman like you.”

“... fuck you,” Kashm growled.

“Yeesh,” I sighed.

“You don’t know us,” she said. We had made it around the end of the building and were backing towards the old road.

“I don’t,” I agreed. “But I’m betting that your pops is in charge, and you grew up a bit of a princess even during the hard times. I bet he isn’t super happy about you dating anyone in his club, but you’ve got him wrapped around your finger as much as you still love him.”

“How about we don’t talk about my personal life while you’ve got a shotgun jammed into my breast?” she asked.

“Alright,” I said, taking a quick glance behind me as we hit the road. “We’re heading this way.”

It was a long, slow walk as I trudged backwards down the road. The potholes made things even more frustrating, and I wondered how the fuck these guys rode it on their motorcycles.

“So whose idea was the market, anyways?” I muttered to her.

“Mine,” she grunted.

“I had a feeling,” I said. “Tell me this. Is it all above board and you just take a skim off the top as profit, or are the boys making side deals and taking advantage of people?”

She was silent.

“Are they forcing women?” I asked.

“No,” she exhaled. “But if someone only has their looks to trade, why should I stand in their way from getting the food they need?”

It was hard to argue with that logic in the current national circumstances. If I hadn't run into Mary in the parking lot she could very well have been doing the same thing within days, she'd been so desperate. Two kids to feed, let alone herself... would I have judged her for doing it? I could blame the bikers for not just giving away the food, but if they were paying discounted prices to the grocery store manager, along with wherever else they got their supplies, then it was capitalism and not charity.

I felt gross, accepting that people were surviving on sexual favours, but I couldn't exactly offer a better alternative.

“This way,” I said, and she followed me as we walked backwards off the road and through the overgrown green space behind the grocery store.

“Do you really think you're going to get away from this?” she asked, her spite softer now that the adrenaline was wearing off.

“I think I understand your father,” I said. “And I think the fact that I'm just doing what I have to and not being an asshole is helping.”

“I'd say you're a pretty big asshole,” she growled.

“Really? Because I could have been groping you this whole time and being a creep, but I'm not. You're a lady, and a daughter, and I respect that even if I have to use the leverage I've got to not have my head caved in.”

That shut her up.

“Step down,” I warned her as we reached the curb into the grocery store parking lot.

“So you really are a cop,” the boss said, about twenty yards back as he and Neck Tattoo continued to follow. Their handguns were lowered but still out and they could clearly see my truck behind me.

“Sheriff, technically,” I called back. “Look, you and I both know that last year at this time, someone with my job meets someone with yours, and we have problems. But the world is going to shit, and as far as I can see your operation back there isn't hurting anyone. And, considering

you threatened that you'd kill me if I came with shit that was stolen by force from others, I think you still love this country and respect the fact that ordinary people should be out of bounds for criminal shit."

He grunted, glancing at Neck Tattoo, then took a breath. "That about sums it up," he said.

We were about five steps away from my truck now and I stopped walking backwards, Kashm backing into me for a moment. "Alright then. So how about this - I don't have a problem with your black market as long as you hold to those values. Looters are a problem though, and they're dangerous to the folks who are still living through this shit. They're also dangerous to you; the virus is airborne and if they are stealing from the homes of the dead they could very well be carrying it with them already. Start wearing gloves, and disinfect anything that's brought to you."

"I'm not exactly concerned about health and safety tips right now, Sheriff," he growled.

"Well, it's my job to keep the public informed," I said sarcastically. "Look, I'll let Kashm go, get in my truck and drive away. I just need you to put my sidearm and my badge on the ground in front of us, she can pick it up and hand it to me, then we're good. We call a truce, I walk away with some bruised ribs and a headache the size of a Range Rover while your boys back there get their noses back in place and deal with their own bruises. That sound like a deal?"

"You OK, baby?" he asked his daughter.

"He hasn't harmed me," Kashm said evenly.

"We're almost done," I said quietly. "And I am sorry that I had to do this."

"Whatever," she grunted under her breath.

Her father nodded to Neck Tattoo, and the biker walked forward and set my badge and gun down about five feet in front of us before backing away.

"Alright," I said. "Now just ease forward, pick them up and hand them to me." I let go of her, and Kashm slowly stepped forward and bent down to pick them up. I wasn't exactly *looking*, but in her tight jeans and with that hourglass figure I had a pretty good sense that she had a nice ass.

She stood, turning and stepping back towards me until she was right in front of me, the muzzle of the shotgun pressed into her chest almost right at her heart. "You know Georgie and Chuck are going to want to fuck you up," she said as she holstered my pistol for me, then reached up to loop my badge over my head.

"I'm pretty sure that between you and your father, you can keep them in check," I said.

“Why would I do that?”

I smirked, and realised that I’d lost my mask at some point during the fight - I’d been a little busy to notice it before that moment. “Well, I won the bet,” I said. “I’m pretty sure I owe you a nice date, don’t I?”

Her eyes widened as her brow furrowed, and then she actually laughed. “You are way too cowboy to be a cop.”

“That’s why my badge is a star, honey,” I said, nodding down to it hanging on my chest. “Now, seriously, reach into my front pocket there and pull out my wallet.” When she did, with a raised eyebrow, I continued. “Take out the business card there. That’s got a line to my cell. If something comes up that you or your father think I could help with, call me. If you’re helping people survive, I’m on your side. And there’s plenty of much larger assholes out here who are only hurting people.”

“Is this a ‘Get out of Jail Free’ card?” she asked, taking the business card and putting my wallet back in my pocket.

“Believe me,” I said. “You do *not* want anyone you know going to jail right now.”

She narrowed her eyes but nodded.

“So, how about Saturday?” I asked.

“What?”

“For our date,” I said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes and I could tell she was grinning behind her mask too. I’d gotten to her.

“Go to him,” I nodded with my chin. “And have a great day.”

“You are one fucking crazy Sheriff,” she said, then stepped backwards a couple of paces before following. As she was going I reached back and opened my truck door, got about halfway in, then slowly set down the shotgun on the cement as I locked eyes with her father. He was glaring at me but nodded. I got the rest of the way into the truck, got my keys out and quickly started it, pulling away and around the side of the grocery store.

My heart and my head were pounding as I panted, the drain of adrenaline from my system as relief washed over me doing nothing to help the fact that I was hurting all over. I glanced at the clock on my dash.

Twenty minutes. The whole thing had taken twenty goddamn minutes since I'd left the store. The dairy and frozen food I had in the back were still fine and I had time to do my meat pickup before heading up to the Rez.

I pulled my truck into a spot in the parking lot, leaning forward and resting my head against the steering wheel.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I groaned to myself. My leg ached, my ribs hurt, my head was throbbing. By all rights I should have gone home, curled up into a ball and slept for the rest of the day. Instead, I fell back against my seat, sitting up, and fished my phone out of my pocket. I hesitated, considering texting Erica, but I didn't want to stress her out. I texted Kara for her address or directions to her place on the Rez.

'Why? Did you figure something out?' she texted back, making me sigh and then grunt.

'Not yet. Bringing you supplies,' I responded.

'Don't. It's dangerous here,' she texted back.

'Do you have enough food for all three of you?'

'We can figure something out.'

I grunted again and hit the voice messaging button. "Kara, if you don't tell me where your place is, I'm going to drive around up there honking until I find you."

She sent me her address, and I headed out. First stop, meat. Next stop, a reserve full of natives who hated my guts and were dealing with an outbreak of a deadly pandemic. It couldn't possibly be worse than getting into a fistfight with a biker gang, right?