

ELIN PEER

A man and a woman are shown from the chest up, wearing black leather jackets. The woman, on the left, has long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The man, on the right, has a full, dark beard and short, styled hair, and is looking off to the right. They are standing in a misty, forested area with mountains in the background. The lighting is soft, suggesting a sunrise or sunset.

MEN OF THE
NORTH

12

THE EXPLORER

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MEN OF THE
NORTH

12

THE EXPLORER

By Elin Peer

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The Explorer – Men of the North #12

First Edition

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons or organizations is coincidental and not intended by the author. Recommended for mature readers due to adult content.

Cover Art by Damonza

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Books in this series

For the best reading experience and to avoid spoilers, this is the recommended order of the books.

Prequel:

Forbidden Letters # 0.5

First Generation

The Protector #1

The Ruler #2

The Mentor #3

The Seducer #4

The Warrior #5

[Box-set #1 contains book 1-5](#)

Second Generation

The Genius #6

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The Fighter #9

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PLEASE NOTE

This book is intended for mature readers only, as it contains a few graphic scenes and some inappropriate language.

All characters are fictional and any likeness to a living person or organization is coincidental.

DEDICATION

I'm dedicating this book to the children stuck at home during this Covid pandemic when they should be out exploring.

May this peculiar time of isolation be an introduction to the vast landscape of their inner world where books and their imagination can take them anywhere they want to go.

It is my hope that the world will soon open up again and that this will be the only pandemic they experience in their lifetime.

Elin

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Northlanders

The Aurelius Family

Khan: Ruler of the Northlands, married to Pearl Pilotti.

Pearl: Wife and advisor to Khan. Former member of the Motherland Council.

Thor: Son of Khan and Pearl, brother of Freya.

Freya: Daughter of Khan and Pearl, sister of Thor.

Magni: Aubri's father. Younger brother and advisor to Khan.

Laura: Aubri's mother. Wife of Magni. First female warrior of the Northlands.

Aubri: Daughter of Laura and Magni. DOB 2438/08/15

Mason: Son of Laura and Magni. DOB 2438/08/15

Dina: Youngest daughter of Laura and Magni. DOB 2445

Solomon: Son of Magni. Married to Willow.

Mila: Married to Jonah. Adopted daughter of Magni and Laura.

The Boulder Family.

Alexander: Wealthy businessman. Husband of Christina.

Christina: Archeologist. First woman to cross the border to the Northlands. Married to Alexander.

Raven: Adopted daughter of Christina and Alexander. First woman police officer in the Northlands.

Indiana: Son of Christina and Alexander. DOB: May 2438 **Jones:** Son of Christina and Alexander. DOB: June 2443

Lara: Daughter of Christina and Alexander. Goes by both Lara and Samara. DOB: February 2441

Side characters in this book

Sparrow: Aubri's best friend. Daughter of Kya and Archer. DOB 2441/05/02

Kya: Sparrow's mother. Runs the school of inclusion with her husband Archer.

French people from Old Europe

Belle Dupont: Previous member of the French delegation. Married to Mason Aurelius DOB: 2442/11/29

Celeste Zay: Delegation member. DOB 2438

Victor Xavier: Leader of French delegation. DOB 2436

Isaac: Delegation member. DOB 2437

Simon Armel: Delegation member. DOB 2439

Rafael Moreau: Prime Minister of French

Banni Armel: Friend of Belle Dupont. Leader of Explorer unit. DOB: 2439/03/27

Val: Explorer and colleague of Aubri and Indiana

Alex: Explorer and colleague of Aubri and Indiana

Brittany: Explorer and colleague of Aubri and Indiana

Helmes: Owner of the Repair Shop.

Motlanders

Holly: Delegation member. DOB 2440

Doreen: Delegation member. DOB 2438

Harper: Delegation member. DOB 2439

Oliver: Delegation member. DOB 2436

Lachlan: Delegation member. DOB 2437

Jonah Cervici: Married to Mila. First male member of the Motherland Council.

Sheana Rene Summers: Chairwoman of the Motherland Council.

Linea: Daughter of Athena and Finn. Friend of Freya Aurelius

PROLOGUE

One of the Boys

Northlands Year 2448

Aubri

Mason and Indiana sped up when I caught up to them. They were heading into the back part of our property line, behind the arena, where the massive trees were.

“Go home, Aubri,” my twin brother Mason told me.

“I want to come with you. Are you going to climb the big one?”

“Yes, but you can’t come.”

“Why?”

“It’s not for girls. It’s too dangerous.”

“I’m older than you are!”

Mason turned his head and scoffed. “By six minutes.”

Running a little faster, I got in front of the boys and walked backwards. Speaking while looking at them, I said, “So what? You still don’t get to order me around. I’m just as good at climbing trees as you are.”

Mason didn’t slow down as he spoke. “Of course I get to order you around. I’m your protector; Dad told me so.”

I gave up walking backward and turned my nose in the same direction as them. “Mom said women are just as badass as men.”

“You’re ten, which means you’re a girl, Aubri, not a woman. And you can’t come.”

Shifting tactics, I turned my attention to Indiana, who was older than Mason and me by three months. “Tell Mason he’s being a jerk. I’m not a normal girl and you know it.”

Indiana had a stick in his hands that he swung through the tall grass while walking at a fast pace like Mason.

“It’s for your own good, Aubri. We don’t want you to get hurt. Mason and I shouldn’t even be climbing up the big one.”

“Then why are you?”

Indiana wrinkled his forehead as if the question were stupid. “Because it’s fun.”

“Exactly.” I had to jog to keep up with them. A year ago, I’d been taller than both Indiana and Mason, but not any longer.

When we reached the big one, we stood for a moment with our necks craned back and our eyes trying to see the top of the giant pine tree.

“We should have brought safety equipment,” Indiana mumbled, but my brother just snorted.

“Safety equipment is for pussies.”

“Dad told us not to climb this one. It’s slippery and too tall.”

Looking down his nose at me, Mason spoke in a demanding tone. “Which is why you’ll stay down here and never tell anyone that Indiana and I climbed that tree.”

“If you can do it, I can too.”

Mason pointed the way we’d come. “Go home, Aubri. It’s better that way.”

Crossing my arms, I raised my chin and gave my brother the stink-eye.

With an annoyed huff, he turned away from me and approached the tree. Mason had to jump to get a hold of the lowest branch. Pulling himself up, he did a balancing act and stood on top of the branch looking upward for his next branch to climb.

Indiana followed his example and with agile movements, the two strong boys climbed up the forbidden tree.

My body was buzzing with a combination of fear and excitement. If I accepted their bossing me around and telling me something was too dangerous, I’d end up like my boring cousin Freya. She was our age, but happy with being a spectator when the boys did all the fun things.

Realizing that the lowest branch was too high for me to reach by jumping, I narrowed my eyes and backed up enough to give me room for speed.

Accelerating as fast as I could, I ran up the trunk of the tree and jumped to grab onto the lowest branch. Hours of practicing on the agility course paid off as I managed to swing my body to the top of the thick branch.

Balancing on top, I put a supporting hand on the tree trunk and looked up to see my brother already halfway up the enormous fir.

Mason looked down at me and warned, “Don’t do it, Aubri. You could get hurt.”

“Shut up, Mason. You’re not my dad.”

“No, but if I was, I’d spank you for not following instructions.”

Ignoring his scolding, I climbed upward, wishing I had Indiana's strength. His arms were already toned and showing bumps of muscle.

"It's not fair that boys are stronger than girls," I grumped while continuing to climb. "But I'm still going to show you that I can do anything you can."

"Don't be stupid, Aubri. I don't want you to get hurt."

"It's not up to you."

Indiana looked up to Mason above us, who was far ahead. I could tell how conflicted he was.

"You don't have to wait for me. Just go!"

"You sure?" Indiana asked.

"I don't need your help. I can climb a stupid tree myself. I've done it a million times."

"Not the big one. None of us have."

Just then I nearly slipped. Tightening my grip on the branch above me, I felt adrenaline rushing through me and my heartbeat spiked from fear. "I said, go, Indy, I don't need you staring at me."

He hesitated for a second and then he climbed upward, leaving me to regret that I'd ever run after my brother and Indiana to begin with. If only I wasn't so bloody curious. Now I was forced to prove that I could be one of the boys. I had to find a way to overcome my fear and climb this stupid monstrous tree.

Every branch higher was a victory. When I was midway, Mason was coming down again.

"I told you not to climb up. Why don't you ever listen?" he said.

"If you can do it, so can I."

"Aubri, stop, you're going to kill yourself," Mason shouted after me as I kept climbing. "Seriously, don't go any higher. It's windy and slippery up there."

I believed him, but with my heart in my throat and my palms wet from fear, I still kept going. Mason had made it all the way up, which proved to me that it was possible.

Later, when it was Indiana's turn to pass me on his way down, he pleaded with me once again.

"You don't have to do this, Aubri. No girl has ever made it this high up. Look, you can see above the forest from here and the Mansion looks tiny, doesn't it?"

We stood for a moment on each side of the giant trunk of the tree, looking out over the million pine trees that surrounded the Gray Manor where I lived.

“Did you see your island from the top?” I asked Indiana, who lived on Victoria’s Island with his family.

“I did. It’s beautiful but let’s go down together. I’ll help you.”

My stubborn nature wouldn’t allow me to give up before I reached the top. “I’ll see you down there. I’m going up.”

“Be careful, Aubri,” Indiana warned.

It felt like I climbed forever, and when I finally reached the top, my arms and legs felt like jelly. There were more branches above me, but the part that I was holding on to was already swaying so I decided not to go any further.

The view from here was endless. I had to be at least two hundred feet above the ground and looking down scared me.

To my left I could see water and Victoria’s Island, where the Boulder family and the school of inclusion was located.

Going up had felt dangerous but climbing back down felt even scarier. Half the time, I couldn’t see where I was placing my foot.

Why had I wanted to climb this stupid tree anyway? Suddenly, my parents’ warning to never climb tall trees without safety equipment sounded like good advice.

Twice, I almost slipped, and my chest was starting to feel too small for my poor heart, which was racing to keep up with the fear and exhaustion that I felt.

“Take it slow and move your foot a little to the right.”

Indiana had waited for me where he last saw me. I felt like crying with relief that he was here to help me, but I wouldn’t show him.

Indiana wasn’t that much older, but he was bright, athletic, and more patient than Mason and me.

Together we climbed down with him guiding me to place my hands and feet right.

“Are you okay? You look tired.”

“I’m fine!” I said harshly, but I was beyond tired. My limbs were shaking with exhaustion.

“You’re almost there, just keep going,” Indiana encouraged me.

“I know!” Looking down, I could see Mason standing on the ground looking up at us.

I had twenty feet between the ground and me when I lost concentration and my eagerness made me speed up.

“Careful.”

Indiana’s scream of warning sounded as I slipped and fell back over.

The lowest branch took the worst of my fall, but one of the branches tore open the skin on my jawline.

“Fuuuck!!!” Mason shouted and ran to me.

Don’t cry. Never cry. I told myself as I lay flat on the ground with all the air knocked out of my body.

“I told you it was dangerous,” Mason scolded me. “Now, Dad is gonna blame me and Indy.”

Indiana had made it down to the ground and came running. “Your face, Aubri... Are you all right?”

Trying to sit up, I lifted my hands to my face and felt moisture. I looked at my shaking hands; my fingers were smeared in blood. “Oh no.”

“Don’t look at it, Aubri. It’s bad.”

Mason’s warning was the last thing I heard before I passed out.

CHAPTER 1

Staying Behind

Old Europe – December 26th, 2465

Aubri

The sight of my uncle's drone flying off with my cousins Freya and Thor, my brother Mason, my friend Belle, and my brother-in-law Jonah, left me with a mix of emotions.

There was a feeling of *oh fuck why did I offer to stay behind?* But even more so there was a feeling of pride. Because of my bravery my twin brother Mason could now marry my good friend Belle, who was pregnant with their child.

"I can't believe you look relieved," Indiana muttered next to me.

With the drone now a mere spot on the horizon, I turned to my life-long friend and saw him standing with his hands on his hips.

"Of all the trouble you've gotten me into over the years, this one takes the cake."

"I didn't ask you to stay," I defended myself.

"It's not like I had a bloody choice. Thor is the heir, Jonah is married and has children, and Mason had to focus on saving his woman and child. I was the only protector able to stay."

"I've told you a million times that I don't need a protector. I'm not like other women."

"No, that's bloody obvious. A normal woman wouldn't have a strong death wish."

I scoffed and mirrored his stance. "I don't have a death wish."

"Then why do you insist on putting yourself in danger all the time? Don't think I'm fooled by your so-called self-sacrifice. The moment you met Banni and the other Explorers, your lust for adventure was ignited. I saw it in your eyes, Aubri."

He was right, of course, but I hated to admit that, so instead I rolled my eyes and walked back the way we'd come.

Once we got back to the office of the French Prime Minister, all signs of Thor's angry outburst had been erased. The chairs had been picked up from

the floor and put back in place, and there were no papers spread out over the floor.

Victor was still there and the tension in the room told me that he had been arguing with the Prime Minister, Rafael Moreau.

“I trust you sent them off well?” The smirk on Rafael’s face made me want to throttle him.

“Yes.” I gave him a bored glare. “Let’s hope for your sake that they can talk my father and Khan into not starting a war to get me back. If I were you, I’d sleep with my clothes on for the next few weeks. If my father decides to come, he’ll start by killing you himself.”

Rafael’s hands went to his bald head and his thin gray eyebrows furrowed. “Jonah wouldn’t allow a war. He speaks with the weight of the Council of the Motherlands; surely your father and uncle would respect that.”

Indiana snorted. “If you think Magni Aurelius will just let you take his daughter, then you don’t know him. He’ll burn down all of Europe if he has to.”

“And kill innocent people?” Victor stood up from the chair he’d been sitting on.

I crossed my arms. “My father is a warrior and a protector, Victor. He’ll do whatever it takes to get me back.”

“Unless Mason, Thor, Freya, and Jonah can convince him that I’ll protect Aubri, that is,” Indiana added. “Let’s hope for your sake that they succeed.”

Victor’s eyes looked sunken in his skull as if acute sleep deprivation and worry was sucking him dry of energy.

“It’s your fault, you know,” I pointed my finger at him. “I still want to kick your ass for speaking to Freya like you did. She was trying to be brave and offer herself so that Mason and Belle could be happy together. You humiliated and degraded her in front of everyone.”

Victor’s hands folded along his sides. “I don’t know what Freya’s game was about, but I know that she didn’t mean it. There’s no way in hell she would truly want to live with me.”

We had all been under pressure when Rafael Moreau had demanded Freya stay behind in exchange for him letting Belle go. We had all watched in horror as Freya offered to sacrifice herself. Her demands had been that she didn’t want to give up her children like they did here in Old Europe, and that she wanted to have them with Victor. Knowing my cousin Freya, she had picked Victor because of his status as a genius. It had to be that because his

personality was obnoxious.

Scowling at Victor, I spoke in an accusatory tone. "I'm not claiming to understand Freya's logic, but you tried to fucking crush her. That thing you said about preferring to drink radioactive water rather than sleeping with her was more than I could listen to. You're such a bag of shit, Victor."

Indiana grunted in agreement.

Rafael stood up from his chair behind his large desk. "If we can move on from these childish squabbles, we should look at the practicalities. I've already instructed Victor to take you to your apartment. You'll be delighted to hear that it's above ground and close to the park."

"I didn't think you had any available apartments. Isn't that what you tell the people living below ground?"

Rafael met my gaze. "I made a call, and you're simply jumping to the head of the line. Someone else was supposed to move into this apartment tomorrow, but they'll have to wait until something else becomes available. If you don't like the idea of line-jumping, you could always move into Belle's room. With her leaving, that's now available."

"We'll take the apartment," Indiana said before I could speak.

I nodded in agreement.

Victor spoke in French to Rafael, who shrugged.

"What did you ask him?"

Victor answered Indiana in a level tone. "I asked if I should have Belle's personal belongings stored for her."

I took a step forward. "Yes. We'll bring it all back home when we visit this summer."

"Very well." Victor gave a curt nod and turned his attention back to Rafael. "If we're done here, I'd like to get going."

"*Oui*. Show our new residents to their apartment."

When Victor, Indiana, and I left Rafael's office, Victor was quiet. Leading us through the streets, he ignored the people shouting greetings and questions at us.

"Why are you being so rude?" I asked him.

"I'm just tired."

"But that woman back there was smiling at you and you didn't spare her a glance."

Victor kept walking. "Half of them are curious about you two and want to know who you are. The other half want to connect with me because I'm

famous. I'm not in the mood, Aubri."

"No, I know your default mode is being an asshole."

Victor walked on and once we got to the right building, we took an elevator to the twenty-third floor and walked down a long corridor to room number 417.

"This is your place. I'll make sure some groceries and hygiene products are delivered to you."

Indiana and I walked inside the small apartment. He stopped in the hallway and looked into a tiny restroom. "My legs won't fit in front of that toilet."

"Then you'll have to sit sideways. We don't build things for giants here," Victor said matter-of-factly.

From the cramped entry area, we walked into an open living room and kitchen.

"Damn, it's small," Indiana breathed.

Walking to the kitchen, I opened the cabinets. "Where's the home-bot?"

"We don't use them here. Preparing food and cleaning your home is considered good to relieve stress so we teach all children to cook and clean."

I looked to Indiana. "I've never cooked or cleaned in my life. Have you?"

"My mom cooks and she's taught us the basics."

Victor stood leaning against the doorway. "With all the times you Northlanders have bragged that you can survive in the wilderness, I'm sure you can survive in an apartment without a home-bot too."

Indiana nodded and then frowned. "Wait a minute. Why is there only one door?" Walking across the small living room, he looked into a room before turning to Victor.

"Where's the other bedroom?"

"There isn't one. You'll be roommates and you'll share a bedroom."

"You know I can't do that," Indiana argued. "Magni would kill me if he knew I slept in the same bed as his daughter."

Victor shrugged. "Then don't tell him. You're a long way from home now and we have no two-bedroom apartments available. If we did, I wouldn't have to share my bed with a resident from a mold-infested building complex. That reminds me. Banni has been informed that you two are his new team members. He was excited."

I lit up in a smile. "That's great."

"Banni or one of his men will meet you here tomorrow morning at nine."

Indiana had moved to the short couch. “This is going to be uncomfortable to sleep on.”

Victor gave a sigh of irritation. “I don’t have time for your weird angst about sleeping next to Aubri. I’ve never understood that part of your culture. I’ll make sure you receive some groceries and set you up with wristbands that are connected to our network. Take the evening to relax and get some sleep.”

“What if we need to get a hold of you?”

“I’ll make sure the wristbands have my contact info in them, but I’d prefer if you used it as little as possible. Before you ask, the answer is, no, you can’t communicate with your family back home. All outgoing calls for the public are blocked on purpose.”

“Why?”

“It’s political. All you need to know is that if you want to send a message to your friends back home, I can help you. I’ll see if I can convince Rafael to let you have the same privilege as we delegation members. We’ve been allowed to correspond with the outside world.”

“This is ridiculous, Victor,” I complained. “Can’t you use your genius to find a way to fix the situation? We need to be able to call our family and friends back home.”

Victor looked like he had aged ten years in the last few hours. Raking his hand through his thick dark hair, he groaned. “If I hear one more time that I should use my genius, I’m going to kill myself. I’m not a fucking magician and I told you, it’s not a matter of technology. It’s politics.”

Indiana and I exchanged a look. Something was completely off about Victor.

“Hey, are you okay man?” Indiana asked but Victor just turned on his heels and left.

“Should we worry?” Indiana asked me.

“About Victor?” I snorted. “Why would we?”

Indiana was silent for a long moment. “I don’t know. He looked like he meant the part about killing himself.”

“He was tired, Indy. He said so himself.”

“Yeah, but it was more than that. He looked like he’d just learned that he was terminal.”

“Argh, don’t worry about him. Victor is a grown man, he’ll figure it out,” I said and walked into the small bedroom. The bed was so narrow that I started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

Turning I saw Indiana filling out the doorway with his large frame.

“They call this a double bed. That’s what’s funny.”

“I’ll sleep on the floor, don’t worry.”

“Stop it, Indy. You heard Victor. No one is going to tell my dad and I trust you.” Getting down, I stretched my legs out on the bed. “I wanna see if we can even fit on this kids’ bed.”

“You sure?” Indiana stood with both hands on the top of the doorframe.

“You’re acting like you’re afraid of me. Get down here.” I patted the mattress next to me.

The bed creaked when Indiana lowered his body to lie next to me.

“I’m not toxic, you know.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“Then why are you on edge like you’re afraid of touching me?”

“I’m not. It’s just weird to be alone with you and in a bed.”

“Well, get over it because we’ll be staying in Old Europe for a year.”

Indiana moved a little closer and it made his upper arm touch my shoulder. For a moment we lay in silence staring up at the ceiling.

“Promise that you won’t tell your dad about this,” Indiana muttered low.

“I promise.”

Turning our heads at the same time, we locked eyes.

“Let’s make a pact.” I held up my hand. “What happens in Old Europe, stays in Old Europe. We won’t tell on each other.”

Indiana lowered his brow. “Deal!”

CHAPTER 2

Lesson

Indiana

My first night sleeping next to Aubri was difficult.

I was concerned that I might turn in my sleep and touch her without knowing.

At least ten times, unknown noises in the apartment woke me up with my instinct to protect her activated.

Each time I woke up, my young grasshopper was sleeping like a blissful angel next to me.

When she finally woke up at seven, she stretched and yawned. "Good morning, big guy."

"Morning. Did you sleep well?"

Aubri turned on her side and smiled. "I did. Except for when you woke me up."

My eyebrows flew up. "I woke you up?"

"Yeah. You were talking in your sleep."

As I feared the worst, my heart picked up speed. "What did I say?"

"I think you had an erotic dream, because you were moaning."

"You're lying." My cheeks felt flaming hot all of a sudden.

Aubri laughed and pushed her long red hair back. "Here's what you sounded like." Closing her eyes, she was half laughing and half moaning. "Oh, yes, tickle me there, mmm... yes, I've been a bad boy, I deserve a spanking."

Sitting up, I threw my pillow on top of her face to make her stop.

Removing it, she laughed even louder. "Okay, you didn't ask for a spanking but you were moaning. Who were you dreaming of, Indy? Come on, you can tell me. Was it Sparrow? I know you have a thing for Sparrow."

"I don't. She's like a sister to me."

"I bet Archer and Kya would love to have you as their son-in-law. You think she's beautiful, admit it."

Getting out of bed, I shook my head. "Everyone can see Sparrow is beautiful but that doesn't mean I have sexual fantasies about her."

"What about me? Do you have sexual fantasies about me?" Aubri was

still laughing.

“Sure, all the fucking time.” Rolling my eyes, I picked up my shirt from the floor.

“I knew it.” Aubri threw my pillow at me and got out of bed too. We hadn’t come to Old Europe with any clothes since we never intended to stay for more than a day.

At least Victor had arranged for tooth cleaners to be sent over last night.

Aubri had slept in her t-shirt, panties, and socks. Now that she was up, she moved around without pants like it was the most natural thing. It should be, because we had known each other our entire lives and I’d seen her in a bikini many times. But the fact that we were unsupervised made this situation very different.

“You’re not wearing a bra.” The filter in my brain wasn’t awake yet and my thoughts spilled out.

Aubri turned. “So? Does it bother you?”

“No, but...”

Her right eyebrow rose as she waited for me to elaborate.

“Just don’t walk around like that when we’re with Banni and the other crew members.”

“Why? You think I can’t protect myself?”

I popped in a tooth cleaner and threw the packet to her. “I know you’re strong, Aubri. You’re the best female fighter I’ve ever met, but you can’t deny that we men have an advantage in size and strength.”

“I’m tall.”

“You’re six feet and taller than most men, but still, Banni looks like he could take you down if he wanted to.”

Aubri had just opened her mouth and put a tooth cleaner in when my words made her scrunch up her face. “He couldn’t!”

“All I’m saying is that you should watch how you dress around men you don’t know. You have to consider what signals you’re sending.”

In ten fast steps, Aubri came to stand right in front of me. With fire in her eyes, she stabbed her finger through the air. “I refuse to live my life in fear of what signals I might send. If you men could have it your way, you’d have us women cover ourselves so as not to attract attention. That’s not fucking happening. I’m not hiding my hair, my body, or my brain by playing small so that men don’t feel threatened by my words or tempted by my body. This is 2465 in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I’m just trying to protect you,” I argued.

“Don’t. After twenty-seven years of men protecting me, I can tell you that protection feels a lot like control.”

“You think I’m controlling you?” My tone was incredulous. With a snort, I squeezed the shirt I was still holding in my hand. “I’m sorry, grasshopper, but the man who can control you hasn’t been born yet. Keeping you safe from yourself is a full-time job in itself. Sometimes I feel sorry for the man you marry.”

Her chin rose in a challenging stare. “How so?”

“Because the poor bastard will see your femininity and beauty and think you’re everything he ever imagined in a woman. Imagine his surprise when he realizes that you’re one of the boys.”

“That’s right.” Aubri pressed the tip of her index finger into my chest. “And if he doesn’t respect a no, I’ll show him that my body is mine.”

I looked down at her because despite Aubri’s height of six feet, there was still eight inches between us.

“You think you could manage a large Nman like me if he was determined to have you?”

Taking a small step back she spread her hands from her body a little. “I know I can. Want me to show you?”

“Come on, Aubri. Don’t be stupid. We’ve wrestled many times and you know I can dominate you with my size and strength.”

“I was younger then.” Using her hands, she gestured for me to make a move.

“I’m not going to wrestle you in here, but you need to listen to me when I tell you to not walk around in a t-shirt without a bra. Tomorrow we’re leaving with Banni and his two men. If they all team up together and I’m not around, you wouldn’t stand a chance. Those Explorers we met weren’t weak Motlander men. They were fit and well-muscled, Aubri, you saw that yourself.”

There was mischief in her eyes as she gestured again. “Come on, Indy. Attack me and let me show you that you have nothing to worry about. If I can fend you off, I can fend any of them off.”

Throwing my shirt down on the bed, I accepted the challenge with a cocky grin. “Okay. If that’s what it takes to make you take my warnings seriously. This won’t take lo...”

I hadn't finished my sentence before she attacked me.

“Hey, I wasn’t ready,” I complained as she twisted my arm back.

“Size is an advantage, but so is speed.” Lifting my arm in a painful angle, she forced me to my knees.

“You little witch,” I hissed through the pain and could think of a dozen things I’d do if I didn’t care about hurting her.

Aubri leaned in and whispered in my ear. “I wouldn’t let a man get on top of me because I would smell his intentions and take him down first.”

I groaned in pain because it felt like my arm was about to pop out of its socket.

“You might be bigger and stronger, Indy, but I’m in power now,” she whispered in my ear. “Maybe I should give you that spanking.”

“What do intentions smell like?” I asked through gritted teeth and drew a sigh of relief when she let me go.

“They smell like... hmm, I guess it’s more of a feeling.” Aubri, who clearly felt that she’d proven her point, walked in front of me and was halfway to the door when I closed my arms around her body from the back and lifted her off the floor.

In an attempt to get free, she threw her head back, but I had expected that and avoided getting hit. Turning to the bed, I threw her down and attacked her again – this time forcing her to her stomach and using the weight of my body to press her down.

She fought like a wild beast, huffing and puffing, but with my three hundred pounds all I had to do was keep my body pressed down on her and use my strength to force her hands down. Once I had them to her sides, I sat on the back of her thighs and pulled her wrists together. Aubri was strong and twisting and turning her body, but there wasn’t much she could do. Getting a hold of both her wrists with my right hand, I used my left hand to press down between her shoulder blades. Aubri’s hair was tousled from our fighting and she was gasping for air after being squeezed by my body. Her face was turning to the left as I kept pressing her. “If I was a rapist, I would have tied your hands now. Even if I didn’t have any rope, I could hold you with my right hand and remove your pants with my left.” To demonstrate I trailed a finger down her spine to the hem of her blue panties, which had crept up between her cheeks while we fought.

“Do you still think you could defend yourself if I wanted inside you?” My voice was hoarse and I was embarrassed that this demonstration was affecting me in a way it shouldn’t.

“I would squeeze so tight that you couldn’t enter me.”

“You can’t close your vagina, Aubri. If that was an option, all women who had been raped would have done so.”

“I’m not all women. I’m stronger.”

Annoyed with her stubbornness and naiveté, I showed her again how I could force her hands from her back to the top of her head. Once again, I pressed her into the mattress using my body, but this time, I was in the position of a man entering a woman.

“The best defense is to not provoke a man. I don’t care if you walk around naked in this apartment, but when other men are present, you’ll wear a fucking bra under your t-shirt so they can’t see your nipples.”

Aubri was breathing in a way that made a strand of her hair rise every time she exhaled. “Liar!”

“What did you say?” I tightened my hold on her arms, suddenly feeling aroused from the power I had over this brat who was the reason I was stuck in France for the next year.

“You said you wouldn’t care if I walked around naked, but your cock pressing against me is saying otherwise.”

“I’m doing this to teach you a lesson, young grasshopper. You asked for me to show you and this is me showing you.” I pressed my hip forward, indicating how vulnerable she was.

“So, you’re saying you wouldn’t touch me if I walked around naked.”

“No, I wouldn’t touch you.”

“Not even if I asked you to?”

My body stiffened and my voice was breathy when I whispered, “Are you asking me to touch you, Aubri?”

“Ew, no! You’re like a brother to me, Indy.”

With a last push on her scalp, I moved away from her. “Do you see what I mean?”

Aubri rolled to her back, her chest falling and rising and her eyes shining with fire. My eyes fell to her belly button, showing since her t-shirt had crept up.

“Yeah, I see what you mean. Someone your size and strength could sneak up on me and rape me, but this isn’t the Northlands. The largest men I’ve seen here are Victor and Banni and they can’t be more than six foot three.”

“This isn’t about height, Aubri. I need you to accept that men like Victor and Banni would be able to have their way with you if they had those

intentions. While we're here, I'm your protector and you'll do as I tell you to."

"The hell I will." Aubri narrowed her eyes. "I didn't get away from my overly protective family to be controlled by you. I'd rather be raped than follow your orders for the next year."

I gasped. "You don't mean that."

She looked away. "Just stop bossing me around, Indy. I'm not your daughter or sister."

I huffed out loud in irritation. "I'm aware of that. You're my fucking headache is what you are."

CHAPTER 3

Crew

Aubri

Indiana and I had met Banni yesterday when Belle had introduced us. When he picked us up, we had a quick stop at a doctor who looked us over and made sure we had the right vaccinations. After that Banni walked us to the Exploration Headquarters while sharing more about himself.

Besides being the leader of the South-Western Explorer squad, Banni enjoyed climbing and running in his free time. He was twenty-six and had been in the same English class as Belle when they were kids. His English was accented, and he warned us that the two other members of the crew, Val and Alex, weren't as fluent as him.

"Val has a speech impediment. He can go days without saying a thing and when he does, it can be difficult to understand him because he mumbles and mispronounces words. He understands English but you have to speak slowly. Don't expect him to answer you directly."

"Okay, good to know," Indiana said. "But then how do you communicate with him during stressful situations?"

Banni tapped a finger against his temple. "We all have brain implants. He sends me pictures of what he sees. It's sort of like having a telepathic connection. It's also the reason I can speak English this well. I have the translation program running."

"How does that work?" I asked with fascination.

"Oh, it's just that words I think about in French are shown in English. I may not always get the pronunciation right though."

"Isn't it distracting to have all of that going on in your head?"

"It was in the beginning, but now I'm used to it. It's like having a personal assistant living in your brain. Anyway, I should tell you that Alex has been with me and Val for three years. He had his prison sentence lowered by volunteering to work as an Explorer. He's loyal and good at his job."

"What did he go to prison for?" Indiana asked in a serious tone with a concerned glance in my direction.

"He was in prison for eleven years for selling Hallus."

"What's that?"

“It’s a strong hallucinogenic drug that the officials banned years ago. It keeps popping up. Alex got recruited as a dealer while he was still in school. He got caught when he was sixteen.”

“Is he okay with you telling us?” I asked as we turned a corner and walked down a street with multi-colored pavement.

“Within the squad there can be no secrets. Our lives depend on each other, so we need to build trust. Alex is a good guy, you’ll see.”

Once we got to the headquarters, the drone we’d seen yesterday was loaded with equipment and ready to go.

Banni gave us green uniforms that matched the one he was wearing. “I’m sorry that we didn’t have time to custom make it for you. We’ll do that before the next expedition. Here, Indiana, I’m giving you the biggest of my uniforms. It stretches so I’m hoping it will fit you well enough to be comfortable. Aubri, try this one on. It’s Alex’s and since you’re about the same height, it should work. It’s either that or you can have one of Colette’s uniforms.”

“Who is Colette?”

“The female squad member I told you about yesterday. The one who went on a single expedition with us before she quit.”

“Oh, right. The one who said she’d rather kill herself than go on another expedition.”

“Mm-hmm.” Banni flashed his white teeth in a grin. “They don’t look like much, but these uniforms are well designed. The fabric is strong and won’t rip easily. The first version they gave us four years ago was designed as a one-piece, but that was a hassle when we had to relieve ourselves in the wilderness. Now it’s a two-piece, but they did something clever with the way the two parts stick together almost like magnets.” Banni lifted his shirt and revealed that he had abs before letting go of the fabric, which instantly sucked itself to his pants. “See! It’s practical in the wintertime when you want to stay warm. I know they look like thin fabric, but these uniforms are temperature regulated. Now, hurry and suit up. We’ve got everything else you need on the drone and we’re ready to go.”

“Is there a place where we can change?” I asked and looked around.

“There’s a bathroom over there, but I hope it’s not because you’re shy. We French are relaxed about nudity, so you don’t have to worry about us. We’ve all seen plenty of naked bodies: male and female.”

Indiana cleared his throat. “That might be, but you won’t see Aubri’s.”

I was already walking to the bathroom. When I got out, Indiana had changed into the green uniform and turned to me.

It was like a second layer of skin on him, displaying all his muscles through the fabric, and leaving no doubt that he was large in all areas.

“You can’t wear that, Aubri.” Indiana’s face was twisted as he picked up his shirt and walked over to cover me.

“Stop that. I’m wearing the uniform.”

Whisper-shouting, he hissed, “I told you to wear a bra.”

“I am wearing a bra.” I pushed him back and took a strong stance. There was distress on his face as his gaze roamed over my body.

“That uniform shows off everything.”

“So does yours.” With an arched brow I looked down to his crotch.

“What’s the problem?” Banni asked.

“Do we have to wear these suits?”

“Yes. They are high-tech temperature regulated outfits that are designed to get us through everything.”

“Indiana thinks they’re too revealing.”

Banni laughed. “Nonsense. They look good on you. The green compliments your red hair color, Aubri. I mean the green looks even better on me and Val but that’s because we’re blessed with dark skin.

“Here, let me get you the toolbelts.”

Indiana seemed relieved to have something covering his front as the belts had bags with testing equipment and tools. I was more excited about the large knives that we got to strap to our right thighs.

He still looked stressed when we got on board the drone and strapped on our seatbelts.

“Why do you keep sending me those side-glances? You don’t believe me, do you? Do I need to show you my bra?” I asked him as the other three buckled up as well. These drones were similar to military drones in the Northlands with six seats in two rows of three. The difference was that these were older and severely rugged and beat up.

“We have several tasks to perform on this expedition,” Banni told us as the drone took flight. “We’ll start in the red zones, which represent areas that are still too dangerous for us to be in. We take soil samples and spread seeds of plants that help absorb the radiation. We also check the radiotropic fungus on the ruins and buildings and plant the newest generation that’s optimized to work faster.”

“What plants are we talking about?” I asked over the worrisome clicking noise from the drone.

“We use a super plant that we call Nuclea. It’s gene-modified from sunflowers, field mustard, Amaranthus, cockscomb, cactus, aloe vera, and the rubber plant, which all have the ability to absorb radiation. Nuclea just does it a hundred times faster.”

The drone, which Banni, Alex, and Val called *Merle Noir*, meaning blackbird, was a slow, old machine compared to what we were used to in the Northlands. The seats weren’t comfortable, but none of that mattered when we reached the first destination on our journey. As the drone descended, I saw ruins of a once-bustling city. Trees and plants had reclaimed the land, but a few buildings reached up high enough to be visible from the sky.

“Wow, I wish my mom could be here.”

Alex shot Indiana a look. “Why? Are you scared?”

Indiana laughed. “No, of course I’m not scared. My mom is an archeologist. If she could walk among ruins of former civilizations like those below us, she would be as excited as a kid on Christmas morning.”

We were all looking down as Val lowered the robot to the ground and controlled the testing remotely. With a high level of concentration, he had it collect leaves, soil, and grass, and scrape matter from the surfaces of walls.

“Your mom will have to wait a while because this area isn’t safe,” Banni said. “We used to gear up with hazmat suits to work in the red areas, and sometimes if the robots break down, we still do. We have other areas that are clean enough to explore but not live in. I’ll take you to my favorite place where you can make a video for your mom, if you want.”

“I’d love that,” Indiana said and lit up when Val waved us closer. We worked for about an hour, with Banni and Val teaching Indiana and me how to use the testing robot. I was eager and the three French men laughed at my excitement.

“Are they making fun of me?” I asked Banni.

“No, they’re saying it’s a nice change from Colette, who was no help at all.”

Without ever setting foot on the ground, we finished our assignment in the first red zone and continued to the next. After three stops where we collected tests from the air, we landed in a yellow zone where the level of radiation had already been deemed safe enough for us to walk around, but not yet ready for human habitation.

“Indiana and Alex, you’ll prepare lunch. Aubri, you’ll come with me and Val to collect water samples from the river.”

Indiana frowned at Banni. “I prefer that Aubri stays with me.”

“Why?” Banni straightened up and widened his shoulders. He wasn’t a traditional leader like my father or Khan, who were intimidating by nature, but there was still a strong authority to his presence.

“Because I’m Aubri’s protector.”

“Stop it, Indy. I’ve told you that I don’t need a protector,” I pointed out for the hundredth time.

“In this squad we’re all each other’s protectors. Aubri can’t do her job if you have to watch her every second. Do you not trust her to be capable of collecting water samples?”

“Sure, but I don’t fully trust you two, yet.”

Banni looked to Val, who shrugged. “Then consider this an exercise of trust. We’re taking Aubri to the river while you’re preparing lunch with Alex.”

I could tell how conflicted Indiana was and patted his shoulder when I walked past him. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

There was something freeing in walking away from Indiana and being alone with two strangers.

Banni and I exchanged small talk as we walked to the river and once we were there, we all helped take the water samples.

“Could we drink this water?”

Val didn’t answer me. He was busy labeling the bottles we’d filled, his tongue sticking out a little bit.

I wondered for a second how old he was and gathered that he could be anywhere from late twenties to mid-thirties. He was clean-shaven but like so many of the French, he had colored both his eyebrows and his long hair, which was gathered in a bun. Since he was brown-skinned like Banni, I guessed his natural hair color to be black, but I couldn’t see any trace of it with the way he had split his hair into four equal sections with different colors. In the top right corner, his hair was blue. The top left part was green, and the two lower sections were red and purple. I wondered if Val had chosen the green color for his eyebrows to match the uniform.

As if he felt me watching him, Val lifted his head and met my eyes for a second before he mumbled something to Banni.

“Val wants to know if it bothers you that Indiana tries to control your

every movement?”

I chuckled. “Indiana is nothing compared to my brother and father. He has good intentions.” I squatted down next to the river and filled the bottle that Banni handed me. “Aren’t you French men protective of women?”

They exchanged glances but didn’t seem to know what to make of my question.

“Belle told me that you don’t grow up in families and that you don’t marry, so I guess it’s different here, but you and Belle were friends... didn't you feel protective of her?”

“Protective how? I’m not sure what I would protect her from...”

“Men who might harm her.”

Banni looked thoughtful. “Hmm, I don’t think I ever had a situation like that with Belle, but I got in a fight once to protect a woman. Not that she appreciated it.”

“What happened?”

“We had just finished our encounter when one of her former sex partners came to see her. He was upset to see me there, half naked and in her bed, so he said some unkind things to her that I didn’t like. We argued at first and when she repeatedly asked him to leave and he refused, I made him.”

“Oh wow, my respect for you just grew, Banni. I love a strong man who protects his woman.”

Banni smiled. “You’re funny, Aubri. The woman I helped got furious at me for manhandling her previous sex partner. She called me primitive and violent and threatened to report both her ex-lover and me.”

I huffed. “What would she have you do? Stand by and let him verbally abuse her?”

Banni shrugged. “Could be. I never stuck around to have a conversation about how she wanted me to behave. It wasn't a great loss as she wasn't a good sex partner anyway.”

Curiosity made me walk over to squat down in front of Banni and Val, who were kneeling on the ground while handling the water samples we had collected. “What makes for a good sex partner?”

Banni kept his eyes on the bottle in his hand and carefully shoved a tablet into it. We watched as the water changed color to a faded yellow.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“We call this tablet *la bavarde*; it means a chatterbox or someone who gossips. If the water is clean, there will be no change of color, but if there’s

pollution, the tablet will tell us. This color means that there's a low level of pollution in the water. You wouldn't die if you drank it, but you might get a stomachache."

"Huh, that's clever."

"*Oui.*" Banni made some notes on the bottle and put it in a box with the others. "And about your question, I think it depends on what you like. Everyone is different. What do you think makes a sex partner good?"

My answer was honest and prompt. "I wouldn't know. I've never had sex."

The two men stopped mid-movement and stared at me.

Val spoke his first English word so far: "Never?"

Shaking my head, I pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the direction where we'd left the others. "Can you imagine an Nman being fine with casual sex? Nah, they would all try to claim me and make me marry them."

Banni's Adam's apple moved in his throat and his eyebrows tightened. "But how old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

The two men once again exchanged glances as if a twenty-seven-year-old virgin was the craziest thing they had ever heard about.

Looking over his shoulder, Val whisper-shouted something to Banni, who looked to me.

"What is he saying?" I asked.

"Val and I are happy to offer you a sexual experience if you want to have sex with someone mature enough to not get possessive."

"I'm flattered." Standing back up, I brushed my hands on my pants and smiled. "But since I already like you, I don't want to subject you to Indiana's wrath if he found out."

Banni frowned and packed up the water samples. "What if I talked to him and got him to accept us having casual sex?"

We started to walk as I replied with a light chuckle. "I think it would be easier for you to make this water completely clean overnight than it would be to convince Indiana to look the other way while I have sex with you and Val."

"Hmm..." Banni took long, strong strides up the hill from the river. "If Indiana is your friend, he should be happy for you to have this opportunity to experiment with your sexuality. If what you're saying is true, there's a chance that he's inexperienced too, so it goes for both of you. Here in France

you can have as many sexual adventures as you want to without anyone judging you.”

The idea of experimenting spoke to me and feeling amused by this conversation, I elbowed Banni with a grin. “I came to explore.”

He grinned back at me. “Then we’ll help you convince Indiana.”

CHAPTER 4

Exploring

Indiana

On our first night in the wilderness, we ate dinner around a bonfire.

I tried to convince Aubri to record a holo message for our families back home, but she was hesitant, thinking that everyone was angry at her for volunteering to stay here for a year.

In the end, I recorded a message myself and had her wave in the background.

We ate a stew that tasted a lot better than expected and talked about our favorite dishes.

“Are you exhausted from the work today?” Alex asked us.

“Why? Was this supposed to be hard?” I said with humor in my tone.

Banni smiled and stretched his legs. “Just wait until tomorrow. We’ll be going into the caves, and that means carrying heavy equipment and rafting down a challenging river.”

“I love rafting.” Aubri sounded like a kid who had just been told we were going to a festival with fun rides.

“Have you done it before?” Banni asked us.

“Of course. Indiana and I have rafted every summer since we were small kids. It’s one of our favorite things to do.”

“Good. Normally, we would never bring new Explorers with us on this part of the expedition. It’s too dangerous, but after today, we can all see that you’re not our usual recruits.”

Banni’s praise made Aubri beam. “You’re damn right, we’re different. We’re born to be Explorers.”

Val said something inaudible to Alex and Banni that made them laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Banni picked up a bottle and offered me some more beer.

“I thought you said there could be no secrets within the squad,” I pointed out because I didn’t like the feeling that they were laughing at us.

“Val just pointed out that there are many ways of exploring and that you’re not exactly explorers in all areas of life.”

“What do you mean?” I drank from my glass while keeping a close eye

on the men.

“Aubri told us that you aren’t allowed to explore your sexuality.”

My gaze flew to Aubri, who sucked in her lips and refused to meet my eyes.

“Yeah, well, maybe that’s true, but it’s a little difficult when there’s nine or ten men for every woman. Who would we experiment with?”

“Don’t you have orgies where a woman can be with several men at once?”

I almost choked on my beer and hammered my chest while coughing. “What the hell are you talking about? How would that ever work? We would fucking kill each other before the orgy was over.”

“Nooo, you wouldn’t.” Alex threw a dismissive hand gesture. “You would all know that it’s just for physical pleasure.”

I squinted my eyes. “Are you saying you have women here who will be with several men at once?”

“Of course. And men who will be with many women at the same time.” With a mischievous grin, Banni gently shoved at my arm. “Hundreds would line up if you were interested. You’re different and everyone is curious about the Men of the North.”

“Hundreds?” The cool night air suddenly felt warm and it made me move back from the bonfire.

“Ah, *oui!* It would be the same for you, Aubri. You could have as many sex partners as you would like to.”

His last words brought me back from the fantasies flowing through my mind of what it would feel like to be surrounded by a hundred naked, willing women.

“I don’t want to be in an orgy,” Aubri said and calmed my nerves. “One partner would be enough for me, or maybe two.”

“That can be arranged.” Banni pointed to himself and the two other men. “As I mentioned, we’ll all be more than happy to offer our assistance if you want to explore your sexuality. You’ll never have to worry that we’ll get clingy.”

I emptied my cup of beer and dried my mouth. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Why wouldn’t you take advantage of your time here? No one will know what you did in France, unless you two tell on each other.”

Aubri had a look of mischief in her blue eyes when her gaze met mine. “You know I can keep a secret.”

“Aubri, no! You’re not sleeping with a bunch of men just to try it out.”

“Actually, I’m more curious about women.”

Alex and Val laughed while I gaped at Aubri. “You’re a lesbian?”

“No, I like men, but I’ll have plenty of sex with a man when I marry next year. What I’m curious about is what it would feel like with a woman.”

“I... I...” Words failed me, and I trailed off without forming a sentence.

“Aren’t you curious about what it would feel like with a man?” Aubri asked me.

“No. They don’t turn me on.”

Aubri moved forward and spoke at a fast pace. “I think Banni has a point. This is a golden opportunity for us to do things that we could never do back home. I promise that I’ll never tell anyone if you fuck a hundred women.”

“No one will care how many women I fuck.” I raised my voice. “If anything, they’ll probably be envious, but why would I fuck a hundred women and hurt myself like that?”

“What do you mean, hurt yourself?” Alex asked. “Are you into submission?”

“No, I’m not fucking into submission unless it’s my woman submitting, but I wouldn’t be able to separate my emotions from the sex. If I had sex with a woman, I’d care for her on a deep level.”

The three men laughed. “You’re funny!”

“I’m not joking!”

“You take sex way too seriously, Indiana. It’s supposed to feel good and be fun, that’s all.”

Banni nodded. “Alex is right. Our system would help you because you can’t be with the same woman more than three times. More than that isn’t allowed because falling in love is dangerous.”

Shaking my head from the madness of them talking about sex as if it was nothing important, I leaned forward a little. “Okay, so tell me this: how many have you slept with?”

Val looked up as if he was counting.

“I never sleep with anyone,” Banni said. “Some want me to stay, but I prefer to leave after the sex is over with.”

“Let me rephrase my question then. How many have you had sex with?”

Banni’s shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I have no idea.” Looking to Alex and Val he asked, “Did you two keep count?”

Lifting their brows while turning their lips down, they shook their heads.

As always, Val kept quiet while Alex spoke, “No, but if I had to guess, I’d say I have two partners a month, sometimes three.”

“Sex two to three times a month doesn’t sound like much for someone with access to as much sex as you want,” I pointed out.

“We can be with a partner up to three times, so it’s more like six to nine times a month. If I go to a sex club it’s obviously more, but I’m starting to run out of new partners in those clubs.”

“How old were you when you began having sex?” Aubri asked.

“I was close to sixteen,” Banni said.

“Me too,” Alex chimed in.

“If you’ve had two partners a month for more than ten years that means you’ve been with at least two-hundred and forty women.” Aubri couldn’t hide the distaste in her tone.

“I never said it was all women,” Alex corrected her. “I enjoy men too, so it’s probably thirty percent men and seventy percent women.”

Exhaling with a huff, I set my cup down. “Okay, I appreciate you all sharing your liberal view on sex with us, but Aubri and I aren’t here to live out some freaky sexual fantasies.”

“Speak for yourself,” Aubri piped up but I shot her a hard stare.

“How about we change the subject?” Banni suggested with a disarming smile. “Indiana, tell us what you do at home. Did you leave a job behind when you came here?”

“Yes. I work for my father. We deal in mining, trade, and that sort of thing.”

“You said that your mom is an archeologist.”

“That’s right. She leads some of the most extensive excavations in the Northlands and she also teaches.”

“I love Christina,” Aubri told the others and smiled at me. “Indiana’s mom was the first woman to cross into the Northlands and I always admired her for that.”

“So, she’s brave?” Banni looked to me.

Indiana chuckled. “Yes, or foolish.”

“Don’t say that. Christina was a pioneer and she’s a role model for my generation of women, just like Raven.”

“Who’s Raven?” Alex asked.

“My older sister.” I felt pride when I projected a picture of my family in front of me. “She’s the one with the curly hair to the right.”

“You don’t share the same father.” Alex stated the obvious since Raven was dark-skinned.

“Raven was adopted by my parents before I was born. She’s married and has a son of her own.”

“That’s beside the point.” Aubri took over. “The reason we all admire Raven is that the men told her she could never be a police officer and she refused to give up. She was the first female police officer in the Northlands and since then others have followed.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m getting the sense that gender means a lot to you.”

I wrinkled my nose at Banni. “Don’t tell me you’re like the Motlanders, who are bloody gender neutral.”

“Relax, I meant that it seems silly that men and women can’t perform the same jobs. Unless we’re talking about reproductive matters, there’s no difference.”

“Dancing demons, I could just kiss you for that comment,” Aubri exclaimed.

It made Banni’s lips lift in a wide smile. “I’d like that.”

Cutting in between them, I said, “It’s not that we don’t value women, it’s that we’re protective. Women used to be so extremely rare that we cherished them like a dying species. We made strict laws to keep them safe and every time a woman was old enough to get married, men fought and sacrificed their lives to prove that they were worthy of protecting a woman. That mindset isn’t one you just get rid of overnight.”

Rolling her eyes, Aubri sighed. “Tell me about it.”

“But, Indiana, you just told us that you were raised by a woman from the Motherlands; surely you understand equality.”

“Of course.”

“He does on an intellectual level but ask him how he feels about Sparrow and me working as firefighters.”

“You’re a firefighter?” Alex asked as if that wasn’t a big thing.

“Yes, my best friend Sparrow and I are both volunteers. We applied to become fulltime firefighters two years ago, but they screwed us over at the testing. It was complete bullshit. As long as we’re volunteers, we won’t be allowed to work on the front line where the action is. All we get to do is preventive work.”

“What do you mean by preventive work?”

“We do controlled burnings and dig trenches to prevent forest fires and

that sort of thing. It's fine, but I'd rather be going into burning houses and saving people."

Banni used a stick to poke at the logs on the fire. "Do you think you should have passed the test?"

Aubri snorted. "No doubt!"

I sighed. "Aubri has it in her head that the people in charge conspired to keep her and Sparrow from getting accepted, but being a firefighter is one of the most prestigious jobs in the Northlands and there's a fierce competition to get into the academy."

"It's still a conspiracy when the tests were designed to favor height and strength."

I raised my brow. "Did you expect them to change the tests to accommodate women? Maybe men are just better suited for the job."

"Not if a house is collapsed and you have to crawl through a narrow passage. Sparrow and I would have an advantage then. You said it yourself; I would be a great firefighter and I deserved that spot."

"Sure, but so would the people who got accepted. I know it sucks, my young grasshopper, but sometimes we just don't get what we deserve."

Aubri picked up a small twig from the ground and threw it in my direction while blowing a raspberry.

"You know what, Aubri, if your goal is to be a firefighter then I'm sure you'll find a way to get accepted to that school," Banni told her.

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's Sparrow's dream more than mine. Originally, I wanted to be a Huntsman like my brothers, but that didn't work out. I've been teaching fighting techniques to students at local schools since I was eighteen, and I'm involved with some of the many philanthropic projects that my cousin Freya runs. It's not that I'm bored, I just wish I could be a pioneer like Raven, Christina, or my mother.

Banni chuckled. "But you are! No Northlander woman has ever worked as an Explorer in Old Europe."

The way Aubri's face lit up and she sat up straighter made me frown. I didn't like the way she looked at him.

"You think I'm a pioneer?" The hope in her voice was troubling. It shouldn't matter what Banni thought of her.

"I already told you that earlier today," I reminded her.

She gave me a quick side glance. "Yeah, I know, but that's different."

Annoyed, I stood up and moved away from the bonfire to empty my

bladder. I didn't like how Aubri dismissed me or took me for granted. She might come across as a ball-buster to everyone else, but I knew the mushy softness under her armor. She and I had been friends since childhood and the times my world had collapsed, she had always been there for me, just like I was always there for her. She'd helped bury my first dog when I was eight and held my hand when I cried that day. I, in return, made it my mission to cheer her up when she carried the grief of her family's falling apart after Magni's drone crash. Our shared story was intertwined in every way and I could read her like an open book. I hated the interest she'd taken in Banni. It was fucking obvious that she thought he was fascinating, and she wanted him to like her.

They laughed around the bonfire while I finished up and wondered how I could make Aubri see that she should care about my opinion and not his.

An idea made me shake my beast and quickly stuff him back in my pants. I had another message to record.

CHAPTER 5

Orders from Home

Aubri

I was squeezed up against the side of the tent with the four men taking up all the room. Indiana was next to me, snoring lightly and throwing off heat like a bloody furnace.

Lifting my head, I looked over Indiana's body to see where the faint light in the tent was coming from. A tiny window next to the opening revealed that the sun was slowly rising outside.

After a lazy stretch of my arms, I scratched my scalp and yawned.

A movement made me look over at Banni, who opened his eyes and smiled at me.

"Bonjour."

"Morning."

My eyes were probably puffy, and I needed a tooth cleaner, but my first priority was to get myself out of the corner Indiana had me backed into. Using his body as a shield between me and the three men, Indiana had made sure to keep me safe and warm all night. Being stuck in a sleeping bag with no room to maneuver made it hard for me to get out, but with a few grunts of frustration, I managed without waking up my gentle giant.

Banni came out of the tent not long after and sat on a log while I got the fireplace going again.

"You're good," he said with a satisfied nod as I blew on the leaves and twigs that I'd set on fire.

"I've been doing this since forever for training purposes. It's just hard to get to actually do anything when there are Nmen around. Most of them are overly chivalrous, constantly trying to impress us women."

"Huh. I'll happily let you do all the hard work if it makes you happy." Banni leaned back and stretched out his legs with an amused expression.

For five or ten minutes we didn't speak. I was busy gathering water from the river and boiling it, while Banni sat in deep thought.

"Aubri."

"Mmm?"

"I received a message for you."

“Where?”

Banni pointed to his forehead. “I was going over my messages and there’s one from Victor, who forwarded it from Freya. Let me get my wristband and I’ll show it to you.”

“I forgot that you have a brain implant. That’s so freaky.”

Stopping to answer, Banni lowered his brow. “I know, but Europeans have been doing it for years, and once you get used to it, it’s practical.”

I focused on cooking some oatmeal for our breakfast while Banni disappeared into the tent. When he came out again, there was talking among the other men, who were all awake now.

“Do you wanna see the message now or should we wait for Indiana?”

“Does it say that the message is for both of us?”

“No. I have another one for both of you that came earlier in the morning, but this one was sent to you from your father.”

“Oh!” Raising and lowering my shoulders with a deep sigh, I gestured for Banni to play the damn hologram.

When my father’s hologram appeared, Banni stared, which didn’t surprise me since my father’s many scars made him look brutal and scary.

“Aubri, I don’t know what the hell you were thinking, offering to stay in Old Europe, but you better believe I’m furious with you. How the fuck can we keep you safe when you go and do stupid things like that? Do you realize that Khan and I are two seconds away from invading to get you home? If it weren’t for Indiana being with you, we would have come for you already.

“I want a hologram ASAP with an explanation for your reckless behavior and a big fat promise that you’re going to do as Indiana tells you to. I’m appointing him your protector and if I hear anything about you giving him a hard time, I’ll fucking come and bring your bratty butt home myself.” The hologram version of my father was stabbing his finger through the air but since I wasn’t standing face to face with him, it felt a bit flat.

I looked to Banni, who was gaping, and then to the other three, who had all exited the tent and were watching my father’s message as the hologram hung in the air.

“Your mother is upset as well, and so is Dina. We all are! Explorer work is dangerous and if anything bad were to happen to you...” My father stopped talking just shy of his voice breaking. Compared to all the shouting, that was the part of his message that moved me the most.

“Anyway, you get the message and I’m not joking, Aubri. You’d better

treat Indiana as your protector and do as he says. I'm ordering him to report back to me, and one word from him about you not following orders will have your ass back here, pronto!"

With irritation my gaze went to Indiana, who stood listening with his arms folded. Once the hologram dissolved into thin air, he scratched his beard and walked over to tend to the fire.

"Whoa, who was that?" Alex asked.

"My father, Magni Aurelius."

Alex whistled low. "Now I'm glad that we don't have parents. Is he always that angry?"

"He's worried about his daughter," Indiana said in defense of my father.

"Yeah, but why does he talk to Aubri like she's a little kid?" Banni asked. "It's not like she needs supervision. She's an adult and shouldn't have to answer to you or anyone about how she lives her life."

I shot Banni a broad smile. "I like you more and more each day."

"Stop fucking flirting with him," Indiana grumped and stood up, lifting his chin in a challenging stance.

We stood for a second on each side of the fire pit with our jaws set and our gazes clashing.

"If you report to my father, I'll be furious with you."

"I don't have a choice."

"Then lie if you have to. This is my chance to have an adventure."

Indiana narrowed his eyes. "You're *my* responsibility."

"You heard Banni, I'm an adult who doesn't need your supervision."

"Oh, so you care more about Banni's opinion than your father's and mine now, do you?" Indiana scoffed.

"The only opinion I care about is *mine* and right now I think Banni is right. I'm an adult, and I don't want you controlling my every move."

"That's too bad because your father made me your protector and I take that seriously."

With my lips pressed together, I stirred the oatmeal with angry movements and reached for a plate. Slapping two spoonfuls onto the plate, I grabbed a spoon and went to sit down on a log while the others poured themselves some of the oatmeal.

Banni came to sit next to me with a plate in his hands while Indiana chose a log on the other side of the fire pit.

"Seeing your father gives me a better understanding of how you became

so fearless and strong,” Banni muttered low. “Standing up to a man like that must have been scary as a child.”

“My dad is intimidating but he can also be generous and caring. It’s been a long time since he’s been that furious with me.”

I appreciated that Banni and I could speak in hushed voices because I didn’t feel like involving the others and it annoyed me how Indiana scowled at us.

After breakfast, we packed up and got to the highlight of the day when we took the boat down the river.

Banni sat in the stern acting as the captain while the four of us sat on the edges of the boat with our paddles ready. “It gets rough in places, but that’s the fun part of it. Once we get under the mountain, I’ll need you to pay attention to the height. Don’t bump your heads.”

“What about the drone?” Indiana who sat behind me asked.

“I’m sending the drone off to meet us on the other side of the mountain. It will take us about four to five hours to go through the caves and do all the testing.” Banni used his paddle to push us free from the riverbank.

From the beginning, the river was fast and the boat sped along. I loved watching the trees close to the bank. It was as if some of them were dipping their branches into the river to feel the temperature of the water. None of us said much as we focused on staying free from roots, branches, stones, and logs that blocked our passage in some places.

I was proud when Indiana and I once again proved that we could pull our own weight. We knew how to follow instructions and the two times that the raft got stuck in shallow water, we knew how to distribute the weight and rock the boat to get it moving again. The third time that we got stuck, Indiana was the first to jump in the freezing water and pull us free. Alex and I pulled him back in the boat as we took off at high speed again.

“You okay back there?” I asked while focusing on paddling according to Banni’s instructions.

“Yeah.”

Indiana had to be freezing. It was late December and the water was ice cold.

“How soaked are you?”

“Stop worrying about me. I’m fine.”

I didn’t hear his teeth chattering when he spoke, which I took as a good sign. It made me look down at my knees. My legs should be soaked from all

the water that had splashed on me, but I didn't feel cold or wet at all.

"What are these clothes made of again?" I shouted for Banni and Alex to hear me. Since Val didn't say much, I had stopped directing my questions at him.

"Less talking and more attention to the water, little grasshopper," Indiana shouted as the raft bobbed up and down on the temperamental river.

Val pointed to a stone structure that reached up through the trees and looked back at Banni.

I figured the two of them were communicating through their brain link and understood when Banni shouted, "The river will split in two soon. We'll need to paddle to keep left or we'll end up going down a massive waterfall. We made that mistake once, so let's not repeat it."

I watched ahead and when I saw the split in the river, I called it out loud and began paddling.

Rejecting the natural course of the stream took hard work and we were all paddling in sync using all our muscle.

There was a feeling of relief in my body when we forced our way to the left and sped in the right direction. This part of the river was calmer, and we stopped paddling.

"Relax, save your strength. The entrance to the first cave isn't far now."

My neck tipped all the way back as I looked up at the mountain. Using my hand to shade my eyes from the bright light, I soaked up the sight of spotty moss on the sides and trees that were naked due to the winter season. This would be beautiful in the summer and reminded me of home.

"This is it." Banni steered to the entrance of a cave and told us to mind our heads.

Indiana's firm hand on my shoulder pulled me back to lie on top of his body while he ducked his head himself.

As the raft floated further into the cave, I felt exhilarated. I'd been in caves before, but this was new and with my eyes still adjusting to the dimmed light, I had no idea what to expect.

Indiana's hand was still on my shoulder. Reaching up, I squeezed it to let him know how thrilled I was. He intertwined our fingers and squeezed my hand back. In that moment my irritation with him from this morning was gone. Getting to go on this adventure with one of my best friends truly enhanced the experience.

We floated long enough under the low ceiling that I began relaxing my

head against Indiana's stomach and smiled to myself. I would have so many stories to tell once I returned to the Northlands.

After a minute, the cave opened up enough for us to sit up again.

"Turn on your headlamps," Banni instructed.

"How big is this cave?" I asked and tried to see to the other side.

"This is nothing. Wait until we get further in. Trust me, we've been to many caves, but this one is the king of them all. You're lucky that you get to go here on your first expedition. We only come here twice a year.

"It's better in the summer when the river is higher. Now, we'll have to carry the raft over shallow parts, which sucks."

"I can't imagine how crazy the rafting is in the summer."

"We have to time our visits according to the weather. We can't go when the entrance is flooded and if we go during dry periods, we risk getting stuck on shallow parts all the time."

It didn't take long before we had to get out and carry the raft, which wasn't hard since there were five of us.

For forty minutes, we sailed, walked, and climbed in a few places until we paddled into a cave so beautiful that it took my breath away.

We all shone light onto beautiful crystal formations that hung from the walls.

"Wow!" Indiana and I exclaimed at the same time. No matter where I shone my light, the cave was a wonder of geology at its finest.

"I've seen stalactites before, but these are spectacular," he exclaimed as we took in the icicle-shaped formations hanging from the ceiling and walls.

I reached out to touch a petrified waterfall that looked as if it was defying gravity.

Once I was over my initial awestruck state, I began filming the cave to show my friends back home.

That night when we set up camp, I recorded a message for Sparrow telling her about our amazing day.

"Let me introduce you to our teammates, Alex, Val, and Banni." I turned to Val and Alex, who were cleaning up after dinner. "Say hi to my best friend Sparrow."

Alex and Val waved and made funny faces.

I flicked the camera back to me. "The last one is Banni, who is here somewhere. He's our boss but also our friend."

"No, he's not," Indiana protested and moved closer.

“Bye, Indiana,” I said as I walked away to avoid him and find Banni.

“Banni, where are you?” I called out and heard an answer from behind the drone. Walking around it, I found Banni naked from the waist up, with his green uniform half off. “What are you doing?”

“Checking on a wound.” His face was downturned, and his hands were applying something fluid to a scar on his right hip.

“You didn’t tell us you were injured.”

“I’m not. The wound is from two weeks ago. I wanted to make sure I didn’t tear it open today and I’m cleaning it for a safety measure.”

“Oh, okay, but anyway, I’m recording so I want you to say hi to my friend Sparrow.”

Banni raised a hand in greeting and broke into a greeting in French.

“English, please,” I reminded him with a grin.

Dabbing at his wound with the cloth a last time, Banni straightened to his full height. “All right, here’s my message... wait, is this for a man or a woman?”

“Woman. Sparrow isn’t a man’s name.”

“There’s no need to roll your eyes at me. How was I supposed to know that when I’ve never met anyone called Sparrow?”

I looked into the camera. “Sorry about that, sweetie. He doesn’t know any better.”

As I talked, Banni came to wrap his arm around my shoulder with a charming smile. “Listen, Sparrow, all you need to know is that you don’t have to worry about Aubri. Trust me, we’re taking good care of her. If you need convincing, feel free to come by for a visit. We French are *very welcoming*.” The way his tone turned sultry at the end made me elbow him and pull away.

“Okay, tone it down, Frenchie. If Sparrow shares this with my brother and cousin, they’ll think that you’re coming on to me.”

“What if I am?” Banni teased.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t say that around Indiana or he’ll blow up again.”

“Say what around me?”

I should have known Indiana was keeping an eye on me. Looking up I saw him leaning against the drone with his arms crossed.

“Stop scowling like that. Nothing happened. Wanna say hi to Sparrow?”

“Sure.” Shifting his balance to stand straight up, Indiana declared:

“Sparrow, tell Mason he owes me big time. I’m stuck here babysitting his

twin while he and Belle are...”

I held up a hand to cut him off, swinging the camera away from Indiana and back to me. “Don’t listen to him. He’s not babysitting. If anything, he’s crashing the party because I never asked him to stay.”

“I *had* to stay.”

“Mm-hmm.... Why don’t you just admit that you were having the time of your life today when we went river rafting, climbing, and exploring?”

Indiana crossed and uncrossed his arms. “I’ll admit that I enjoyed it at times.”

“See.” I walked over to stand next to him and filmed us both. Looking up at him, I pushed my luck. “How about you tell our friends at home that being here isn’t as miserable as you want them to believe?”

He groaned. “Being out here is fine, but what happens when we have to live in that apartment and figure everything out?”

I smacked my tongue. “Tsk, you worry too much. It’ll be an adventure. We’ll get to try new food, meet new friends, and Banni already promised he’ll take us to a fight club.”

“A fight club?” Indiana’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

Banni, who was close enough to hear, was quick to correct me. “No, I said a nightclub, not a fight club.”

“Oh, what the hell is a nightclub?” I asked.

“It’s a bar where there’s music, dancing, and flirting. Don’t you have that in the Northlands?”

“Ehh... sort of. We have bars and the yearly festival where there’s dancing, but it’s not limited to the nighttime, they can do it during the day as well.”

Indiana looked into the camera with a serious expression. “Sparrow, it’s better if you don’t show this vid to the others. There’s no need for them to worry. I’ll make sure Aubri doesn’t flirt with anyone.”

Remembering my father’s threat from this morning, I played along. “And with that promise, we’ll end our greeting. I have to send a message to Dad, who wants me to apologize for sacrificing myself. Apparently, only men are allowed to be heroes.”

Ending the call, I looked up at Indiana again. “We’re going to that nightclub.”

“Aubri...” It sounded like a half-hearted protest.

“Don’t even start. You know you want to go as much as I do.” Holding

out my hand I looked deep into Indiana's warm brown eyes. "Remember our pact that what happens in France stays in France."

"You want me to look the other way when you do things you shouldn't."

"Uh-huh. In return I'll do the same for you."

Indiana tilted his head. "Sounds like you have more to gain from that pact than I do."

With a playful tone, I angled my head. "But you'll do it because you love me and you're such a good friend."

From Indiana's expression I could tell he was torn.

"Come on! Think about all the fun we could have."

Indiana rubbed his forehead as if my father's voice was screaming at him to watch me twenty-four-seven.

"I'm an adult, Indy, and you know I can take care of myself. I'm not letting you stop me from having adventures."

"How about..." His hands fell to his side. "How about we take one day at a time? I'm responsible for you and if I ever want to set foot back home again, I need to make sure nothing bad happens to you."

"Okay, but promise me that you'll be open-minded and not freak out all the time."

Indiana looked down, taking some time to think before he nodded and met my eyes. "Okay, I promise to be open-minded, if you promise to be safe."

"Deal!"

CHAPTER 6

Protecting Aubri

Indiana

The expedition took five days, which was record speed according to Banni. Having two strong and capable Northlanders on the team had been a massive help and Alex, Val, and Banni all praised Aubri and me for our contribution.

Over the five days we were gone, I'd watched Banni and Aubri build a friendship. He had been friendly to me too, but I found it hard to like him when he was flirting with the woman I had sworn to protect.

Aubri sensed my reservations toward him and on our first night back in the apartment, she confronted me with a direct question.

"Why don't you like Banni?"

"I never said that I don't like him."

Sitting down on the bed, Aubri sorted through the clothes we'd bought today. "I think you should wear this one." She handed me a blue shirt in a soft material and picked up one of the two perfumes we bought for me. "Use this one, it smells amazing."

I took the shirt and the perfume and moved to the bathroom, leaving the door open.

"You don't have to say that you don't like Banni. I can feel your resentment toward him. You're not that hard to read, you know."

Pulling off my sweater, I applied the perfume and pushed my arm through the first sleeve of the blue shirt Aubri had given me.

"I don't like how you two are flirting."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to be with someone like him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"With him you'd just be one out of many. If you wait until you marry, you'll be your husband's only lover."

With an irritated sigh, Aubri brushed her hands through her long red hair, pumping it up in volume. "What if my husband and I aren't compatible sexually and I never get to experience good sex? Why can't we be more like the French and just have fun? Who says sex has to be this serious thing?"

Don't you want to try more partners?"

Taking a last look in the mirror, I walked back into the bedroom. "Sure, I fantasize about it, but I'm smart enough to know it would be a disaster in real life."

"Why?" Aubri had placed two outfits on the bed and was now trying to decide between them.

"That one." I pointed to a dusty-green pantsuit that I knew would go well with her gorgeous hair color.

Picking it up, she moved to the bathroom and left the door ajar so we could continue talking. "Why not have fun while we're here? I promise I'd never tell your future wife what you did while we're in Old Europe."

I scoffed. "That's probably what Mason thought."

"What?"

"That Belle could be an experience and that it would be fun."

"Who said they didn't have fun?"

"No, I'm sure they had fun, but look at the disaster that came of it. We're here because of his actions, and he has let down your family."

The door to the bathroom opened and Aubri stood with the pantsuit on. "Are you serious? Belle is the sweetest woman Mason could have married. I'm so tired of all the politics and the expectations that because we're from the Aurelius family, we *have to* marry Northlanders. What if I don't want to marry at all?"

"You have to. You promised your parents."

She turned around and pointed with a thumb over her shoulder. "Can you help?"

Walking over I closed the back of her pantsuit that fit her snugly and showed off her hourglass figure. "I'm serious, Aubri. You promised that you'd marry a Northlander when we return."

"I was buying time. I'm hoping that Thor and Freya have married before we get home. If both of them get hitched with some ideal candidate then I'm off the hook, don't you think?"

"What's wrong with Northlander men that you don't want to marry one of us?"

"Oh, you mean someone like Walker?"

I turned her around. "No, of course not. That guy was a jerk and the way he treated you had nothing to do with you."

Her gaze lowered from my eyes to my neck where a large scar told a

story of a fight that had almost cost me my life. With a sad face, she trailed my scar with her index finger. “I still feel bad about what happened. He could have killed you. Why would you go up against a Huntsman? You know they’re trained to kill in seconds.”

“He insulted and hurt you. I couldn’t just look the other way.”

“I’m a big girl and I have dealt with worse than Walker.” Aubri lowered her hand from my neck and returned to the bathroom with a few beauty items we’d picked up earlier.

For a while we didn’t talk. She made herself pretty while I plunked down on the bed and placed my hands behind my head, thinking back to one of the worst days in my life.

Seven Months Earlier

It had taken years of persuasion, but finally Aubri had managed to convince her brothers to let her come along to a training camp with the Huntsmen. When I heard that she got to train with the elite soldiers in our country, I’d been green with envy.

Huntsmen were respected and admired by all of us Northmen. If I weren’t part of the business empire I was running with my father, I would have loved to join the unit.

After a night of drinking and intense pressure, I’d managed to convince Mason to let me come as well.

Our friend, Sparrow, kept badgering me and Aubri to make Mason invite her as well, but even though Aubri tried, he wouldn’t budge.

On the day we left, Sparrow said too much and accidentally revealed to me that Aubri was interested in one of the Huntsmen, called Walker.

From the moment I met him, I hated that fucker.

Walker was the kind of man who felt superior to others and acted as if everyone wanted to be like him.

The first thing he told Aubri and me was, “So you think you can keep up with someone like me?”

“I’m here to learn and grow,” Aubri said with a smile that was unusual for her, telling me that Sparrow had been right about Aubri’s having a crush.

The first day, Aubri worked twice as hard as any of the men. Mason and I agreed that had she been a man, she would have been the ultimate Huntsman.

Unfortunately, the eighteen Huntsmen participating in the training camp didn’t treat her with the respect she deserved. The majority of them would have fought any tournament if that meant securing her hand in marriage, but

when it came to seeing her as an equal warrior, it was a different matter.

Whenever Mason wasn't around, some of them would tease her and make things harder for her. I tried to help her by telling her to stop antagonizing them, because Aubri couldn't keep her mouth shut.

Being an outsider myself, I didn't yield any power with the Huntsmen, and the times I asked them to back off and leave her alone, I was either ignored or told that I lacked humor.

"Is this how you treat women?" I asked after Walker was screaming at Aubri to move her big fat butt faster.

"What's your problem? She wanted to come so let her prove that she's as good as we are."

With a frown I stood watching Aubri sprint as fast as she could toward the finish line. She would have been faster than most men, but these were the alpha dogs of the Northlands and chosen because of their physical superiority.

Walker kept heckling Aubri, shouting insults, "We should have let your friend come instead of you. I bet Sparrow would have flown right through. Is that even supposed to be running? Looks like jogging to me."

Red-faced and panting, Aubri pushed herself to the breaking point and accelerated even further.

I heard quiet whispers in the group of men behind me, acknowledging that she was incredible, but Walker and his buddy Harris were mean-spirited and laughed when Aubri tripped and dipped her knees, hands, and face in mud. Like the warrior she was, she got up, wiped the mud off enough that she could see the trail in front of her, and then she ran on.

I had already finished my four rounds in the makeshift agility course that Mason had arranged in the woods. Now I stood with the other men while Mason was at the starting line, too far from us to hear the comments about his sister.

Maybe Walker's words bothered me more because I knew Aubri had feelings for him. I couldn't understand why, because as far as I knew they hadn't spent time together and in my opinion he was unworthy of her time and adoration. The man was built like a bloody ox and incredibly strong, but other than that, he seemed two-dimensional to me with his lack of empathy and kindness to an underdog like Aubri. He should be fucking celebrating her courage to show up and train with the best in the world.

With Mason positioned at the other end of the agility course, he couldn't

hear the crude comments between some of his men, but when Aubri came around for the last time, Walker turned it up.

“I bet she regrets coming here. Look at how she’s smeared in mud,” Harris said.

Putting both hands to his mouth, Walker shouted to Aubri. “This isn’t a spa, woman. You’re not supposed to lounge around in the mud and make yourself look pretty.”

The men all laughed at his joke, but I was fuming.

“She doesn’t need mud, she’s pretty already,” a soldier behind me said as if discussing Aubri like this was no big deal.

My arms were crossed, and my hands folded in fists as I tried to calm myself. If I made a scene, Aubri would be furious with me. She didn’t want special treatment and she didn’t want Mason or me to fight her battles.

Walker turned his head, responding to the soldier who had called her pretty. “What does it matter if she’s pretty when she behaves like a man? That woman could make a man’s cock limp just by opening her mouth.”

Harris elbowed his friend. “I wouldn’t mind her opening her mouth for me.”

“Sure, as long as she sucks and doesn’t speak.”

Aubri passed us just then and from the way she turned her head and frowned, I feared that she’d heard the degrading words about her.

Pushing at Walker’s shoulder from the back, I snapped, “Shut the fuck up!”

He spun in a fast movement and grabbed my hand, pushing my elbow up and my wrist back in a painful hold.

“Whoa, relax,” some of the others warned, but I was pumped with adrenaline and Walker stared at me like he wanted to break every bone in my body.

“If you can’t deal with the tone among soldiers, then you better fuck along home and stay behind your desk, pretty boy.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d used that tone to get under my skin. I took great pride in grooming my impressive beard and keeping my hairstyle sharp. He in contrast had long blond hair stuck in a man bun that looked like it had never seen conditioner in his lifetime.

His friend Harris tried intervening with a hand on Walker’s shoulders. “He’s Mason’s best friend. Are you sure you want to upset the Captain?”

“Yeah, or Solo. What if this civilian tells the Commander what you said

about his sister?” another of the soldiers pointed out.

The pain in my arm was substantial and I bit my lips together, refusing to give him the satisfaction of my scream.

“Let him go.” Aubri’s panting was close, but Walker was like a crocodile with its jaws locked around its prey.

“Your friend attacked me. I’m just teaching him a lesson,” Walker said through gritted teeth.

“Let. Him. Go!” Aubri’s tone was fiercely protective and authoritarian. It made the men snicker and turn to see what Walker would do about being given orders by a woman.

“Or what? Are you two weaklings gonna run back to Mason and Solo and cry about how mean the Huntsmen were?”

“You’re hurting my friend. I’m asking you for the last time to let him go.”

Aubri’s threat amused the men, but I could see she was over her infatuation with this motherfucker. If he didn’t release me, she would attack him.

I couldn’t allow my friend to get into a fight because it would mean a ban from ever coming to these types of training camps again.

“Aubri, just finish your round. It’ll be fine,” I pressed out despite the excruciatingly painful hold he had me in.

She kept in her spot with her feet firmly planted and her hands on her hips.

“Careful, Walker, the lady is about to throw a fit and tell you to behave,” one of the Huntsmen joked.

Walker eased his hold on me and looked at Aubri. There was pure disdain in his eyes. “That’s why women will never be allowed in this unit, they don’t get our culture and they get upset over something as innocent as this.” With a smirk, Walker pushed my wrist further back and the sharp pain made me mutter a low curse.

I could fight back, but it would cost me a broken wrist and potentially a dislocated elbow. Walker was no doubt a better fighter than me. On top of that he had his buddies by his side, while I had Aubri, who risked getting hurt if a fight broke out.

“Let me go!” I hissed in pain.

“I’m helping you build a tolerance to pain.” Walker gave a condescending laugh and didn’t see Aubri do a fast roundhouse kick to his

face, knocking him off balance.

Releasing me, he raised his hands to his nose with a look of complete disbelief. “She fucking broke my nose.” Walker snarled and lowered his hands, which were bloody.

“*Run, Aubri! Run to Mason.*” I knew her brother could protect her better than I could, but she wouldn’t leave me.

“I told you to let Indiana go twice, you idiot. It’s your own fault for not listening.”

No one was laughing or finding it funny. It was like a group of people staring at the fuse to a bomb waiting for it to go off.

Walker used the back of his hand to wipe away some blood but smeared most of it on his face. His eyes had a wild expression in them and with the blood it made him look like a savage.

“Look, we don’t want any trouble.” I stepped in front of Aubri. “Things got a little out of hand here, but let’s just deal with this as civilized people.”

Walker narrowed his eyes and pointed a bloody finger at us. “You’re fucking gonna pay for this.”

When Walker took a step toward us and reached out to grab Aubri, one of his colleagues stepped in front of her too. “I can’t let you put a hand on her.”

“Why not? She kicked me.”

Aubri, who had never understood when to back down, taunted the giant. “Sorry, sugar, I was just helping you build your pain tolerance.”

Provoked by her attitude, Walker threw himself forward to get her, but she still didn’t run like a normal person. Instead she spread her hands out.

“Does it make you feel powerful to beat up a woman? Come on then, go at it, I’m not afraid of you.”

“Aubri, for fuck’s sake, *shut up!*” I ordered while trying to hold back the brute.

“What is it, *little* Walker? I thought a little violence was innocent fun or is that only when you’re the one being violent and demeaning?”

“You fucking bitch.” The moment he said it, I took a swing at him. No one got to call my grasshopper a bitch.

From that moment on it was mayhem. Walker and I were fighting and others were shouting. I saw Aubri hanging in the air as one of the large men held his arm around her midsection. She was screaming and kicking her feet and it made me crazy that I couldn’t help her. I was busy trying to survive my fight with Walker, who was fueled by Aubri’s humiliation of him.

I tried to block his attacks, but everything happened so fast, and I didn't even see the knife until he was holding it by my face.

"What's going on?" I registered Mason's voice in the distance and moved my body just as I felt the cut on my neck.

"Let my sister go."

I was on the ground, my hand pressing against my neck. I could tell the blood was streaming fast from the way my hands got wet.

And then Aubri was there, her eyes large and frightened as she pressed down on my wound on top of my hands. "He cut you."

My sight was full of spots and I couldn't speak. She was so beautiful with her red hair glowing like an angel's halo. I wanted to comfort her and tell her I would be fine, but we were in a forest and from the feeling of blood gushing through my fingers, I knew I was losing blood too fast.

"Grass... hop..." Speaking took strength that I didn't have, and I found it hard to breathe.

Mason fell to my side and gave orders for the others to hand him supplies. I watched my friend do what he was trained to do, but for a split second we locked eyes and I saw fear in his eyes. He didn't think I would make it.

"Indyyy." Aubri was crying now, her blue eyes overflowing with tears for me. I wanted desperately to stay with her, but my eyes rolled back as darkness claimed me. I could still hear Mason giving commands and Aubri screaming my name, but my body had stilled. The pain didn't bother me anymore as I felt myself float away. Visions of all the people I loved bombarded me. My mom singing to me and my dad teaching me to fight. Jones cracking jokes and my little sister Lara showing me a drawing she made for me. I saw myself drinking my first beer with Mason and running through a field with Aubri. There was so much love and gratitude, but there was also a deep sense of sadness. I didn't want to die this young, and I didn't want Aubri to blame herself for my death. As their voices faded, I was left with an all-consuming regret: Now, I would never get to kiss my young grasshopper.

CHAPTER 7

Nightclub

Aubri

We met Banni and Alex in front of the nightclub. Banni opened his arms to hug me and, embracing their culture, I let him. When he tried to do the same with Indiana, the proud Nman held out a hand. “I’m not a hugger.”

“Okay.” Undeterred, Banni patted Indiana’s shoulder and threw a nod to a pair of double doors bathed in bright blue light with a sign above that said, “*La Grotte Grotesque.*”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It translates to the grotesque cave.”

“Hmm... what’s grotesque about it?”

“Not much, except this is where we outcasts go, and the people who are attracted to danger.”

The way he wiggled his eyebrows made me laugh. I was aware that Banni flirted with me and I welcomed it for entertainment purposes. But despite his good looks and charming personality I wasn’t interested in him as anything more than a friend. Banni opened the doors and walked in, waving us past two men that he greeted like old friends.

We walked down two flights of stairs before a large room with high ceilings opened up. There were at least two hundred people dressed in colorful clothing and hairstyles. At least fifty of them were dancing in the middle, while others stood watching them from balconies all around.

I turned to grin at Indiana, telling him without words that I was excited. He rolled his eyes, but the edge of his lips lifted. He could pretend to be bummed about staying in France with me, but I knew he was as eager for an adventure as I was.

“Come on.” Banni gestured for us to follow him up a staircase where we found a bar with large mirrors and more colorful lighting. Without asking, Banni got us drinks and paid with the wristband the same way we did back home.

“What is this?” I asked and sniffed my drink.

“My favorite drink. It’s spicy and gets you buzzed fast.”

Tasting the liquid, I closed one eye and scrunched up my face. “You

weren't kidding. This has got a kick to it."

Indiana coughed and dried his mouth. "How can this be your favorite drink?"

"I'm a hot-blooded man and I like spicy things," Banni said and watched me give the drink another try.

"If you have to be hot-blooded to like this drink, then I must be cold-blooded, because it tastes like piss to me."

Indiana gave a grunt in support of my review of the drink.

"Then go get something else to drink. Do you want me to introduce you to people, or would you like to browse the place for yourself first?"

Indiana and I exchanged a glance and then he spoke. "Aubri and I will go and dance."

"Dance? Don't you need to be drunk for that?" I asked because the times we had danced had always involved Indiana being intoxicated.

With a disgusted look to the spicy drink in his hands, Indiana emptied the glass in one go like it was medicine that needed to be taken.

I followed his example and stuck out my tongue as if that would help get rid of the awful taste.

After we set down our empty glasses, Indiana led me back down to the dance floor.

The music had a strong beat and many of the French people were jumping up and down and singing along. Others were swaying with a partner and a few even kissed on the dance floor.

We had bars in the Northlands, but this was like something from before the Toxic War when there had been even numbers of men and women.

We'd attracted attention from the moment we entered the club. Maybe it was the way we took everything in with open curiosity, or maybe our size and way of carrying ourselves revealed that we were different.

Indiana was the tallest one in the club, but plenty of the men were taller than me. Even with my six feet, Indiana still had eight inches on me. It was weird how back home I'd never thought of him as large since he walked around with Mason, who was taller. Seeing him among the Europeans, he looked different somehow.

All eyes were on us although no one dared approach us in the beginning. I saw Alex dance with a blonde with purple eyebrows. They looked like old friends and smiled a lot.

I wasn't surprised that the French had a different style of dancing from

us, but I didn't like how much attention we drew with our different looks and moves. We were athletic by nature and both of us had rhythm. I enjoyed the music, but I wasn't as good as Indiana when it came to shutting everyone else out and focusing on us.

After twenty minutes of upbeat dancing, the music changed to a slower pace.

"Wanna find a place to sit for moment?" I shouted to Indiana over the music.

He nodded and steered me toward Banni, who sat in a corner with a large group of mostly women.

"Come join us," Banni called out to us and moved to make room for me between him and an elegant woman with black hair.

Indiana sat down opposite us and right away some of the women moved closer to him and asked him questions.

"Aubri, let me introduce you to my new friend, Lucille. She was just admiring your dancing."

The woman pushed her styled hair back and gave me a warm smile. "You and your friend have good rhythm and toned bodies; are you dancers?"

"No, but we are used to being physically active, if that counts."

She had pretty features that I found pleasing and I wondered if Banni had introduced us because of my comment that I wouldn't mind a sexual experience with a woman.

When she lifted her hand, I saw that, like most people here, she wore a lot of jewelry. The light in the room reflected on her many rings and bracelets.

I sat still as her fingers played with my red locks.

"Is this your real hair color?"

"*Oui.*" It was one of the few words I'd picked up this past week in Old Europe.

"*C'est magnifique.*" Her choice of words was close enough to English that I understood her praise.

"*Merci.*"

I was impressed with myself and figured that before I left this country, I'd be fluent in French.

Lucille's fingers were still playing with my hair when Banni pushed a drink into my hand.

I sniffed it to make sure it wasn't spicy, but this one had a sweet scent to it. The taste was pleasant and Banni grinned when I took a sip and gave him a

nod of approval.

“Here, I ordered a beer for you,” he shouted to Indiana, who was chatting with a pink-haired woman who was exhibiting her breasts in a low-cut dress.

“Thanks.” Indiana took the beer and shot me a quick glance before being sucked into the conversation with the women on each side of him.

Lucille was sweet and intelligent. Her English wasn’t perfect, but I understood her fine. Several times, she touched me in a flirtatious way and after twenty minutes of talking, she asked if I wanted to dance.

Letting my eyes glide over the dance floor, I noticed that women dancing with women seemed to be as normal here as men and women dancing together.

“Sure.” Once we stood, I saw that Lucille was almost a head shorter than me.

As I walked past Indiana, he grabbed my hand and looked up at me. “Where are you going?”

“Dancing.” I wiggled my eyebrows with a laugh. “We’re here to explore, remember?” I didn’t stay to hear his opinion but followed Lucille to the dance floor. She was soft in the right places and I liked how womanly she was with her beautiful curves. We danced and Lucille’s moves were so seductive that I no longer doubted her intentions. She was interested in me sexually and I felt flattered. Maybe I wasn’t exactly turned on by her, but the adventurer in me loved the novelty of flirting with a woman. In the Northlands every man in the bar would have been staring if I danced with a woman like this. Because I held a special status as Magni Aurelius’ daughter, someone would have tipped off the News, who would have concluded I was a lesbian.

Here, no one cared. Sex was considered a pastime and stress reliever, not a commitment for life.

Lucille danced closer to me and I got the feeling she was looking for a chance to kiss me. I laughed when she leaned in and kissed my neck while letting her hand run down my back to my butt.

Others tried to join our dancing, but Lucille turned her back on them and moved us to another part of the dance floor.

“Everybody wants your attention,” she told me and when yet another person attempted to mingle with us, she’d had enough and led me back to the sofa where we had first met.

“It’s better here,” she said and picked up my drink from the table and

handed it to me. “*Santé.*”

“Cheers,” I responded and downed my drink, giving me a lovely buzz. Putting my glass down, I looked over at Indiana and saw him studying me. He looked pissed for some reason, but when the blonde next to him slid her hand up his thigh our eye contact was broken.

“My friend Sparrow will be glued to my every word, when I tell her about this,” I told Lucille, who was sipping on her drink.

“Is she your lover?”

I shook my head. “No, she’s my best friend. Here, let me show you a picture.”

It didn’t take me long to pull up a picture of Sparrow and me together. “Her parents run a school and she and I have been teaching fight classes there since we were eighteen.”

Lucille leaned in, studying the picture of Sparrow, who looked more like her mother Kya than her father Archer. “She’s beautiful. I love her smile and her black curly hair.”

“That’s funny you should say that. Sparrow always hated her tiny curls and wanted my straight hair, but now that she’s grown and she wears it loose, it looks amazing.”

Lucille looked away from Sparrow’s picture to me. “You’re both extraordinary. If she came here, she would be as desired as you.”

“Me? Nah.” I passed her words off as a joke. “The thing about Sparrow is that she loves to test boundaries and she’s going to be so jealous of all the things I have access to here.”

“If she’s as open-minded as you are, then how come you haven’t slept together?”

“Oh, we’ve had plenty of sleepovers.”

“So, she *is* your lover.”

“No, we never had sex. That would be weird when we’re best friends. What about you and Banni? How close are you?”

“Banni?” She furrowed her brow.

I looked around and saw him sitting further away with some women. “Over there, he’s the guy who introduced us.”

“Hmm. I saw him walk in here with you and the tall fella and asked him to introduce us.”

“Oh, I thought you were friends?”

“No. But I should warn you. He’s an Explorer and those people are

extreme.”

I laughed. “I know.”

She laughed with me. “No, you don’t understand. There was a show that followed their work. These people walk into polluted areas, sleep outside, and use the wilderness as a bathroom.” She wrinkled her nose when she said the last part.

With the drink in my system I found her amusing. “Have you never taken a shit in the wild?”

“Absolutely not. But Explorers do. Everybody knows they aren’t normal. I mean this in the best way; be careful who you associate with. Explorers like your friend over there are almost always criminals or illiterate people.”

I couldn’t take her comments seriously. “Are you saying that how well a person reads and writes determines if they are good people?”

Lucille swung a hand. “You would understand it if you were from here.”

“Yeah, but I’m not. As I see it these brave men and women risk their lives for your future. For weeks at a time, they give up on comforts like running hot water and modern toilets to go and clean up the world for future generations. Problem is that the rest of you are a bunch of entitled pricks who don’t appreciate the hard work they do for you.”

Lucille’s eyes widened and her lips made a small “oh” expression.

“That’s right. Banni and his people shouldn’t be treated as outcasts. They should be celebrated as fucking heroes.”

Looking in Banni’s direction, I saw that he was still talking with three women who were hanging on his every word. “At least those women seem to appreciate him.”

Following my gaze, Lucille dipped her head a little. “This place attracts people who are drawn to trouble. Danger can be addictive, and Banni was a favorite from the show that followed the Explorers. I too find him attractive but then I was always drawn to the dangerous and troubled type.” She moved a little closer and placed her hand on my thigh.

Tilting my head, I looked down at her hand and back to her face. “You think I’m dangerous?” She couldn’t have chosen a better compliment.

The right side of her lips lifted in another seductive smile. “The right kind of dangerous. There’s something incredibly sexy about you. Your energy is strong and almost masculine. I feel like you would punish me if it pleased you.”

That made me laugh. “You mean like spank you?”

“Only if you want to. I already told you everyone in this club wants you, myself included.”

I didn't know what to say and I think Lucille sensed my underlying uncertainty.

Taking my hand, she played with it. “Have you ever been with a woman?”

“Not yet.”

A seductive smile played over her lips. “Would you like to?”

I smiled back and pushed through my inner resistance. “Mm-hmm.”

She looked pleased as she sat watching me with her nail running in circles on the inside of my wrist. “Good.” Leaning closer, Lucille whispered in my ear. “Your friend is keeping a close eye on us.”

Turning my head toward Indiana, I saw that Lucille was right. He was watching us and our eyes locked. Sitting opposite us on a leather seat, he was surrounded by sexy women trying to get his attention.

Indiana kept staring at me with a sullen expression on his face as if he was willing me to connect to him instead of the beautiful woman next to me.

“How about we ask him to join us for some fun?” Lucille's whispering in my ear made me blink my eyes and try to break the strong connection between Indiana and me.

Seeing him sit with his strong legs slightly spread and his arm resting on the back of the seat, he looked so handsome and rough. It was the weirdest sensation because I had never thought of Indiana in a sexual way before. Maybe it was the flirtatious energy between Lucille and me, or her indication that we should ask him to join us in a threesome, that made me see my friend with a new set of eyes.

I had seen him half-dressed many times when we went swimming, but as he sat with the blue shirt that I'd picked out for him, he looked... My brain was scrambling in confusion because I shouldn't think of my friend that way, but swallowing hard, I allowed the word to form in my mind. Indiana looked bloody sexy and the second I admitted it, my gaze broke free from him and zoomed in on the women jockeying for his attention.

“What do you think?” Lucille purred next to me. “I'm up for some fun, are you?”

It was like I had tunnel vision and couldn't see anything but Indiana. Why hadn't I ever seen how attractive he was with that trimmed beard and broad shoulders? His lips were... wow, why didn't I ever notice how full his

lips were? Without thinking about it, I licked my own lips and heard Lucille laugh beside me. “Oooh, I can tell you like my idea of a threesome. Would you like me to invite him, or do you want to do it?”

I had felt sexual desire before, but never toward Indiana, whom I’d always considered one of my closest friends. I couldn’t invite him to be in a threesome with me. He would scoff at the idea. Indiana didn’t like me that way. He was here because he knew my father would have never forgiven him if he’d let me stay in France without protection.

Before I could say yes or no, Lucille gestured for him to come to us. Indiana didn’t hesitate. I saw the disappointment on the faces of the hopeful women who’d been trying to get his attention when he came over to squat in front of me and Lucille.

“Hey, handsome,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Aubri and I were going to have some fun together and we would like you to join.”

Indiana narrowed his eyes slightly. “Come again?”

Sliding her finger up his strong arm, Lucille repeated her offer. “How would you like to have a threesome with the two of us?”

Pinning me with his sharp gaze, he asked, “Is that a joke?”

I swallowed hard, searching for something to say that would make sense to him. “If that’s what it’ll take for you to keep quiet about it. We could experiment together... on her.”

Indiana was quiet for a moment as if waiting for me to say “Psyched!” I didn’t. I loved the idea of experimenting and exploring, but my mind was running in circles trying to understand why out of all the people in this nightclub, Indiana was the one I wanted to do it with.

“You want me to...” He tightened his eyebrows. “Are you asking me to have sex with you?”

The idea was so extreme that even though my body was full of lust for him, I still couldn’t say yes to his question. Instead, I mumbled, “With her. We’ll have sex with her... together.”

Indiana moved his head to look at Lucille. There was no excitement in his eyes but when he looked back at me, he gave a short jut of his chin. “If you want to experiment, I’d rather you did it with a female and me than one of the men here.”

My heart was hammering in my chest and not even my sense of adventure could wash away the fear that I was setting myself up for failure. Lucille was in her late twenties and no doubt sexually experienced. I liked

being the best at everything, but in this area, I would look like an amateur next to her.

“My place or your place?” she asked with triumph glowing from her pretty face.

“Our place,” Indiana said and rose up to his full height offering us both a hand to pull us up.

As the three of us walked through the nightclub toward the exit, Indiana looked like a man on a mission, while Lucille glided over the floor with pride.

My mind was racing with confusing thoughts because behind my excitement that I was about to experience sex for the first time, there was a nauseating feeling that this time I might have taken my curiosity too far.

CHAPTER 8

Two on One

Indiana

We walked through the city with Lucille flirting with me and Aubri.

Part of me kept screaming that this wasn't how I wanted my first time with Aubri to be. I wanted it to be just her and me on our wedding night.

If only she hadn't put me so firmly in the friend zone, I could have had a real chance with her.

Her attempt to bribe me to be silent about her escapades wasn't unexpected. But I was surprised by the tactic of trying to make me complicit.

The fact that I'd said yes showed how desperate I was for her to see me as more than a friend.

Aubri offered Lucille a drink when we got inside our apartment, while I put on music.

The women began dancing again like they had in the club. I didn't hate Lucille's hands on Aubri's body as much this time because at least they had invited me to play along.

Our apartment was small with large windows offering plenty of light. To keep our experiment private, I walked over and pushed the button to close the curtains

"Have you ever been with two women, Indiana?" Lucille asked me while opening Aubri's pantsuit in a slow sexy movement.

"No."

"He hasn't even been with one woman. Sex-bots, however, that's a different story."

Lucille kept undressing Aubri as they danced and once the pantsuit was off, Aubri returned the favor and undressed Lucille.

I took a seat on a chair and watched the spectacular vision in front of me. They were both in their underwear now and as I watched, Lucille expertly made those four pieces of fabric fall to the ground.

My throat seemed too tight to have room for my Adam's apple, which kept bobbing as I swallowed several times.

This protection assignment had gone from duty to pleasure really fast.

Lucille had bigger breasts than Aubri and more curves on her body, but

my young grasshopper was firm and tight with the cutest birthmark on her hipbone.

“Don’t you think he has far too much clothing on?” Lucille asked Aubri in a teasing tone. Hand in hand they came over and pulled me up from the chair. I kicked my shoes off, but the rest of my clothing was stripped off me by Lucille and Aubri.

“Oh, wow.” Lucille let her hands roam over my chest and down to my abs. Her appreciative sigh empowered me to take Aubri’s hand and place it on my chest as well.

Aubri had said that we could experiment with Lucille, together. I wasn’t sure what she meant by that.

Kneeling down on the plush red carpet, Lucille kissed my thighs and gently bit my hipbone while her hands went to my firm behind.

Aubri looked a little lost like she didn’t know what to do with herself. The frown on her pretty face as she looked down on Lucille kneeling in front of me made me turn my torso to Aubri and pull her into my arms.

“Hey, beautiful,” I pushed a lock of her hair back and looked deep into her eyes.

She stood completely still as I trailed a finger down her cheek and smiled at her. “You okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

We were both out of our element, but this was my chance to be close to her. My eyes fell to her lips and when she licked hers, I closed the distance between us and kissed Aubri with the hunger I’d carried with me since the day I almost died.

To my delight, she reciprocated and kissed me back. I couldn’t figure out if this was part of her experiment or if Aubri too had wanted to do this for a long time.

I was so lost in my kiss with my grasshopper that I didn’t pay attention to Lucille until suddenly her hand folded around my cock and she moved her soft hand up and down.

Looking down would mean breaking my kiss with Aubri and I didn’t want to do that. Holding onto her with both my hands behind her neck, I felt like lifting from the ground when her tongue came into my mouth looking for trouble. With my heart rate spiking from excitement, I was quick to play along and swirled my tongue around hers in a playful dance. Butterflies were still swarming around my stomach when she broke our kiss and pulled back

to look into my eyes again. There was something new in her gaze. Like she was seeing me for the first time. For a beautiful second, we smiled at each other and it was like her eyes were saying, *Why didn't I see you when you were right here all along?*

"Aren't you two cute." Lucille's comment made us both look down to see her sitting with her large brown eyes looking up at us.

I didn't have a chance to react before Lucille lifted my cock and leaned in to lick my balls. Instinctively, I jerked back a little.

My reaction made her chuckle. "What's wrong? Don't you like to have your balls touched?"

Aubri's face stiffened and turning away, she moved to the bedroom. I followed.

"What's wrong?" I asked, but I never got an answer because Lucille came from behind and crawled up on the bed where Aubri was sitting.

"Let me show you something amazing," she purred and pushed Aubri down. It was my turn to be a little unsure what to do with myself, but I chose to join them on the bed, getting close to Aubri and kissing her again.

Spreading Aubri's legs, Lucille moved down between them and kissed and licked her inner thighs.

From the red color on Aubri's neck and cheeks, I could tell she was affected as her breathing changed.

Looking into her eyes, I silently asked if she wanted me to stop Lucille, but she spread her legs further and reached for my face.

While kissing deeply again, I moved my hand to her breast and played with her nipple.

"Ohh." Aubri arched a little and looking down, I saw Lucille smile up at us with moisture around her mouth.

"Do you want me to teach you how to please a woman to perfection?" she asked.

Without hesitation, I nodded.

Lucille trained me. She taught me about the clit, the g-spot, and how to use my tongue the right way. When to suck, gently bite, and finger Aubri until her body convulsed in orgasmic cramps.

Her moans and little screams were sounds from a symphony I would love to hear every day. Eager to connect with her, my fingers dug into the flesh on her hips as if I could somehow get inside her.

Aubri was out of breath and had her eyes closed when I crawled up and

placed my hand next to her shoulders. Pride filled my chest when she smiled and giggled a little.

“You look gorgeous,” I whispered.

She answered me by wrapping her legs around my body and holding me tight.

I was horny and my cock was positioned just right. Part of me screamed internally that I should claim her. The other part warned that I was already in too deep emotionally.

Just then a sound alerted me and made me turn my head to Lucille, who stood next to the bed.

“Did you just take a photo?” I asked.

“*Oui*, do you want to see it?”

I jumped up from the bed, reaching my hands out to her. “Delete that photo right now!”

“Why?”

“Just do it. We didn’t give you permission.” My tone was rough and threatening. I couldn’t explain to Lucille my fear that the wrong people would see that picture and kill me.

“Lucille, do as he says.” Aubri moved to sit on the edge of the bed and covered herself with the duvet.

“All right, I’ll take it down, but I can’t control who saw it already.” She maneuvered the device in her hands.

“Saw it already?” I was about to explode and raised my voice. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Still with the duvet around her, Aubri got out of bed and nudged Lucille back into the living room. “Stay here, Indy, I’ll deal with this.”

I paced the floor in the tiny room while Aubri muttered with Lucille, who dressed and was escorted to the door.

Once I heard the door close, I sat down on the bed and pulled a pillow over my crotch.

Aubri returned to the bedroom and crawled into bed again. “She took it down. It’s three in the morning so it’s unlikely anyone saw it. I made sure she deleted it from her device before she left.”

“By Lucifer’s ass, why would she do that?”

“I asked her and apparently it’s a way of honoring your lover to share a picture from the act.”

“Who the hell wants to see my bare ass on top of you? That’s private.”

“The network she shared the picture to is a place to find new lovers. It’s not a normal social network like we know them.”

Tearing a hand through my hair, I sputtered. “She still should have asked.”

“Yes, I agree. Next time we’ll specify that there can’t be any photos.”

“Next time?” I gaped at Aubri. “You want to do this again?”

She bit her lower lip and met my gaze. “I do. Minus the bad ending.”

“You want another threesome?”

Lifting the duvet, she gestured for me to get comfortable.

“Aubri, are you seriously suggesting that we have another threesome?”

“Maybe.” With a playful shove at my shoulder, she teased. “Next time let’s invite a man to join us.”

I crossed my arms. “Would you do it if I said yes?”

“Could it be you and Banni?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because you like him too much.”

“But I feel safe with him.”

“I don’t care. I’ll break his arm the moment he touches your private parts.”

“So, we can’t have a threesome with a man?”

“Sure, if he’s dickless and has no arms and hands.”

Aubri laughed softly. “Noted.”

We were quiet for a long moment, both of us lying on our backs looking up at the ceiling.

She was the first to speak. “I’ve had my first orgasm with a man now.”

“Mm-hmm.” A smug smile spread on my lips, knowing that I’d been that man.

“You’ve had your first oral too.”

“Not really.”

“She licked you down there.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t count. She didn’t close her lips around my cock and suck me.”

“I’m sorry.” Aubri propped herself up on her elbow and faced me.

“About what?”

“That you didn’t get to come.”

“It’s not the end of the world. I just wish she hadn’t taken that stupid

photo.”

Falling back on her pillow, Aubri folded her hands on top of the duvet and waited a moment before she spoke. “I want one of their pregnancy prevention implants.”

I turned my face toward her. “You do?”

“Yes. I can have it removed before I go back home. I want this year of complete freedom before I commit to someone.”

I rubbed my forehead with my palm. “I get that, but what about your future husband? There are men who wouldn’t like that you’d been with others.”

“Then they can choose not to marry me. If I’m lucky I can find someone who has a lot of sexual experience himself.”

“You want him to have had other women?”

“I’m thinking it would make him a better lover. I don’t know, Indy, this whole virgin thing seems silly to me. I want to explore.”

“I do too, but I want to explore with the person I love.”

“But we didn’t love Lucille and it was still fun.”

“Fun, yes, but only because you were here.”

Reaching her arm over to my side, Aubri took my hand. “You mean that?”

“Of course. My favorite part of the evening was kissing you.”

“Hmmm. My favorite part was seeing you between my legs and reaching my first climax with a man.”

“You didn’t like our kiss?”

She smiled. “Sure, but I think we need to practice a little.”

“Are you saying I’m a bad kisser?”

“How would I know? I’ve never kissed anyone else.”

In my mind one sentence wanted out, but I kept my lips closed and didn’t tell her that I hoped she never would kiss anyone else.

CHAPTER 9

Neuro Link

Aubri

The day after the incident with Lucille, Indiana and I behaved differently around each other. Or maybe I was the one who behaved differently.

I had kissed him last night and moaned his name when he gave me oral sex.

It was like my brain needed time to digest what had happened while my heart was acting up and beating faster when Indiana smiled at me.

Confused about what this all meant, I kept busy to avoid any awkward situations between us.

Indiana went for a run while I took a long shower and tried to clear my head. Had he felt something last night or had he just indulged me? The situation with two women had turned him on. I had seen the evidence of that from his erection, which had lasted until Lucille ruined everything with that stupid picture.

Getting out of the shower, I combed my long hair and wondered what would have happened if things hadn't ended so suddenly. The experience had been novel and exciting, but after my delicious kiss with Indiana, looking down to see Lucille with her hands and mouth on his crotch had bothered me. That's why I'd walked into the bedroom to get my emotions under control.

Possessiveness ran in my family. My father was impossible when it came to my mom. She couldn't talk to another man without him getting the wrong idea. I didn't want to be like that. That's why France offered such a great opportunity for me to be more relaxed when it came to sex and relationships. I'd seen too many fights between my parents because of their mutual jealousy.

As my fingers braided my hair, my eyes glazed over and my eyebrows wrinkled. What would have happened if Indiana had fucked Lucille? If it made me uncomfortable to see her hand on his crotch then how would I have felt if they had gone all the way? My mind's eye showed me an image of the two of them kissing and it made my lips turn down and my hands brush my hair faster.

How could I be jealous over Indiana when we were just friends?

You like him as more than a friend.

My heart had been telling me that since the nightclub, but my mind still dismissed that idea. I'd been drinking and the atmosphere in the club had increased my sexual desire. Indiana had simply been the man in that club who came closest to what I preferred in a man.

I stood in the bathroom looking into the mirror as if my reflection would have the answers to where to go from here.

"I'm back." Indiana's voice brought me out of my deep thoughts and I quickly dressed and walked out to meet him.

Standing casually, leaning on the kitchen counter, Indiana had a glass of water in his hands and was looking out the windows to the high-rises around us.

"Did you have a good run?"

"Yeah, I went down to the park." He pointed with his glass to the left side of the large windowpanes. "See between those two buildings?"

I walked over to stand with a hand against the glass. "Yeah, I see it. I wish that big building wasn't blocking our view."

"At least we're above ground and we get to leave this place for work."

"Mm-hmm." I stood for a moment looking into apartments across from us. It felt like an intrusion of privacy to see people reading, working out, sleeping, or playing the piano.

I did a double take when I saw an intimate act between two men in one of the apartments. "Are they...?"

Indiana followed the direction of my gaze and made a sound in his throat to confirm that he saw what I saw. "Hmm."

I should look away, but my damn curiosity drew me in.

Indiana turned his back to the window and looked at me. "Look, Aubri, about last night."

"They're doing it like a man and a woman would."

"What do you mean?"

"I just always assumed that men would have to do it doggy style, but they're doing it missionary style."

"Yeah, ehm..., but can we talk about what happened last night?"

Feeling nervous about where this was going, I moved away from the window and to the kitchen to get some water.

"How do you feel about what happened?"

My hands shook a little when I answered without looking at him. "I feel

fine. It was a good experience. How do you feel?”

“Good. It was just an awkward ending. I would have liked to see where things could have gone.”

“Would you have fucked her?”

My question seemed to stun him a little.

“Ehhm... Did you want me to?”

“Isn’t that the idea of a threesome?” God, I was being a bitch for putting him on the spot like this, especially because the answer that pushed from inside me was: No! I didn’t want him to fuck Lucille.

Before he could answer me, there was a knock on the door.

Indiana went to open it and let Victor in.

“*Bonjour*,” I said, showing off that I’d learned a little French.

He greeted me back and took a seat at the small round dining table without being asked.

“I’m here to discuss a few things. First of all, since you’re here, would you be willing to do a bit of teaching?”

“Do you want us to teach fighting techniques?”

“No; we were thinking more along the lines of cultural education. Simon works for the Minister of Education and he thought it would be an excellent idea if you visited a few schools and gave our children a chance to meet some real Northlanders.”

“Sure. That’ll be fun.”

“The press had been pressuring us for permission to do an interview with one or both of you.”

“You control the press?”

“Not me personally, but the Prime Minister has influence.”

Indiana and I looked at each other before agreeing to the interview. “We’ll do it together,” he said.

“Good. Next on my agenda is your need to communicate within this country. I’ve brought you a few different options. No matter what solution you choose, you won’t be able to call anyone back home, but you’ve been granted permission to write them, which is a privilege in itself.”

Victor ignored our groans and continued, “Since you’ve chosen to work as Explorers the logical solution would be a brain implant. That way you wouldn’t have to worry about carrying a physical device with you.”

“How would we know you wouldn’t put spyware in our heads to get intel on our thoughts and conversations?”

Victor lifted his shoulders in a small shrug. “You don’t know, and I don’t perform the operation, so maybe you should go with the next best solution.”

“Which is what?”

Pulling out a long slim device, Victor turned it in his hand. “This is a Neuro Link. I’m not claiming that it’s as good as a brain implant, but for those of us who don’t want anything implanted into our brains, it’s a damn good alternative.” Lifting the white stick, he placed one end on the top of his right ear and clicked a button on the side. The stick folded around his ear and now sat attached.

“The Neuro Link can play music and sounds using bone conduction. Others won’t be able to hear it unless you wish them to. If you get a message or a call, this tip of the stick will project an alert in front of your eyes. You can activate the service function just by thinking about it, and if you need direction, you’ll have that too.”

“We have something similar at home called Genius Glasses, but it never became the big success it was expected to be. This is like an upgraded version.”

“Glasses change how you look. The Neuro Link is more discreet. It also comes with five different color options.”

“But won’t it fall off?” I asked.

“No, it sucks itself to your ear without being painful. You’ll have to push the top button for it to release.”

Indiana reached out to touch it. “That’s like some fancy pre-war technology. Who came up with this?”

“It’s a new product that we’re testing for a company in the Motherlands. It’s not on the market yet, but Jonah connected me with the engineering team who made it. He has a friend called Shelly who developed some of it.”

“You must be talking about Shelly Summers. We know her,” I exclaimed.

Victor raised a brow. “I know. You told me so already.”

“When?” I couldn’t remember talking to him about Shelly, who was a famous genius who had once taught as an assistant teacher at the school of inclusion. “She’s married to a Northlander called Marco.”

“At the first summit, you told me that I couldn’t possibly be the person with the highest intelligence in the world, since that was Shelly Summers.”

“You remember that? Huh.” I gave a nod to signify I was impressed.

“Of course, I remember. That’s one of the curses of my intelligence. It

would be nice if I could forget irrelevant things and people, but I can recall every day of my life as if it happened yesterday.”

“No way.” Indiana crossed his arms. “No one can remember every day they lived.”

“I can.”

I exchanged a look with Indiana, silently telling him that it was just Victor exaggerating again. The man in question seemed uninterested in proving that he was telling the truth because he returned to the Neuro Link. “I’ve tested the functions myself, but unfortunately, it’s not reading non-verbal instructions a hundred percent yet. There’ve been times when I’ve had to verbalize my commands, but I like that the information appears in front of my eyes when needed and that the design isn’t as intrusive as wearing glasses at all times.”

“What other options do we have?”

“A wristband like the one you have already, or you can go with a larger pad, but that wouldn’t be practical when you go on expeditions.”

“I’m choosing the Neuro Link,” I declared.

“Yeah, me too.”

“I expected as much,” Victor said dryly and pulled out two boxes. He stayed long enough to help set up the technology and watch us navigate the options.

“Victor, I wanted to ask you something.” Indiana moved in his seat. “Have there been any threats from the Northlands because of what happened?”

“Not directly. I’ve been told that Khan spun a story that we French asked for assistance to clean up the environment and that you two bravely volunteered.”

“Good!” I squared my shoulders a little. “So at least they’re acknowledging at home that I did something heroic.”

“What is it about you Northlanders? Why are you so obsessed with being heroes?”

“You don’t want to be a hero?”

Victor pushed out his breath forcefully. “I *am* a hero.”

“Yeah, yeah, you improved the formula and because of you Europe is getting cleaned much faster. We heard. It’s super impressive, so why are you always in such a foul mood?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m always smiling and happy.”

He said it with dripping sarcasm and a stone face. “Anyway, I’ll forward you each a few messages that I’ve received for you from your friends and family.”

Indiana lit up while I asked, “Did you get them via Freya?”

Victor nodded and got up from the table.

“Did you apologize to her yet?”

“That’s none of your business.”

His dismissive attitude made me defensive. “Like hell it is. She’s my cousin and you treated her with disrespect. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

Victor’s jaw tightened as he took the last three steps and placed a hand in front of the electronic door opener. “Trust me, Aubri, your cousin doesn’t need your help to deal with me, she does fine on her own.”

“You’ve spoken to her?”

“Corresponded, yes.”

“And?”

“And my correspondence is private,” said Victor and stepped outside.

“Victor! Tell us you apologized,” My tone was firm but he still ignored me and looked past me to Indiana, who was fiddling with his Neuro Link. “It’s the other way around. The silver button goes up, not down.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Hey, dickwad, I’m talking to you! I demand that you apologize to Freya for being rude and disrespectful.”

Victor gave me one of his bored expressions. “It’s a little hard to take orders from someone who’s rude and disrespectful herself.”

“I’m not.”

“You called me dickwad.”

“Yeah, well, that’s sort of a pet name in the Northlands,” I lied.

“Great, in that case I’ll start using it more frequently. Since you think I was too harsh on Freya, I’ll make sure to use soft pet names in the future like dickwad.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t do that. It’s... ehmm... best used with males.”

“Right. Fine. Call me if you need anything.”

“See you, Victor,” Indiana called out from the living room.

“See you, dickwad,” Victor answered and shot me a smug smile, telling me he knew very well what the word meant.

When I closed the door, Indiana looked confused. “Wait, did that little shit on a stick just call me a dickwad?”

“Yup.” I sat down and reached for my new communication device. “He thinks it’s a pet name.”

“Huh. I can guess who gave him that impression.”

“He’s so annoying. It’s like he’s always a step ahead.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know. It’s like he expects nothing of us. Like all he knows is people disappointing him. He’s just different and I’m pretty sure he knows we talk shit about him behind his back.”

“Then maybe you should stop bitching like a chicken.” Indiana shoved at my shoulder with a smile. “Try calling me again. I want to see how cool it looks when the call comes up.”

I put my Neuro Link on and formed the precise order in my mind to call Indiana Boulder.

Indiana lit up when he got my call.

“It says ‘Young Grasshopper Calling.’ Can you read that?” He pointed in front of him.

“No, all I see is a faint blue light shining from the tip of the stick.”

“That’s brilliant.” Waving his hand in front of his eyes, Indiana pondered out loud. “Do you think it’ll still work in sunshine?”

“If Shelly invented it, I’m sure it’ll work even in a tornado.”

Indiana seemed fascinated with his new toy and I was grateful that it distracted him from the conversation we’d had before Victor arrived.

CHAPTER 10

Far from Home

Indiana

After Victor left, we watched the vid messages that we had received from home.

Aubri laughed when Sparrow told us we'd better journal everything and share our adventures with her.

"What do you think she'll say when I tell her about last night?"

Scratching my beard, I thought about it. "You can't tell her. What if she lets it slip or she watches the vid with someone else?"

"Right. Maybe I'll save that for when I see her again." We watched a long vid from my brother Jones, who had recorded from Mason and Belle's wedding.

"I know what you're thinking," Jones said after we'd seen Khan perform the ceremony. "You think I'm heartbroken that Belle chose Mason, but I'm not. I heard that Aubri promised to marry an Nman when she returns in a year. Indy, I know she listens to you, with you two being close friends and all. Do me a favor and put in a good word for me, will you?"

I raised my brow. My brother was almost five years younger than Aubri and I'd never had the impression that he was in love with her.

Leaning back in the small sofa, she pulled her legs up with a distant look on her face.

I cleared my throat. "Ehm... I don't think he expected me to share that vid with you. Jones is a good kid, you know that."

"Mm-hmm, what?" She looked distracted like she hadn't quite heard what I just said.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I asked, seeing her face sad and her eyes moist.

"I just feel so far away from home right now. My twin got married and I wasn't there with him."

"I know. It sucks." Sitting next to her, I felt sad myself. Mason and I had been best friends for as long as I could remember. Never would I have imagined him marrying without Aubri and me there to celebrate.

"This isn't like going to the cabin for a week. We won't see our friends and family for six months." Aubri's voice broke a little. "I'm just realizing

that we've only been here for a week and I already have so much to share with Sparrow and Dina, but I can't see them."

"But you knew that when you volunteered."

"I was so focused on saving Freya and Belle from staying here. It all happened so fast and my focus was on all the adventures I could have, but..." She trailed off with her eyes shiny from unshed tears.

"But you didn't stop to think about what you would miss back home."

In a slow movement she turned her head and looked deep into my eyes. "No, I didn't. For all the adventures we get to go on here, we're missing out on things back home. And what if they need us? What if Dina gets in a fight with our parents and I'm not there to support her? What if Sparrow falls in love and we can't gossip about it?"

I watched tears start to fall from her pretty eyes. "I won't be there when Mason becomes a father, or even see my niece or nephew until months after the child is born."

Her eyes widened as if a horrible realization just hit her. "And you..."

"What about me?"

"I brought this on you. You didn't want me to do it, but I thought..." Her hands went to her face to dry away her tears. "I wanted to make a difference. My father always said that one day Mason and I would save Freya... you know, because she can't fight. This was my chance, and I took it. I wanted to make him proud of me."

"I'm sure you have. Once this is all over and we're home safe, Magni will be the first to brag about his valiant daughter who saved her family."

"You think?"

I dried one of her tears away and took her hand. "I know so."

For a long moment we sat shoulder to shoulder holding hands.

"Don't tell anyone that I cried, okay?"

I made a sign that my lips were sealed. "We made a pact, remember? What happens in Europe stays in Europe. Your secret is safe with me."

With a sad smile, Aubri leaned her head on my shoulder. "I wish we had pre-war technology and could just zap from one end of the world to another. All we have are slow drones that are expensive and take hours."

"At least we have that. If we go back far enough there was a time where traveling happened on foot, by boat, or on the back of a horse."

"I know, but you know what I mean. I wish we could do our work here and just zap back once in a while to check up on everyone."

“Are you regretting that you offered to stay?” I asked.

“No, I want the adventure. I just want everything at home too.”

My thumb circled the back of her hand while my eyes glazed over, staring on a spot on the white wall. “I understand. I feel the same way, but I suppose every adventure comes with a price. You can’t try new things inside your comfort zone, and once you leave it, you’ll never be the same. When we return to the Northlands, we’ll be different people, Aubri.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I could feel her nodding her head on my shoulder. “I already am.”

“I once asked my mom if she missed the Motherlands and she said that she does. It’s the same for Pearl, Kya, and the other Motlanders who moved to the Northlands. You’ll always miss something from back home.”

“But they’ve been in the Northlands for so long now.”

“I know, but my mom says that when you move abroad, it splits your soul in a way. You love people and places in both countries and no matter which country you choose to live in you’ll miss something from the other country.”

“That’s sad.”

“I guess. But think of the perspective you’ve gained from seeing other places and meeting new people. Last night at that nightclub I was thinking about my friends back home. What they would have done if they could walk in and see that many single women willing to have sex with them. It blows my mind how different the French are. I had at least five women straight up ask me to have sex with them and then there were all the inviting looks.

“You had five women ask you?”

“Mm-hmm. You and Lucille, and then there were three others.”

“Wow. I had Lucille ask me, but that’s it.”

“Because she kept others away from you. There were plenty trying to get close when you were dancing.”

“Yes, I noticed.” Aubri sighed. “You know what I’m most scared of?”

“What?”

“I know that we’ll have changed when we move back home, but I don’t want home to have changed. I want everything to be the way we left it, you know?”

“That’s not how it works, my young grasshopper.”

“What if Sparrow finds a new best friend and she doesn’t need me anymore?”

“You’ll always be special to her. You know that.”

“Yes, but I’m not there and someone could easily try to take my place as her closest friend.”

“You’ll make other friends here as well. You and Banni seem close already.” My last words came out with a bit of a bite, but she didn’t seem to notice.

Wrapping her arm tight around mine, she looked up at me. “I should have told you earlier, but I want you to know how grateful I am that you stayed, Indy. At least we’re going on this crazy adventure together. I’m torn between two countries so for the next year, you’ll be my home.”

I swallowed hard. “And you’ll be mine.” Our faces were close enough that I could kiss her, but the moment I leaned closer, Aubri wrinkled her brow a little and it made me hug her instead.

As we let go of each other after the hug, she smoothly moved on to a different subject as if we didn’t have a huge fucking elephant in the room with us. We needed to address what happened between us last night, but instead she asked, “Are you excited about tomorrow? Banni promised that he’d take us to his favorite old city and he even said that we could collect some treasures if we find any. I bet your mom would be ecstatic if you brought something home from Old Europe.”

“No doubt,” I said but knowing my mom I knew that she would agree with me that the only treasure I needed to bring home safely was Aubri.

CHAPTER 11

Treasure Hunt

Aubri

I was like a little kid when Banni, Alex, and Val took us treasure hunting. “How far is it?” I asked when the old drone took off.

“Not far. The city was called Bordeaux and it was pretty before it fell.”

“But I thought Old Europe was located *in* Bordeaux,” I said.

“That’s because Bordeaux is the closest city, but technically the survival bunkers were located in a nature park south of Bordeaux called Des Landes de Cascoigne. Some of the regions in France were impacted worse than others during the Toxic War. This region is the safest to be in because we’ve cleaned and nurtured it for generations.

We hadn’t flown for long before Val pointed and made a sound.

Indiana and I pressed our noses against the window to look down. Below us ran a large river with ruins on each side nestled in between trees.

“What’s that spear sticking up?” Indiana pointed.

“That’s the old Cathedral. There used to be two towers, but one collapsed.”

“Have you ever found any real treasures?”

Alex laughed. “We’ve walked into bank chambers and seen piles of old money, but it’s not worth anything now, is it?”

“But what about art and pre-war technology? Have you saved some of that?”

“Hmm. There’s a guy that we know who runs a small repair shop. He’ll buy some of the things from us and fix them up for sale, but the market isn’t great. Most people want nothing to do with items from the polluted areas.”

“But you don’t bring back polluted items, do you?”

“No. It’s illegal. You’ll need to use these instruments to determine what’s safe to touch and what’s not. We always decontaminate the items we bring back to Helmes’ repair shop. He likes decorative things like old clocks and paintings. We don’t have room for furniture in the drone, so don’t ask to bring home large items.”

Indiana and I exchanged a look of impatience. We were both anxious to get down on the ground and get going.

As the drone descended, Banni gave us some firm instructions. “We go as a group and no one enters any ruins until the robot has measured the stability of the building. Understood?”

We nodded. The first one to exit the drone was Val, who went to the storage area to get equipment. I had to wait for Banni, Alex, and Indiana to get out before me and it felt like they all moved in slow motion.

“Hurry, people, we’re going on a treasure hunt and you’re moving like slugs.”

Alex was amused by my enthusiasm and patted my shoulder. “Usually when we bring new people, they’re scared of touching anything. I can’t tell you how much fun it is to have you two come along like eager puppies.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. Everywhere I looked there were stories waiting to be explored. In the rest of the world, the survivors had torn down and buried the old world to start anew.

Val grabbed onto my shoulder when I moved forward with eagerness. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

His eyes were serious, but as always Val left it to Alex and Banni to communicate for him.

“We have a ritual before we go into cities,” Banni said. “I know you’re intrigued to see what’s left, but you’ll see that it’s not just the buildings that we’ll find. In this city alone, more than two hundred thousand people lived and died. Their remains are still here and you’ll see their bones and personal items. We always take a moment to honor their memory and let them know that we mean them no harm.”

“That’s right, and we always leave before the sun sets,” Alex added.

“Don’t tell me that you believe in ghosts,” Indiana said with surprise in his voice.

“Trust us, you would too if you stayed here overnight.”

Indiana stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his feet. “Maybe I will. I’ve never seen a ghost and it might be an experience.” Looking to me, he asked, “You up for it?”

My eyes lit up. “Hell yeah.”

Banni shook his head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but there’s something wrong with you two. Now, be quiet and pay your respects for the next two minutes in silence.”

“Will they understand if we give our respects in English?”

Banni raised his left eyebrow, telling Indiana to stop fucking around. We all bowed our heads and stood in silence for two minutes.

“Ready?” Banni asked when it was over.

“More than ready,” I said and clapped my hands together.

“Is your instrument secured?” Banni reached out his hand to mine and adjusted the small gamma reader that I carried like a ring on my finger. “Just wave your hand over an object and it will tell you if it's safe to touch.”

“Okay.”

In the beginning we walked in what had once been streets. Crumbled building materials were spread all around and trees stood in what had once been people's houses. My head went from side to side as I took in everything. It was a good thing that Banni had warned me, because the remains of the city's inhabitants were still around.

Val collected samples from the fungus growing on walls, while Alex filled sample collectors with soil.

Walking to a small building nestled between two taller ones, I saw what was left of a window display. Out of the thirty-six framed windowpanes, four still had glass in them. Inside the shop, the elements had destroyed the interior, which was now in a sad condition.

Above the shop hung a weathered sign with a name I couldn't read and what looked like a hat.

“I think this was a shop that sold hats,” I told Indiana, who came to look for himself.

Banni passed the shop and with a quick glance he dismissed it.

“Come on. I want to show you the jewelry store.”

It was hard for me to pass by places that begged for us to come and investigate. It felt like the ghosts of this city were eager for us to recognize the life they left behind.

“It's here. Let me just send in Pio first.”

We waited while the robot moved inside. Unlike our humanoid robots at home, this one was pure machine and small enough that it only reached my hip.

“How does it work?” Indiana asked.

“We're linked up to it via our brain implants. It scans the buildings. I can see floor plans in my mind that Pio shows me with an analysis of building materials and strength. This building isn't about to collapse so it's safe to go inside.”

We walked around in the remnants of what had once been an elegant jewelry store. Moss grew on the carpet, fungus on some of the walls, and a small tree was sprouting through the floorboards.

Banni squatted down and waved us over to a pile of old boxes. “We’ve already taken some of it, but what do you think?” He held up a display of earrings.

“Helves can take these and polish them into beautiful jewelry again. Do you want some for your mom?”

“Are you kidding me? Yes!” Indiana reached for the treasure while I looked through the pile with Banni. We found necklaces and arm bracelets.

“Can we take all of them?” I asked.

“Sure, if you want to, but do you think your friends would want this old stuff?”

“Of course! Don’t the French?”

“There’s a small market for antiques, but most people connect pre-war things with bad energy. Some say that objects can carry spirits inside them and it’s bad luck to own them.”

Indiana and I kept going through the treasures of the store. “Northlanders aren’t afraid of ghosts and spirits. We could make a fortune by bringing antiques back home.”

“Hmm.” Banni looked around the store. “What about old watches? There are some over there.”

Indiana laughed with glee when he found at least forty watches in fine boxes.

“Do they still work?” I asked.

He used his gamma reader before picking up a few. “No, they need some restoration, but if that guy from the repair shop could show us how to do it, we could import antiques to the Northlands. I know I could sell all of these.”

“Always the businessman like your father,” I said and rubbed on one the necklaces. “I wanna give this one to my mother.”

“We should bring one for Freya as well. She’ll appreciate the history of the objects.”

“So would Pearl,” I pointed out and thought of a long list of close friends that would love a present like this.

In the end we filled a bag full of jewelry and watches. Just as we were about to leave, I pushed a door open into a back room, and found crates against the wall. Wrapped inside silk, I found a true treasure of a rococo style

clock.

Even though the glass was dusty, and the gold was faded, I knew instantly that I had to have it.

“Can we bring this one?” I asked Banni.

He came to stand next to me and looked at the old fragile clock. “That old thing?”

“Yes. Even for the people who owned this store, this clock would have been an antique. With some tender love from your repair man, it could be beautiful again.”

When Banni agreed that I could bring it, I showed it to Indiana with pride.

“Does this remind you of something?”

His eyes widened. “That’s like the clock on my parents’ mantel in their living room.”

“Yes, except what they have is a replica. This one is a true French rococo style clock.” Making a sound of joy, I rose on my toes and beamed with excitement. “If we could have their friend at the repair shop fix this one, your mom would forgive me for staying in Old Europe. I know she worries about you and probably blames me for the whole thing since you wouldn’t have stayed if it weren’t for me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It might take her a while to forgive you for that, but that clock would definitely help smooth things over with her.”

We spent five hours in the city center with Banni, Alex, and Val showing us some of the city’s old landmarks.

It was easy to see that this historical place had once been a proud and gorgeous city. At the same time, it was sad to walk around among the ruins of what had once been. There were no signs of invasion by a foreign power, no bullet holes from projectiles fired, no burned-down buildings. Most likely people died from toxic bombs or they killed themselves because their brain implants got hacked.

I rubbed my nose feeling emotional from seeing the gruesome way that this old civilization had come to an end.

Banni was by my side and placed his arm around my shoulders. “I know. It’s one thing to read about it in the history books but coming here makes everything more real.” I stopped in front of a drone that stood parked with branches growing through the windows.

“Four hundred years ago, someone bought this machine and flew around

in it with pride. Now it's left for us to figure out how to get rid of it."

"Are you going to bury the town?" Indiana asked from Banni's other side.

"We don't have the machinery to do that. So far, we've expanded into areas requiring the least amount of work. Eventually, we'll have to come up with a solution to fence this in or get help from the Motherlands to tear it all down and bury it."

"Or rebuild it?" I suggested with optimism.

Banni shrugged. "Hmmm. I don't even know if that's possible."

Indiana shook his head. "I don't think so. Maybe using some of the materials for a new city would make sense, but that's about it."

We left Bordeaux with our treasures wrapped for protection and headed back to the Exploration Headquarters where the objects were put in a decontamination chamber overnight.

"Tomorrow we'll take you to meet Helmes. You'll like his repair shop, it's full of old and quirky things," Banni said before he was interrupted by Alex, who nudged his arm.

Banni turned quiet and we watched as the three Europeans seemed to have a silent conversation.

"Hey, no brain gossip. What's the deal?"

Banni inhaled sharply and frowned while looking from Alex to Val, who sat on a bucket with his green eyebrows drawn close.

"Who would they tell?" Alex asked and that revealed they were keeping a secret from us.

Lifting my finger, I pointed it right in front of Banni's nose. "You said there would be no secrets among the crew, so spit it out."

Banni scratched his stubble and looked down.

I angled my head to one side and pressured him. "Banni, come on, don't you trust us? Belle trusts me and you can too."

"It's not that. It's..." He trailed off and bit his lip while shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "I've never told Belle about it because I didn't want her involved in illegal activities. I don't want you involved either but..." Banni's large brown eyes darted around the room.

"Is bringing back treasures illegal?" I asked.

"No, that's not it. Look, you're connected to some pretty powerful people in our country and you have to promise not to tell Victor, Isaac, or the other delegation members."

“Deal!” I exclaimed at the same time as Indiana said, “No problem.”

“Good.”

The three men came to stand around us, all with serious faces. “Maybe it’s better if we show you,” Alex said. “But first let’s get out of the uniforms. We can’t go anywhere looking like this.”

CHAPTER 12

Gorilla

Indiana

We stopped at a street vendor to buy food. The spicy meat tasted delicious but gave me the hiccups, and from the amusement on Alex's face, I suspected he'd asked the woman who made it to put extra chili in mine.

"Where are you taking us?" Aubri asked several times as we went underground.

"You'll see" was the answer we got.

We moved down four levels. I remembered Belle telling us that no one lived that far down. This was a service level where water was cleaned, garbage recycled, and heating generated.

"Stop for a moment," Banni said and looked over his shoulders and all around before he quickly nudged us down a staircase to a door with a cross on it. I got the feeling we were breaking rules and moving into a restricted area, which was confirmed when the door closed behind us and left us in darkness.

Flashlights from the men's wristbands lit up a long narrow hallway that was dark at each end.

"Okay, this is fucking creepy," I told them and reached for Aubri's hand. "Stay close."

Alex chuckled behind me. "Are you scared, Indy?"

"How about you come to the Northlands and I take you to some fucking abandoned place where it's dark and no people are around? Then you tell me if that doesn't make you alert and on guard."

"We're almost there," Banni assured us and kept walking in long strides. With no fabric or soft materials in this place, the sounds of our footsteps reverberated against the walls and pipes running along the ceiling.

When we had walked seventy or eighty feet, the sound of a door opening made me turn and see flashlights where we'd entered a few minutes ago. Others were coming the same way.

"This is it," Alex whispered, and we all stopped in front of an old rusty metal door.

Val stepped closer and gave three rapid knocks on the door.

Five long seconds passed and then the door slid open. A petite woman with a miniskirt and her nipples showing through a net shirt stood in the entrance.

It was clear that she knew Alex, who kissed her cheek. She had questions about Aubri and me. I could tell from the way she looked us up and down that we made her equally nervous and excited.

“They’re from the land of giants. They’re our guests.”

My gaze was already looking past the small woman to the people behind her. The room had a ceiling low enough for me to reach if I raised my hands up. There were no windows and blue paint was chipping from the walls.

About twenty-five to thirty men and women stood around the room talking. Some of them had drinks in their hands but I saw no bar.

“Gosh, it’s hot in here!” Aubri removed her jacket and studied the ceiling. “Is this an old survival bunker?”

“Yes. It’s one of the originals. It used to be a laboratory,” Banni explained and moved us further into the room, where narrow tables were pushed against the walls. “Are you thirsty?”

“What are we doing here? Is this some kind of illegal nightclub?” I asked. “Where’s the music?”

Alex took off his backpack and passed out the bottles of beer that he had in there. “This is an underground fight club.”

I took the beer and grinned. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

Aubri stood distracted next to me, her eyes scanning the room.

“Who’s fighting?” I asked Alex.

He had a secretive smile on his lips when he answered, “We call him the Gorilla.”

“Is he here yet?” I didn’t see anyone worthy of a nickname like that.

“No. Nor is his opponent. They’re in the back.” Alex nodded to a door in the back of the room.

More people entered and over the next twenty minutes, the room filled. The petite woman who had let us in and a man in his forties with large ears walked around taking bets.

“I’m placing my money on the Gorilla. He hasn’t lost a fight in months,” Banni said.

“Huh.” I lowered myself to the edge of the table behind me and took another sip of beer. “Now, this is my kind of night. I still don’t understand why you had to be so secretive about the whole thing. Aubri and I are used to

fighting. It's what we do for fun at home."

The noise level in the room rose when the back door opened, and a man walked in swinging his arms back and forth.

"Is that the Gorilla?" Aubri asked with her nose wrinkled. "He doesn't look big to me."

Right then another man came out and some of the people whistled loudly, cheering for him.

"Ah, I see." Aubri nodded her head. "It's not his size but the hairy chest that gave him that nickname, isn't it?"

"He's a great fighter," Alex assured us. "He and his people are so sure of him that they scheduled him for two fights tonight."

"Then let's hope he doesn't get knocked out in the first fight," Aubri said with a grin.

The petite woman who had let us in walked over and jumped up to wrap her legs around the hips of the Gorilla. He kissed her before slapping her butt in a loud smack.

"What are they fighting for?" I asked. "Money or something more?"

Banni stood leaning against the table behind us with his hands in his pockets. "They fight for fame and money. Both of them are strong construction workers."

"And who are the people in here?"

"P's. We don't allow A's in here. They would find it brutal and close it down. They've done it in the past."

I knew from our years with the summit meetings that A was short for Academics and P was short for Practical. These people were workers.

"I'm honored that you let us in," Aubri said with a smile.

"You're P's like us now."

The tiny frown on Aubri's face didn't escape me. As part of the ruling family in the Northlands, she'd led a privileged life with a status worthy of a princess. She might see our time in Old Europe as an adventure, but for them we were working class people now.

A loud whistle sounded, and after gestures and shouts in French, everyone pushed up against the walls leaving the two men in the middle of the room to fight.

The room was boiling from intense heat and a bloodlust I knew from fights at home.

The Motlanders were pacifists, but our affinity for fighting was another

thing that bonded us Northlanders to the French.

“This is great!” I exclaimed and patted Banni’s shoulder.

He smiled but kept his focus on the Gorilla, who was now circling his opponent, whose name I hadn’t caught.

Aubri and I were laughing and smiling as the fight progressed. It wasn’t a quick fight but rather a mix of wrestling and street fighting dragged out for the entertainment. The two fighters were strong but untrained compared to warriors like Mason, Thor, and myself.

The Gorilla wore his opponent out by being relentless and in better shape.

When he was declared the winner, he raised his hands in the air and took a bow like he was an actor in a theatre or some shit.

The man with the big ears made a declaration in French that Banni translated for us. “The Gorilla will have a small break before the next fight. He also reminded us to limit our drinking as there are no toilets on this level.”

“Good to know.”

We hung around and talked for half an hour before the petite woman returned and made an announcement. Disappointed boos were heard around the room.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The second opponent hasn’t turned up.”

I elbowed Banni. “Then you do it. You could easily win against that guy, couldn’t you?”

“Maybe.” He looked tempted. “But I’m scheduled to fight in two days and Alex is fighting tomorrow. The rule is that we can’t fight more than one night out of the week.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Aubri, no.” I turned to my young grasshopper and gave her a stern look. “We didn’t come here to fight.”

“You heard them. The Gorilla is undefeated. Admit it, you want to take him down yourself.” She had that glow in her eyes that I loved so much.

“Aubri, are you sure you want to do this?”

“It’ll be fun,” she told me before waving her hand at the petite woman and shouting to her. “I’ll fight your boyfriend.”

Banni said something fast in French that glued the peoples’ gazes to Aubri and me.

“Your offer has been accepted,” Banni shouted to Aubri over the noise that erupted. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Aubri removed her sweater, revealing a thin beige top and black pants that hung low on her hips. With her chin held high, she walked with her back straight to the center of the room.

The Gorilla stood for a moment looking at her as if he wasn't sure what to make of the situation. Aubri on the other hand took her time to run her hands over her braids and remove a ring on her finger that she carefully placed in her pocket before sealing it.

I couldn't understand the things people were shouting but if I were to guess from their laughs, they were telling him to go easy on her.

Men in the Northlands underestimated Aubri all the time, but I would have thought these people were wiser. Compared to them, she was a tall woman and with her confident stance, she was signaling that she knew what she was doing. But maybe women didn't fight here, or maybe this man was so superior to all the other fighters they'd ever seen that it seemed unthinkable for a woman to beat him.

When the woman came around asking for our bets, I leaned in to Banni. "Can I borrow money to bet from you?"

"*Oui*. How much do you want to bet?"

With a small smile, I whispered. "As much as you can spare."

Banni's eyes widened and then he spoke a number to the woman that made her laugh at him. I didn't understand her answer, but her body language said, "You're joking, right?"

After a quick glance in my direction, Banni confirmed that he was serious. The woman held up her wristband to show him the number he was betting and they both nodded.

"I just transferred my entire savings to that woman. If Aubri loses I'm fucked."

"Hey, Aubri," I called out. "Banni's got money on the line so you *have* to win."

Her jaw dipped, signaling that she'd heard me.

It was warm in the underground room and Banni was sweating profusely, making his thin shirt wet on the back.

"I shouldn't have done that," he muttered low. "What if she loses?"

Crossing my arms, I scooted further back on the table and waited for the fight to start.

Aubri had always been an expert at riling up men. Her mother and Raven had taught her tricks to get under her opponents' skin as a tactic to trip them

up emotionally. This time, she couldn't use her clever words, but she was already making eye contact with him and playing her game.

The Gorilla winked at Aubri and spoke to her in French.

I didn't like the way he licked his lips. "Alex, what did he say to her?"

"That if she wanted him to touch her all she had to do was ask."

Lowering my brow, I wished that I'd volunteered instead of her.

The man now moving closer to her was a few inches taller than Aubri's six feet. They moved in a circle with their knees bent and their arms in fighting position.

Aubri's eyes were glowing and I felt my own heart race from the tension and excitement in the room.

What if he'd gone easy on his last opponent and we had underestimated him? There was no doubt the man was strong and could knock Aubri out if she let him get close enough.

His first attack was a half-hearted jab in her direction. He laughed and seemed to think this was a show rather than a fight.

As he looked over to his fans and made what was no doubt a witty comment, Aubri reacted like a cobra seeing her opening. Boom! Her foot was in his face with the speed that made her lethal.

He staggered back with shock and surprise on his face.

"Whoa, did you see that?" Alex turned to Banni, who stood biting his nails.

The Gorilla shook his shoulders and took a fighting position again, this time less playful. Pushing his tongue against his cheek, he scowled at her.

Fueled with the classic need to show this woman that she couldn't beat someone as mighty as him, he attacked again – this time with sound and force.

Aubri could have simply moved out of his way, but she was clearly in the mood to show these people that she was a next-level warrior. Using his momentum, she acted like he was an oncoming vehicle and jumped up and rolled over him. He looked like he'd never seen anything like it and turned to catch her. I chuckled at her showmanship when Aubri stayed down in a frog position with one leg stretched to the side. She looked up at him with her head tilted as if his rage was a mystery to her.

Another attack had him on his back with a howl of frustration. It was like watching a cat play with a mouse. She never attacked him but waited for him to do all the work while she gave an excellent demonstration in blocking

techniques.

“It’s like she knows what he’s going to do before he does it,” Alex said in awe.

I laughed. “That guy fights in slow motion so it’s not that hard.”

Both Banni and Alex stared at me.

“I’m serious. The kids at my local school could take that guy. He’s all muscle and no technique. Don’t you have fight schools here?”

“We have wrestling and martial arts, but those disciplines are strictly regulated. Underground fighting like this is illegal because there are no rules.”

The Gorilla’s fans were shouting demands at him to take Aubri down, and the poor man’s skin had turned red from anger and exhaustion while his bushy chest was glistening with sweat.

Unlike the Gorilla, who was arguing with the audience, Aubri kept her focus on her opponent when Banni called out to her. “Keep going, Aubri, you’re doing great.”

“She’s in a bubble, she won’t hear you,” I told him.

“How did she get to be this good?”

“This? This is nothing. You haven’t seen her fight yet. All she’s doing so far is block his attacks. Aubri is the daughter of a legendary fighter called Magni Aurelius. Her brothers Mason and Solomon are equally phenomenal so it’s not so strange that she has the same gene.”

“I wish I could be that good,” Banni muttered with his eyes glued to my young grasshopper, who moved fast and smiled as if this was playtime for her.

“If you want, Aubri and I could teach you.”

“Are you as good as her?”

With a smug smile, I crossed my arms. “I’m better.”

“How is that even possible?” The admiration in Banni’s voice made me warm up to him.

“We have different styles. She jumps and kicks more than I do, but that’s because I have sufficient force in my arms to knock you out if I want to.”

Just then, the Gorilla charged Aubri again with a roar of humiliation. The fight had been going on for a while with the man about to collapse from all the times he’d been kicked to the ground. This time, Aubri took mercy on him and ended the fight with a flying kick that made his head whip to the side and blood spray out on some of the audience members.

Alex, Val, and Banni screamed with joy and ran to congratulate Aubri on her win.

I stayed where I was, watching others try to wake up the Gorilla, who lay knocked out on the ground. When he moved his hand, I sighed with relief because the last thing we needed was for Aubri to be accused of murder.

When the squad came toward me, Aubri was smiling. “What did you think?”

“What’s wrong with your hands? Aren’t they working?”

She laughed.

“I’m serious. I felt like you were back at the school teaching a class on how to block with your legs and never touch your opponent.”

“Did you see how sweaty he was? I’m sorry, but I didn’t want all that sweat on my hands or body.”

Lifting my hand, my face softened as I ran a finger down her cheekbone. “You did great, grasshopper, but then I knew you would.”

For a moment our gazes were locked, and I had the crazy feeling she was holding something back.

“Yeeees!”

Banni’s loud outburst broke my prolonged eye contact with Aubri. “What is it?”

“I just tripled my savings.” His eyes were wide with disbelief as he looked to Alex and Val. “What the hell, it says here that no one else bet on Aubri other than me.”

Alex gave an apologetic shrug. “Our mistake.”

“You’re splitting your wins with me,” I told him, but Aubri smacked my shoulder.

“Let the man enjoy his win. He believed in me.”

“So did I.”

“That’s not the same. You knew the outcome before the fight started. Banni had never seen me fight.”

“I’m happy to split it,” Banni said.

“Then tell you what, if you tripled your investment, then give us a third. Indiana and I will split the money between us and that way you still doubled your investment.”

When I raised my brow at Aubri, she told me, “Don’t look at me like that. I’m the one who fought him, it’s fair that I get a share of the money.”

“You hardly broke a sweat out there,” I teased.

“Nor did you, sitting here,” she retorted and reached for her jacket and shirt behind me. “Now can we get out of this claustrophobic sauna already?”

Walking through the old survival bunker, Aubri and I were being stared at from all directions.

The man with the large ears stepped in front of us and rumbled something in French. Expecting problems, Aubri and I squared our shoulders and looked around to assess how many we had to potentially fight to get out of here.

Alex was doing the talking and turned to us. “He wants to know if you’ll come back and fight again.”

Aubri eased her stance. “Does he have someone who can actually fight?”

The man with the large ears seemed to understand her because he pushed out air forcefully and threw his hands up in a theatrical way.

People were gathering around us to listen in on the conversation that continued between Alex and the man. Aubri and I exchanged a glance when the crowd made an “oohhh” sound and got excited.

“He says that the Gorilla is one of his best fighters but that if you’re up for it, you could go up against two fighters at once.”

“Maybe that will make you use your hands,” I said dryly.

“What’s in it for me?” Aubri asked the man and since he answered right away, it was clear that he understood English.

“Money,” he said in a strong accent and pointed to his wristband.

It was fun to see Aubri look thoughtful as if she wouldn’t do it for free. She loved fighting and even if they had told her to fight five at once, she would have been up for the challenge.

When she nodded in agreement, he smiled and then his eyes shifted to me. “You combat?”

With my height I was looking down on the man when I answered. “Yes, I can fight, but you’ll need more than two of his kind to match me.” I threw a nod to the Gorilla, who sat against the wall where someone was cleaning his slit lip.

“You fight *trois*?” He held up three fingers.

“Sure, sounds fun.”

It seemed settled and we were just about to go when out of nowhere a woman came up from behind and placed her hand on my shoulder.

I turned to see her watching me with a seductive smile. “Are you available?” she asked.

“Ehmm...” I cleared my throat still not used to being hit on by a woman.

Her sweet giggle accompanied her index finger running down my chest.

Before I could answer, Aubri pushed the woman's hand away. "Don't fucking touch someone without consent. That's rude."

The woman gaped with apparent confusion, but Aubri was already pulling me out of the room.

"You didn't have to do that. I could have handled it myself," I told her as we walked down the long narrow service corridor again.

"Would you be okay with a man touching my breast like that?"

"No."

"Same thing."

"It's not the same thing. I wasn't in danger from her."

"I think we've just established that I'm not in danger from the men here either. None of them are trained fighters like we are."

"They could still overpower you if they worked together."

"Except I'm always with you and you'd never let that happen."

I made a sound of confirmation. "Next time, let me handle it, okay?"

Aubri stopped and spoke with a bratty attitude. "I'm sorry... do you want me to go back and get her for you? Want to bring her home to our apartment and fuck her?"

"That's not what I said."

"No, but it's what you're implying."

"No."

"You made it sound like I came between you two." She raised her voice a little, and feeling annoyed I matched her volume.

"Because you did!"

"Then go back to her, Indy. I'll find my own way home." With a huff, Aubri turned to leave. The corridor was dark, lit only by the flashlights carried by Banni, Val, and Alex, walking ahead of us.

"Stop!" Grabbing onto her upper arm, I forced her around and stepped into her personal space. "I'm your protector and I'm not leaving your side."

"Not even to fuck some French temptress?" she hissed.

"She's not the one I want to be with."

Aubri was shaking and her breath was ragged as we stared at each other in the dim light.

I wanted her to ask me who I wanted to be with, but she didn't. My feelings for her seemed so obvious but it was like she refused to see them.

"Is everything all right?" Banni called to us in a hushed voice.

“Yes. Everything is fine,” I responded with frustration and let go of Aubri’s arm.

CHAPTER 13

The Repair Shop

Aubri

I'd been jealous when that woman in the fight club came on to Indiana last night.

The anger from seeing her touch his chest had stayed with me all morning.

My possessiveness frightened me because I knew from my parents' relationship how many fights jealousy had caused between them.

Indiana had tried talking to me again last night, but I wasn't ready and had managed to wriggle my way out of it by feigning a headache and going to bed.

These new feelings that I had for him were confusing. Maybe it was a matter of homesickness making me irrational. My biggest dilemma was my fear that I might hurt my friend by being with him, only to regret it later.

Indiana would make the most loyal and amazing husband to a lucky woman someday. I just never imagined it to be me.

In my mind, my husband would be a large, dangerous, and mysterious warrior who would do anything to convince me we belonged together. Indiana was large and he could fight, but he was a businessman more than a warrior. And he might be a mystery to other women, but I was his best friend and knew everything about him.

The times Freya had teased me that Indiana and I would make a good couple, I'd told her that having sex with him would feel like being with Mason.

I'd been mistaken.

My mind went to the other night when Lucille had taught Indiana how to please me with oral sex. That night I'd been full of sensual lust for him. Being naked with Indiana hadn't felt wrong at all.

"Where did you go?"

Blinking my eyes, I realized Banni was talking to me.

"What?"

"Are you homesick? Is that what has you this quiet?"

"Mm-hmm." We kept moving down the narrow street on the first

subterranean level where stores were located side by side.

“Do you think that if I came to your country the women would fancy me?”

I frowned. “You’re not allowed to leave, Banni. Visiting our country isn’t an option for you.”

“Unless you smuggled me out.” He gave a mischievous grin. “But seriously, would I be as popular there as you two are here?”

“You think we’re popular?”

“Ha! I was just telling Indiana that the rumor has spread by now and I’m getting hit up by hundreds of people who want to be introduced to you. Everyone wants a taste of the North.”

I should feel flattered, but my instinct was to feel threatened. I’d been the one advocating that Indiana and I should take the opportunity to explore while we were in France. Now, I couldn’t stand the thought of him with all these women.

“I’m sure many Nwomen would feel attracted to you, Banni. You’re good-looking, intelligent, and charming, not to mention that you speak with a sexy accent.”

Banni laughed. “Is that so? Then how come you haven’t been open to my advances?”

“Your advances?”

“Oh, haven’t I been direct enough?” He bumped my shoulder and laughed.

“I get the feeling that your interest in me is because of the novelty. Am I even your type, Banni?”

“I like women of all types.”

“Okay, but if you could choose?”

Tapping his lips, Banni admitted, “I do have a weak spot for dark women with big curly hair.”

“Like this?” I pulled up a picture of my friend Sparrow and showed it to him.

Banni was quiet for a long moment and just stared at my best friend’s photo. “Who’s that?”

“That’s Sparrow, whom I told you about. She’s the one I was recording a vid for that time you cleansed your wound, remember?”

He didn’t take his eyes from the picture. “What is she doing? Why is she laughing so much?”

“Oh, we were out skiing when I took that picture. We’d just eaten our lunch at that lodge in the background and she was cracking up because I entertained her with an embarrassing story. Sparrow and I share a dark sort of humor that not everyone gets.”

“She’s... She’s pretty.” Banni kept looking at her photo and pointed to her nose. “Are those freckles?”

“Yes. Cute, right?”

He was quiet but nodded.

I arched an eyebrow. “What’s with you?”

“I wish I could meet your friend and experience her rare beauty for myself.”

I broke into laughter. “Nice try, Frenchie. We both know you don’t care about my best friend on the other side of the world. You’re just hoping Indiana and I will smuggle you out of here, but we can’t! The reason we’re here to begin with is to smooth over an international crisis. Bringing you with us would be seen as kidnapping.”

“First of all, I do wish I could meet Sparrow, and secondly, it’s not the same as with Belle.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not asking to *move* to the Northlands. I just want to visit. Besides, Belle hadn’t done her civic duty yet, while I already donated my sperm when I was sixteen. I do important work, but Explorers like me are seen as expendable.”

I frowned. “Don’t say that.”

“Think about it, Aubri. Wouldn’t you be excited if you had an opportunity to go to a new country?”

He was hitting me where I was softest and kept pushing.

“I already thought about how we could pull it off, and it could work.”

We had stopped in front of a store that looked as antique as the items we were bringing. There was even a small bell above the door that chimed when we entered.

Indiana and I browsed around as we waited for someone to greet us. Old mechanical toys stood on shelves next to frames with paintings that looked to be from the Renaissance.

“This can’t possibly be real.” Indiana took down a frame and turned it around to study it.

“Banni wants to come back with us this summer.”

“Yes, he told me.” Indiana kept turning the frame.

I bent toward a lower shelf to study an old doll that looked creepy to me. “Can you imagine how shocked he’d be to learn that none of the women there would sleep with him?”

Indiana shrugged. “I know of a widow who has no interest in remarrying but likes to have sex.”

“What? You never told me that.”

He still wasn’t looking at me when he muttered, “I know you like to think that you know everything about me, but you don’t.”

In a sharp whisper, I asked. “Did you go to her?”

“Who?”

“The widow.”

With a secretive smile, he put the painting back.

“Did you?” I asked with annoyance.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Do I know anyone who did?”

“Yes, but I’m not telling you.”

“How old is this widow?”

“She’s in her early thirties now. She’s pretty and very independent, but then she’s a Motlander.”

I was so consumed by my conversation with Indiana that I didn’t pay attention to the man who had come to the counter, talking to Banni about the treasures we’d brought back from our visit to Bordeaux.

“Are you going to see her when we get back?”

“Who, the widow?”

“Yes!” I hissed out in irritation.

Indiana kept looking at the toys and articles from the past that were all over the store. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well, I think you should do it.”

I could have bitten off my tongue, but I was so tired of my stupid jealousy that I pushed him away. I felt his eyes on me as I walked to stand next to Banni, who was bent forward with both his elbows on the counter.

“*Bonjour*,” I greeted the man who I assumed was Helmes.

“*Bonjour*,” the old man muttered low with a short glance in my direction before he returned his attention to the jewelry in front of him. Unlike most people here in Old Europe he didn’t have on a colorful outfit. His gray hair seemed greasy and with his bushy eyebrows, large belly, and strong body

odor, he reminded me of some of the old geezers I knew from back home.

“Is this Helmes?”

“No. This guy works for Helmes. I don’t know his name because he hardly ever says a word, but he does good work.”

Banni asked a question in French and the old man mumbled something back.

“Huh.” Turning his head to me, Banni said, “He says that Helmes is delivering something to a female customer.”

I didn’t ask if that meant what I thought it meant. Instead I asked about the one thing that mattered the most to me, “Can he repair the clock?”

“He says it will take time. It’s delicate work.”

Banni and I waited while the repairman studied all the jewelry. He was wearing glasses with lights and zoom function and took his time. Behind the counter, pushed against the wall, was a table with several tools and robots. Brushes, hammers, screws, and tiny spirals filled the table and on a shelf were piles of what looked like ancient manuals.

The air in this shop was heavy and made me think that not enough customers came by to open the door and let fresh air in, but then I remembered that we were underground, and down here the air wasn’t great in the best of houses.

We waited another five minutes while the old man studied the jewelry we had brought. Then the sound of the bell over the door sounded and a rangy man entered the shop. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, clean-shaven with jaw-length hair and a receding hairline.

Banni straightened up and grinned. The two men hugged each other and then Banni introduced us.

“This is Helmes, who turns trash into gold like a true magician.”

The man had a broad smile, showing crooked canines. “I know who you two are. You were on the News and rumor has it you’ve been winning some epic fights at the club.”

I looked to Banni, who grinned. “Helmes was the one who introduced us to the fight club.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said and lifted my chin in a greeting.

Coming over, Helmes leaned his hip against the counter and studied me with interest. “Is it true you are hiding from your *papa*?”

“Who?”

“*Papa* means father,” Banni said.

With an offended frown, I spoke in a firm voice. “Who said that?”

“There’ve been articles and a ton of people are talking about the two Northlanders living here. Except for the Motlanders teaching us English, we’ve never had outsiders come to live here.”

“And what are these articles saying about us?”

Helmes didn’t hesitate when he said, “That women in the Northlands are being controlled by men and forced into a life of servitude.”

My nose wrinkled. “Servitude. That’s bullshit.”

Since Banni didn’t look surprised, I reckoned that he’d heard these outrageous rumors before.

Indiana stood watching us and interjected, “Maybe it’s because you French don’t understand how marriages work. It’s not a slave contract.”

Helmes smiled. “I’m glad to hear it because truth be told, I did find it hard to believe that any woman would allow a man to decide for her. Ah, but I probably should have known it wasn’t true when I read about the absurd sex rule.”

“What sex rule?” I asked.

“Argh.” Helmes waved his hand through the air. “It was something bizarre about the Northlander women being *forcée* to have sex with only one man for the rest of her life and to be *obligée*... ehh... I mean obligated to have children with him and no one else.”

Indiana and I exchanged a look and then he spoke in a strong voice. “What’s absurd about that? When I marry, my woman and I will be faithful to each other and we’ll have a family.”

Helmes laughed as if he thought Indiana was joking, but when none of us joined his laughter, he stopped, and his face fell. “Oh.”

Indiana carried on. “No woman is forced. It’s a choice she makes.”

“That’s right. Besides, a marriage contract goes both ways,” I explained. “My husband won’t sleep with other women either.”

“But *why? Pourquoi?*” Helmes looked completely baffled, as if we’d told him we’d decided to eat one specific dish for the rest of our lives.

Banni patted Helmes’s shoulder. “It makes as little sense to me as you, my friend, but from what I understand it’s a matter of tradition.”

Helmes crossed his arms. “So, it’s true then? Your *papa* is forcing you to sign a contract with a man back home and you’re hiding here to avoid becoming that man’s property?”

“I’m not afraid of my father and I’ll never be some man’s property. When

I marry, my husband will be a man of *my* choice.”

Uncrossing his arms, Helmes’ tone turned lighter. “At least we know that in case your husband doesn’t treat you well, you can *défendre*.” He made hand movement to imitate fighting.

“Hmm. Are you suggesting that we Nmen are violent toward our women?” Indiana asked him with his brow raised.

“No, no. All I’m saying is that from what I heard, you’re both *combattants magnifiques*.”

“That’s right. They’re both great fighters.” Banni must have picked up on the annoyance in Indiana’s tone and wisely changed the subject to talk about the items we’d found and brought to the repair shop.

Helmes cracked a few jokes that made Indiana and me soften to him after his attack on our culture. One of them fell completely flat in translation from French to English, but the way Helmes was laughing at his own joke was infectious and made us laugh with him.

“Are you going to the club this week?” Banni asked him when we were wrapping up. “Indiana is fighting three men again on Thursday night.”

“*Oui*, I heard, but the list was full.”

“Then come with us. We’ll get you in,” Banni offered.

“Oh, *oui*?” Helmes lit up. “That would be *fantastique*.”

As we walked out, Indiana stopped and took down a red vehicle from the shelf. “Can you ask him how much he wants for this one?” he muttered to Banni, probably hoping that Banni was getting some kind of discount.

“What is it?” I asked and moved closer to see the weird ladder on top of a large old-fashioned car.

“It’s a fire truck. They had them before drones took over. I once saw an old movie with a boy who played with one of these. The ladder extended and the truck had a siren.”

“But what would you do with it? You’re not a kid.”

“I would give it to Sparrow as good luck on her journey to become a fire fighter. I think she’d appreciate it.”

Something was seriously wrong with me. We’d been having a great time in the repair shop and I should praise Indiana for his thoughtfulness toward Sparrow. But I couldn’t.

Feeling like all the air had been forced from my lungs, I muttered, “Great. I’ll wait outside.”

“Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm, the air is just stale and dusty in here.”

Walking outside, I felt ashamed of my reaction. Sparrow was my dearest friend, and I should be happy for her that Banni thought her beautiful and Indiana wanted to buy her presents. Why did I have to be this petty, jealous person?

Feeling a knot in my chest, I leaned against the wall and pressed a hand to my stomach. I was becoming my father and although I loved him, I had sworn that I'd never be as possessive and controlling as Magni.

The small bell above the door made a sound when Banni and Indiana exited. From the bag in Indiana's hand I guessed that he'd bought the fire truck for Sparrow.

The two men exchanged small talk as we walked back to the Exploration Headquarters while I was brooding over the emotional turmoil inside me.

CHAPTER 14

Visit

Indiana

Three weeks after we arrived in Old Europe, things were slowly falling into a new routine. We worked as a team with Banni, Alex, and Val and traveled with them to do the rounds in the areas that our team was responsible for.

Aubri and I had both fought and won fights at the underground fight club making prize money for both us and our friends. But despite all the new and exciting things, Aubri didn't seem happy.

She and Victor kept snapping at each other the three times we'd seen him since we arrived. That's why, I sighed when he called us up early on Tuesday morning.

"What the hell, Victor? Why are you calling us this early?" I asked with my eyes still closed and my voice rusty from sleep.

"Good morning to you too," he responded in his typical grumpy Victor way. "You have visitors."

"What visitors?" I yawned and turned on my side.

"It seems a drone arrived twenty minutes ago with three women who insist on seeing you."

"Who?"

"I'm on my way to sort it out, but if I were to guess, I'd say it's Freya sticking her nose in other people's business again."

I was sitting up by now and pushing at Aubri to wake her up. "Where should we meet you?"

"It's easier if I bring them to you. Just be sure that you're up."

"What is it?" Aubri sat up with her hair in a mess and her arms stretched out. Her face scrunched up as she gave a loud yawn.

"Someone is here to see us."

That woke her up fast and with a small squeal, she got out of bed and ran to the bathroom.

"We're up and we'll be ready," I assured Victor.

"Who is it and when will they be here?" Aubri called in quick succession.

"He doesn't know, but Victor is bringing the visitors here."

Sticking her head out from the bathroom, Aubri grinned. “Tell Victor to stop and buy some croissants on the way.”

“Did you hear that?”

“Uh-huh. Tell Aubri that I’m not her servant.”

“He’s not your servant.”

Aubri came into the bedroom again and spoke closer to my Neuro Link: “Victor, just buy eight croissants and stop bitching all the time. It’s the least you can do after being an ass to my cousin.”

“She’s never going to let that go, is she?” he asked me.

“Nope, so you better be nice from now on.”

From Victor’s panting, I reckoned that he was walking fast.

“Why don’t you have a hover board?” It annoyed me that whoever had come to visit us had to stand around and wait because the French insisted on walking everywhere.

“I do, but since I’ll be walking back with them to your apartment, I thought... argh, why would I even try and explain myself to you?” With an exasperated huff, Victor ended the call.

I quickly made the bed and picked up some clothes from the floor. At least the place was small and didn’t take long to tidy up.

Knocking on the bathroom door with my fist, I called to Aubri, “Hurry, I want a shower too.”

She was whistling in there.

It would take our visitors and Victor at least twenty minutes to walk here from the landing spot, and even longer if Victor stopped to buy croissants.

“Aubri, come on, hurry up.”

“Stop knocking on the door. If you’re in such a hurry, just come and join me.”

I blinked my eyes, trying to decide if she was serious.

Aubri had avoided talking about what happened between us our first week here. She didn’t play-wrestle with me like she used to and there was a new guardedness to the way she was around me. I’d taken the hint and pulled back. If we were to live together for a year, I couldn’t afford to put my cards on the table and have her reject me. I still had hopes that once she had processed the physical attraction between us, she would want more.

Was today my lucky day?

Opening the door a little, I asked, “Do you mean that?”

“I’m almost done, but I’ll share the shower with you.”

This had to be an invitation and although her timing was awful, I closed the door and stepped out of my briefs.

The shower wall was frosted glass, allowing me to see nothing but the outline of her body. Damp air was filling the small bathroom as I took the few steps, opened the shower door, and stepped inside the tiny shower that barely had room for the both of us.

I'd used up all my confidence to get me into the shower with her and now I was left with doubt about what to do. My heart felt as if it was running hurdles and that I could easily slip and fall if I made a wrong move.

"You're blocking all the water," Aubri said and looked up at me. Her red hair was wet and lying heavy on her shoulders.

Taking a chance, I placed my hands under her arms. "Want me to lift you up?"

She seemed a little nervous, but still lifted her arms and placed them around my neck.

Lifting her up, I felt a massive swarm of butterflies in my stomach when Aubri tightened her hold around my shoulders. We were eye to eye now, but it had to be unpleasant for her with the way I was holding her, so I lowered my right hand and hooked it under her right thigh, lifting her higher.

Aubri leaned her head back and let the water run over her face, and then she hooked her left leg around my hip.

We were naked with her sitting on my hip and my obvious erection trapped between our bodies.

"Want me to wash your hair?" she asked.

I couldn't think of shampoo when I wanted something else. None of this made sense to me. While Aubri washed my hair, I kissed her neck.

"What is this?" I muttered against her ear.

"Two people sharing a shower."

"Are you playing with me?"

She pulled back and looked at me. "How about we call it exploring?"

I pushed her against the wall. "You chose this moment because you knew I wouldn't have time to do all the things I want to do with you."

"You were the one knocking on the door."

"Are you gonna let me in?"

She pretended not to understand. "You're here."

"That's not what I meant." I looked down to my engorged crown before meeting her eyes again. "Are you going to let me in?"

Aubri wet her lips and whispered, "I don't know."

We were staring into each other's eyes, an intense spark of energy and lust sparkling between us.

"Our first time won't be rushed, Aubri."

She nuzzled the hairs on my nape and pressed her lips against my mouth before telling me to close my eyes. Pushing my head back, she rinsed out the shampoo. "All done."

I wanted more of her, but time was ticking, and she motioned for me to put her down.

After another kiss, I let her go and watched her open the shower door and exit. A minute later the bathroom door opened and closed.

My heart was still pounding in my chest and my mind was trying to catch up with what had just happened. Her mixed signals were driving me crazy, but I knew I needed to be patient. Aubri was worth waiting for.

The apartment smelled of coffee when I was done in the bathroom. I'd groomed my beard, styled my hair, and put on my favorite new outfit.

"Who do you think is coming?" Aubri asked me.

"He said it was three women. I'm thinking Freya for sure. Remember how Mason told us that she feels guilty about you sacrificing yourself for her."

"I didn't do it just for her. I did it for Mason, Belle, and their child too."

I raised a brow. "Sure, but maybe you should be honest and tell them that you also did it because you were dying to have an adventure?"

Aubri was wearing a white sweater and tight blue pants with a bright red line running down the side of her pants legs. "No, I prefer for them to think of us as heroes."

"Us?"

"Yes, Indy. You're a hero too for staying with me. I'm sure they admire how you sacrificed yourself."

I huffed out air and shook my head just as a knock sounded on the door.

Aubri was quick to run the ten steps and swing the door open. She screamed with joy when her mother Laura stormed in to embrace her.

"You silly, silly girl," Laura said and lifted Aubri from the ground despite Aubri's being a few inches taller than her mother.

"Mom, I can't believe that you came."

My mother Christina followed with Aubri's aunt Pearl.

"Indiana." My mother's eyes teared up as she reached for me.

“Mom.” I wrapped her in my arms and kissed the top of her head where strands of silver-gray hair had replaced the brown hair she’d had when I grew up. “How long can you stay?”

“Just for today. When we landed, we were met by armed guards who refused to let us set foot off the drone. After Victor came, they let us go, but we have to leave by nine tonight.”

When my mom was done hugging me, Pearl was next and then came Laura.

Victor stood stiffly by the door and cleared his throat. “I’ll leave you to catch up with your family.”

“Did you buy the croissants?” Aubri asked him.

With his upper lip curled, he said, “I told you; I’m not your servant. It’s bad enough that I get dragged into your family visits. I have important work to do.”

Aubri rolled her eyes, but Victor left before she could get the final word.

“Never mind the croissants, we’re here to see you,” Pearl comforted us. “Now show us your apartment.”

Aubri and I exchanged a quick look as I felt bile rise in my throat. Laura wouldn’t understand that we’d chosen to share the same bedroom. She was raised in the Northlands and cared about traditions.

“Okay, so this is the kitchen and living room. As you can see, it’s small.” Aubri waved a hand to the windows. “But we’re lucky to have a view at least. Belle lived all her life underground because there aren’t enough apartments above ground. I think that’s why the parks are always full of people.”

Pearl, Laura, and my mother walked over to our floor-to-ceiling windows and took in the city view that was so different from back home.

“Look between those two buildings and you’ll see the park,” I instructed.

My mother nodded and then she looked up to the top of the building in front of us. “We were told you were given the best accommodation possible.”

“More like the best accommodation available,” I said.

“Hmm...” Laura turned to Aubri. “Show us your rooms.”

“Right. Yes, it’s ehh, this way.”

I watched in horror as Laura, Pearl, and my mom walked into our small bedroom. Pearl opened the door to the bathroom and asked, “Are there other bathrooms than this one?”

“There’s a guest restroom by the entrance.”

“You know, this reminds me of my first apartment. It was tiny as well,

but I made it quite cozy with artwork and plants.”

Aubri and I stood in the doorway to the room watching them investigate.

“We haven’t gotten to that part yet.”

“So, who sleeps in the bed and who sleeps on the couch?” Laura asked with a displeased expression.

My neck had to be red from the heat I felt. If Laura knew that her daughter had just been naked with me twenty minutes ago, I’d be in serious trouble. Laura was from a time when touching an unmarried woman meant the death penalty.

“We take turns,” I said before Aubri had a chance to respond. “I started off on the couch but with me being grumpy from poor sleep, she took pity on me and now we take turns when we’re here.”

Aubri and I stepped aside when all three women exited our bedroom.”

“And when you’re not here?” Laura asked.

“When we go on expeditions we sleep in a tent.”

“Together?” Laura asked with one eyebrow raised.

This time, I kept quiet and let Aubri answer.

“Yes, Mom. We’re five people in a tent. I sleep against the side with Mister Overprotective here acting like a wall between me and the others.”

“And who is acting like a wall between you and him?” Laura asked in a sharp tone.

“Laura, you know that Indiana would never overstep her boundaries,” my mother defended me.

Laura came closer and narrowed her eyes a little. “Hmm... that’s what Mason said as well but look what happened to him and Belle when they shared a bed.”

“Mom, can we talk about something else? I’m twenty-seven and an adult. If I decide to have sex with someone, it’s really none of your concern.”

Pearl swallowed a chuckle of amusement when she saw Laura’s horrified expression, as if she’d just discovered maggots in her food.

“I’m just trying to look out for you, which isn’t easy when you live on the other side of the world now.”

Putting an arm around her mother’s shoulder, Aubri leaned her head against Laura’s. “I know, Mom, but you’ve got to trust that you raised me to take care of myself.”

“I’m keeping her safe,” I interjected and received smiles from my mom and Pearl in return.

“We’re happy to see that you both look healthy and well,” Pearl said. “Everyone wanted to come to see you, of course, but for the sake of diplomacy we decided it was better if we came instead of Khan and Magni.”

“Are you meeting with the Prime Minister?” Aubri asked Pearl.

“I am. There’ve been some heated exchanges back and forth between him and Magni, which is threatening the peaceful relationship we’ve always had with Old Europe. I’m here to advise Monsieur Moreau to tread lightly or he might soon look up to see drones above his country.”

“You’re threatening him with an attack?” I asked with surprise. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

Pearl looked out the windows again. “Not threatening but warning. The French are being careless playing this game. I’m not sure what he hopes to gain from his demand of keeping a daughter of the North.”

“Oh, it was nothing but a power trip. Moreau was pissed that Belle was leaving without giving France the two children she was obligated to carry.”

Christina spoke up. “In his last communication, Moreau made a serious threat. He said that he’ll order the ten French children and the teacher who is currently at the school of inclusion back to France. We were so proud to have an international school with all three nations represented.”

“He’s also threatening to hold his delegation back from next summer’s summit in the Motherlands,” Laura said.

“Moreau is a proud fool,” I muttered. “But I doubt he’ll go through with any of it.”

Pearl played with her necklace and looked out the windows. “I hope you’re right, but unfortunately the tension between our countries has caused arguing between Pierre and Archer.”

Indiana threw his hands up, “Argh, Pierre was always dramatic.”

I’d met the man in question enough times to know Indiana was right. Pierre was the French teacher who had arrived from Old Europe eighteen months ago with ten children between ten and thirteen.

“In all fairness, Archer and Pierre never got along, but now that there’s been talk of war, he’s threatening to go home. I doubt Moreau will send a new teacher, and that means all the children will surely be called back to France.”

“I’m sorry,” Aubri said and rubbed the side of her aunt’s arm. “If anyone can talk some sense into him, it’s you.”

“Thank you.” Pearl placed her hand on top of Aubri’s.

“When are you ladies meeting with the prime minister?” I asked.

Pearl stood straight, with that air of sophistication that came so natural to her, when she said, “I will meet with him alone.”

“Fine, but I’ll come for protection,” I exclaimed, not liking the idea of Pearl meeting with the prime minister alone.

“Thank you, but you already have Aubri to protect.”

“We’re both coming,” Aubri declared, but Pearl just smiled.

“I’m here to deescalate things and nothing does that better than showing up with no weapons.”

“We could leave our weapons here,” I offered.

Pearl reached out to touch both our shoulders. “Thank you, Laura already offered her assistance as well, but Monsieur Moreau knows enough about Northlanders to know that you *are* weapons.”

“Trust me, I wanted to come, but Pearl is convinced that I’ll lose my shit with that fucker. For him to take my daughter and provoke my husband – urgh, I could just...Ooph. ” Laura finished her sentence by pressing her lips together and blowing up her cheeks, as if she was holding back a description of all the vile things that she wanted to do the prime minister.

I would have felt better if Pearl had let one of us come with her, but with her being a figure of authority to me, I didn’t press the subject further. Instead I offered, “At least let us walk you there.”

“I’d appreciate that since I would surely get lost if I tried to find him myself. Victor said that he would contact Monsieur Moreau and let us know when he’s ready to meet with me.”

“Yes, and in the meanwhile, we would love for you two to show us this fascinating country,” my mother said. “I’m told that the original survival bunkers have been turned into a museum.”

“One of them is used for an underground fight club. Indiana and I have made money there already.”

“You’ve fought for money?” The concern on my mother’s face made Aubri and me laugh.

“It’s a walkover. They have no real fight training here. In that area, they are as hopeless as the Motlanders. They don’t even teach their kids basic self-defense.”

Laura, who was a skilled fighter herself, didn’t show concern. “Who did you fight? Was it fun?”

Aubri and I put on jackets and shoes while telling about the Gorilla and

the other people we had fought against.

As we walked with our mothers and Pearl through the streets, they pointed out all the things that had once seemed strange to Aubri and me too. It made me reflect on how we'd become used to the colorful outfits and the lights on the buildings. By now we even understood how to read the street signs and navigate the different levels.

There were no tourists in France. They had limited space and the government was afraid of outside influence. Many were curious when they heard us speak English, but few approached us.

We stopped and looked at displays of fashion that made our moms gape.

"But it's see-through," my mom said in response to the bright yellow dress that hung in the window.

"Do you want to buy one? It's high fashion here," Aubri teased her.

"Promise me that you'll never strut around in see-through clothing like that," Laura said with a shake of her head.

"Why not? I'm so good at *strutting* around." The love between Laura and Aubri shone from the two women as they laughed together, linked arms, and walked on.

My mother placed her hand under my elbow and smiled up at me. "We miss you, Indy. But I'm also jealous that you get to experience a new culture. It's very different here. When I arrived in the Northlands, at least I could understand and speak the language. Are you picking up on French?"

"A little, but the younger generation have all learned English in school, so we get by fine."

We spent an hour in the survival bunker turned into a museum. Pictures of the original two hundred and seventy-two survivors hung on the walls along with passages from their diaries describing the fear and panic when they understood that the world had gone under.

As an archeologist and historian, my mother soaked it up and took pictures of everything.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"It's amazing. I feel their anxiety and pain. I could stay in here for a month and just dig deep into the history of this place. I want to understand how they produced food and how the dynamics were in terms of hierarchy. Did they name a leader, or did someone take that role? I assume food was rationed." Her gaze was darting around the room as if she could find all the answers she wanted in no time.

“Check this out,” Laura called to us.

We joined the others and looked inside a large container with slim vertical panels running from one end to the other.

“Interesting.” Pearl stepped inside the room, which had a purple warm light glowing. “This is what hydroponic farming looks like.”

A young guide was excited to learn that we were interested and went over how the plants grew vertically in this compact setting with a minimum of water.

“And what about the animals?” my mother asked.

The guide pointed to a large interactive screen that explained how the survival bunkers had been designed to be self-sufficient for a doomsday scenario.

When we left the museum, Victor called me. We walked Pearl to her meeting with the prime minister and told her that we’d wait outside.

The meeting took around half an hour.

“How did it go?” Aubri asked.

“I think Monsieur Moreau understood my warning, but he’s a vain and proud man.”

“Did you manage to smooth things out?”

“It was a civil conversation, but diplomacy takes time, Aubri.” Pearl didn’t want to share more details and insisted that we forget about her meeting and go out to lunch instead.

We took them to a restaurant that we’d been in before and laughed when we tried some of the strangest things on the menu.

“What do you think this is?” My mother held a wiggly pink-colored worm shaped thing up in front of her face to study it.

“I don’t know, but they definitely put garlic in the sauce,” I said and took another spoonful. “It looks weird, but it’s actually pretty good.”

“I wish we could read the menu card,” Pearl commented.

“I’m sorry but I refuse to eat this, I think it’s some sort of intestine.” Laura sniffed the dish in front of her. “Look at the texture, is it liver maybe?”

Aubri leaned closer and poked the pieces of meat with a fork. “Could be heart or tongue.”

With her nose wrinkled up, Laura pushed it away.

“Oh, no.” Aubri laughed and pushed the plate back in front of her mother. “Remember your rule that we always had to try something before deciding if we liked it or not?”

I laughed. “Sucks when your own rules come back to bite you, huh?”

Laura gave us the stink-eye. “Why did you have to tell that waiter to bring me the most unique local dish? You should have ordered some chicken.”

“Tell you what, Mom, I’ll order some chicken for you as soon as you taste the food in front of you.”

My mother gave Laura a sympathetic glance. “I would offer to taste it with you, but you know I don’t eat meat.”

“Right now, I wish I didn’t either,” Laura muttered and cut a tiny bit.

“Oh, come on. That’s not a healthy bite. You won’t be able to taste anything.”

Laura sighed. “Don’t use my words against me.” Taking the bigger pieces, she closed her eyes and swallowed hard before she took two deep breaths and put the fork with the meat in her mouth.

Aubri rubbed Laura’s back and the rest of us cheered for her.

“So, how does it taste?”

“It’s heart, definitely heart. I recognize the taste from when I was a child.”

I called the waiter over and asked her what Laura was eating. The waiter was Belle’s age and happy to use her English. “It’s deer.”

“Is it the heart?” Laura asked.

“*Oui*. It’s our special *délicatesse*.” She smiled from ear to ear. “*Bon, non?*”

Laura’s smile was strained. “Not my favorite, but I can just eat these.” With her fork, she pointed to the vegetables on her plate.

We continued talking and after five minutes the waiter came back with a new plate for Laura.

“Try this instead.” The waiter put down the plate and flapped her arms. “It’s bird.”

Once Laura dug in, her face softened. “Wow, this is delicious. Such richness and taste.”

The waiter took the plate with the deer heart away and left with a polite smile.

“Tell us, what are your favorite things about Old Europe so far?” My mother asked.

I couldn’t tell them about kissing Aubri so I focused on talking about the work and the adventure before I exclaimed, “Also, there’s a place we need to

take you, mom.” I told her about the repair shop and saw the lights in her eyes shine bright.

“Sounds magical.”

An hour later, I enjoyed Christina’s reaction when she walked in and saw all the old, reclaimed toys, paintings, jewelry, and knick-knacks. It made my mom tear up. “Are these all antiques or are some of them replicas?”

“It’s all antiques.”

The hours passed way too quickly as we spent the day with Laura, Pearl, and my mom. We had a lot of fun, and at least three times my mom spontaneously hugged me. Each time I kissed the top of her hair feeling grateful she’d come all this way to see me.

At nine that night Aubri and I walked them to the landing place and saw Victor waiting for us.

“I thought you were too busy to handle our family visit,” Aubri said in a dry tone.

“I am. But for some reason, I keep getting dragged into everything Northland-related against my will.”

Pearl came over and reached out her hands to Victor. “Thank you, Monsieur Victor, for coming to our rescue when the guards wouldn’t let us off the drone.”

Aubri scoffed. “You wouldn’t thank him if you knew what vile things he said to Freya.”

Pearl’s polite smile stiffened a little, but she kept her hands outstretched.

Victor took her hands and gave a curt nod before he let go fast. “I’ve taken the liberty of filling the drone with some of Belle’s personal belongings. It’s mostly her paintings.”

“Thank you. I’m sure she’ll appreciate that.”

“Good. Now, I would also ask that you carry back with you the message that Old Europe isn’t a tourist destination. Further uninvited visits won’t be tolerated.” With his nose in the air, Victor turned and left us.

My mother sighed. “The others will be disappointed to hear that. Jones, Dina, and Sparrow were begging to come.”

“Tell them all that we miss them and that we can’t wait to see them this summer.” I hugged my mother tight.

Saying goodbye was hard and I felt a huge knot in my stomach when the three women got into Khan’s large drone and looked back at us with sadness.

Pearl was standing in the door opening with her hand on the doorframe

when she turned her head and said, “You know, I once sacrificed myself as well. Officially it was to save Athena, but in my heart, I saw it as an opportunity to make a difference and change the world for the better. It was hard living out of my comfort zone and Khan was obnoxious and confrontational.” A small smile played at the edge of her lips. “Funny thing is that today, Khan and I talk about that time in our lives as *the good old days*.”

With those words she waved a last time and pushed the button to close the door.

We stood watching the large diamond-shaped drone lift at a slow pace. Once it was fifty feet above the ground it took off toward the Atlantic Ocean, which separated us from our family back home.

Feeling emotional, I watched until the drone was nothing but a small dot of light in the distance.

“Come.” Aubri placed her hand in mine and squeezed. My gaze met hers and for a moment I recognized the young girl who had always wanted to join Mason and me on our adventures when we were children. This time, Aubri’s sense of adventure had landed us in our greatest challenge yet. What came to my mind wasn’t river rafting or discovering underground caves. It was being in a small shower with Aubri naked on my hips.

Great explorers had returned home after dangerous expeditions with mountains named after them. My mission in all of this was to claim one major territory: Aubri’s heart. If I could succeed in making Aubri Aurelius agree to become Aubri Boulder, then I would ask for nothing else in my life. I smiled at her and kept a firm grip on her hand. “Let’s go, my young grasshopper.”

CHAPTER 15

Experimenting

Aubri

Indiana and I were lying in bed with both of us unable to fall asleep.

“It was so good to see my mom.”

“I know. I’m grateful that they came all this way to see us.” I was on my side looking up at the dark ceiling.

“You got annoyed with your mom, though,” Indiana pointed out and propped his arm under his head. “In the restaurant, when she reminded you of your promise.”

“Was it obvious? I thought I hid my irritation.”

“It was subtle, but you can’t hide much from me, young grasshopper.”

Turning on my side, I pushed my pillow into a better position. “I know I promised to marry when we return in a year, but it’s not just a matter of deciding I want to marry. I will have to find the right man as well.” As soon as I said it, I knew it was a mistake.

Indiana narrowed his eyes and even though he didn’t speak at first, I felt the energy change in the room.

Ever since our night with Lucille two and a half weeks ago, something had been off between us. Indiana had tried to get me to talk about what happened several times, but I was afraid he wanted a commitment from me and had avoided the conversation.

The new attraction I felt toward Indiana scared me. It was bringing out new and crazy sides of me. Like the sudden bursts of jealousy that I had felt when Lucille or that petite woman from the fight club touched him. Or when he bought Sparrow the fire truck. Despite telling myself to get a grip, I’d had little to no control on the night when Indiana fought and won against three men. The women at the club had been drooling over Indiana and making him outright offers in front of me. Instead of being happy for my friend, and encouraging him to explore his sexuality, I’d been edgy and bratty. Unable to express how I felt, I’d ended up picking a fight with him over something petty.

I’d always been a bit wild, but doing something as irrational as inviting him into the shower with me was the epitome of stupid when I knew damn

well that Indiana wasn't a French guy who would be amused by a little fun and move on.

"Maybe you did find the right man," Indiana said, looking intently at me.

He was talking about himself. I knew it, but my head still couldn't wrap itself around the two of us as a couple. I needed danger and excitement. Indiana was safety and a soft place to fall.

I had backed myself into a corner. We had to talk about what was happening between us.

My lips pressed together as I rolled to lie on my back. What if Indiana blamed me for playing with his heart and demanded that I married him?

What if our talk ended in his leaving me in Old Europe alone? The thought of Indiana leaving me made it hard to breathe.

"Aubri."

"Yes?" I rolled to the side and swung my legs over the side of the bed. My heart was beating way too fast and my throat felt prickly and raw.

"Where are you going?"

"I need water."

Indiana waited while I walked to the kitchen, gulped down a large glass of water, and returned to the bedroom with a full glass in my hands.

"You want?" I reached out my hand with the glass.

Taking the glass from me, Indiana touched my fingers and kept eye contact. "Thanks."

I watched him drink as he sat in bed with the duvet covering the lower part of his body. With his attention on the water, my eyes feasted on his upper body. Like some schoolgirl with a crush, I noticed how the hair on his chest was trimmed and every part of his upper body looked like an artist had carved him to perfection. Indiana wasn't as obscenely muscled as some of the men back home who waddled because their thigh muscles were too large to walk normally. He was well proportioned and athletic.

Stop it, Aubri!

I got back into bed, telling myself that I was being a freak for ogling my friend.

"Can we talk about that night with Lucille and what happened today in the shower?"

"I told you. It's all part of exploring."

"Why do you sound so defensive? It's not like I've accused you of anything."

“I’m not defensive. I just don’t want you to think I expect anything from you.”

“What if I want you to expect something from me?”

“Indy, we’re friends. We’ve talked about it a million times; you deserve someone sweet and patient. I’m the opposite.”

Moving closer to me, Indiana placed his arm across my stomach, on top of the duvet. “You can be sweet and patient.”

“Mm-hmm, but I rarely am. Besides, I’m drawn to brooding, domineering men.”

“I can be both.” He gave a mock scowl.

“You know that I love you, but we’ve been friends for as long as I can remember. People don’t marry their friends.”

“What kind of rule is that? We’re the first generation to have friendships across genders. That wasn’t ever an option for our parents. There sure as hell weren’t any girls at my father’s school.”

“I know, but it’s weird.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s weird for me too, but it worked, didn’t it?” His hand lifted to my bare arm and stroked it up and down. “You came that night, Aubri, so you must have liked what I did to you.”

I bit my lip. “I’m not gonna deny that I liked the oral sex, but taking it further than that would be a mistake, don’t you think?”

Indiana took a moment before he answered, “No. I don’t think it would be a mistake.”

“Are you saying that you wouldn’t get possessive if we fucked?”

Indiana’s hand paused the caressing. “I’m willing to give it a try.” The way he looked at me with hunger ignited my desire for him. My gaze lowered to his lips and like the skilled hunter he was, he read my body language and lifted the duvet to move on top of me. “What about you? Can you control your possessiveness if we fuck?”

“I... I...” My brain was impaired and couldn’t think. It was as if my body reacted on instinct and my legs spread to make room for him.

Fisting his hand into my hair, Indiana’s voice turned demanding. “I asked you a question.”

“I think so,” I breathed.

“Are you gonna let me fuck you then?”

I loved the way his weight on my body pressed me down into the mattress, but what made butterflies flutter their wings and fly around my

body was the way he spoke to me like his question wasn't a question at all.

"I haven't..." I licked my dry lips. "I haven't had the implant yet."

"So?"

"We can't. I mean if you come inside me..."

Indiana cut me off. "Oh, I'm gonna fucking come inside you." He looked so different with his jaw set and his eyes shades darker than normal. "But first, you're gonna suck me."

I blinked my eyes trying to catch up to this demanding man who looked like my friend and spoke with his voice but was nothing like him.

"You wanted to experiment, didn't you?" His gaze was challenging.

"Yes."

"Then I'll teach you how to please me." With a firm hand he cupped my face and kissed me.

Closing my eyes, I kissed him back. My little moans grew in volume the more violent our kissing grew. Indiana was pressing himself against me and grabbing my body in all the right places.

"Ouch." I jerked back when he lowered his head, pushed my shirt up, and suckled hard on my left nipple.

Everything between my legs was moist with anticipation. He was so fucking sexy with the way he took charge.

There were no words between us as he licked, bit, and suckled my breasts while fingering me.

Leaning my head back, I reveled in the feeling of being desired by him. His fingers inside me made me want more. I definitely needed an implant and we definitely needed to go all the way.

My moans became louder.

"Are you gonna scream like that when I fuck you for real?" he asked in a low gruff voice.

Opening my eyes, I saw Indiana watching me. For a moment I wondered if he would do it tonight. I could ask him, but if I got pregnant, we would be bound together and I wouldn't be able to fulfill my part of the deal with the prime minister.

"Yes," I breathed. "I want to know what it feels like."

He was on me ever so fast, pushing my legs apart at the same time he got his briefs off.

"Indiana, no! We need to wait for the implant. I don't want to get pregnant."

Pinning my arms above my head, he still moved into position, his cock right at my entrance and his torso and broad shoulders all I could see.

I felt him press but not enter. "I want you, Aubri."

"I know, but not tonight."

With a growl of frustration, he let go of my arms and moved higher to sit astride my shoulders.

"Lift your head," he ordered and when I did, he placed another pillow under my head. "Open your mouth."

His cock looked enormous so close to my face and I was fascinated with the way tiny droplets hung from the tip of it, like his cock itself was drooling to be with me.

"Wider!" He pressed his thumb on my chin until I opened up wide.

Indiana's lips were a bit parted too as he steered his cock to my mouth. It almost felt as if he was putting his mark on me when he slid his cock over my lips before inserting the plum-sized head into my mouth.

I was curious and used my tongue to feel and taste his erection. Closing my lips around his soft skin, I loved hearing him moan out loud.

"Mmmm."

This might be my first time giving oral sex, but I was an Aurelius and we could never settle for second place. I wanted this to be the best oral sex Indiana had ever received.

"Oh, fuck, Aubri. Easy." He had his eyes closed and his hand on the wall for support when I sucked him with eagerness.

I loved the taste of him and the way he filled my mouth. Indiana had showered before we went to bed, like he did most nights. I loved the familiar scent of his body wash.

"Are you sure this is your first time?" he breathed and moved my right hand from his hip to the root of his cock. "Like this." He showed me how much pressure to use.

Judging from his reaction to the oral, I was doing great, but my neck was getting sore from bobbing my head back and forth.

"You're driving me fucking insane," he muttered and began rocking his hips.

With me on my back and him astride me, he was literally fucking my mouth now. I gagged a little when he pushed too deep, but Indiana wasn't my caring friend anymore. He was a large, horny Nman and he fisted his hand into my hair and did it again.

“Relax your throat.”

I tried to follow his instructions as he moved his hips faster and harder. “I told you I was gonna fuck you and come inside you.”

“Mm-hmm...” My response was muffled with his pushing in and out of my mouth.

His smell, his sounds, his taste and the feeling of being small underneath him was all part of the insane arousal I felt in that moment.

“Ohhh... Fuck, yeess.” With an expression of deep concentration, Indiana watched his cock fucking my mouth. My jovial and funny friend wasn’t around anymore. Instead this primal man was in his body taking me with a ferocious hunger.

“Stick out your tongue!” The order came in a hoarse voice at the same time as Indiana pulled out of my mouth.

I did as he wanted and saw him jerk off in front of me with his face scrunched up.

Keeping my tongue out, I took in the sight of his jaw clenched, his veins on his neck bulging, and his neck turning red.

“Ahhh....” He sounded pained when semen was ejected from the tip of his cock and landed on my face. I closed my eyes and felt the rest of it land on my tongue.

With Indiana sitting astride me I couldn’t move much. Opening my eyes, I watched him slowly stroke his cock up and down.

“Are you going to swallow or spit it out?” he asked as if it was a personal challenge. It reminded me of the time Mason, Indiana, and I were children and made a bet about who would be brave enough to eat a slug.

Staring into his eyes, I closed my mouth and swallowed.

The deep groan that rumbled from his chest filled me with satisfaction.

Getting off my body, he moved to his side of the bed and lay with a big grin on his face. “Fuuuck!!!”

“Was I better than a robot?” I asked as I went to the bathroom and washed my face. I returned and snuggled up against him.

“A thousand times. *That* was the ultimate moment of my life. If lightning strikes and takes me out, I’ll die a happy man.”

I chuckled. “Do you think intercourse will feel even better?”

He placed a hand on top of his eyes. “If it does, we’re doing it every night and every morning.”

“Indy.”

“Mm-hmm?”

I waited for him to look at me. “Remember that what happens here stays here. We can never tell anyone.”

He closed his eyes and didn’t answer.

“We agreed,” I reminded him.

I got the feeling Indiana wanted to say something, but he kept quiet and gave a single nod.

“If you feel that your emotions are getting in the way, you’ll tell me, right?”

He nodded again but still didn’t look at me.

Kissing his arm, I whispered, “Good night, Indy.”

After turning off the light he whispered back, “Good night, my sexy grasshopper.”

CHAPTER 16

Teaching

Indiana

It took three long weeks until Aubri got her implant. In the meantime we pleased each other orally without risking pregnancy.

I went with her to the appointment and watched the French doctor inject something into her thigh. He was older and his English was broken, but we understood that having it removed would be uncomplicated and painless.

If it were up to me, we would have taken a day off from work, and gone home to make love for the first time.

Aubri might say that we were experimenting and that we should keep our feelings separated from the sex, but for me that had never been an option since I'd been in love with her for a while. All I could hope for was that her having sex with me would make her realize that we were meant to be together as man and wife.

Isaac and Simon were in conversation with our team members when we arrived at the Exploration Headquarters, and all of them looked somber.

"Are you ready?" Simon asked when he spotted Aubri and me.

"Ready for what?"

Among the French delegation, Belle and Simon had always been my favorites. Simon had a good sense of humor and we had enjoyed a lot of beers over the twelve years we'd known each other. Today, however, he looked stressed as he swung his right hand and frowned. "For teaching. We need to hurry. You're scheduled to begin in thirty-five minutes."

"Dancing demons, I forgot. Is that today?"

"Yes, it's today. Come on."

"We'll be back later then," I said and touched Banni's shoulder to make him look at me.

He gave a nod and turned his back on us, giving an order to Val and Alex. It was normal for Val to hardly ever speak, but I noticed that Banni and Alex were somber and quiet too. The way they kept an eye on Isaac had me wondering what had gone on before Aubri and I arrived.

Aubri and I exchanged a worried look as we walked off with Simon.

It wasn't our first time talking to students, but these weren't young

children like the other times. They were teenagers.

Simon, who had a senior position in the ministry of education, introduced us to the students. We gave a presentation of the Northlands before accepting questions.

There were around fifty students and almost every single one of them signaled that they had a question. I sighed, because I still hoped that Aubri and I could sneak in an hour at home before returning to work. I wanted so badly to test my theory that once I was inside her it would be like a key unlocking her heart and making her fall in love with me.

Aubri pointed to a girl with rosy cheeks who asked, “What’s it like to have a mom and dad?”

“It’s wonderful. My parents are my biggest supporters and I love them,” Aubri said.

“My parents are pretty cool people as well, but not everyone is as lucky as Aubri and I. And actually, it’s a new thing for kids in the Northlands to have parents. When my father was a kid there were a hundred thousand men for every woman. Back then, few children grew up with a mother. The vast majority of the children in the Northlands were boys without parents.”

“If you had so few women then who gave birth to the boys?” one of the students asked.

“That’s a great question,” Aubri praised him and let me answer.

“The boys were born in the Motherlands and lived in family units until the age of three. After that they were sent to the Northlands where they were raised by teachers in a school setting that favored physical strength.”

Aubri nodded as if to support my answer and then she turned to the teenagers. “Do you wish you had parents like us?”

Some of them shook their heads and one of the boys joked, “Our system is better. We’re all sisters and brothers and it’s not a matter of luck to have a good life.”

“Luck?”

“Yes, it sounds like in your society it’s a matter of luck to be born into a good family. If you’re unlucky you’re stuck with some...” He seemed to search for a word and asked the others in French.

“Amateurs,” someone shouted in answer.

“*Oui*. You could have amateur parents who don’t know how to raise children.”

“Do people in your country have to pass a class to become parents?” a

girl asked.

“No.”

Disturbed whispering filled the room.

“But does that mean *anyone* can become a parent?”

“Yes.”

She wrinkled her forehead. “That sounds both irresponsible and dangerous. Here in Europe, people who want to be a caregiver or teacher for children have to study and pass rigorous tests.”

“You might have a point.” I shrugged. “Any other questions?”

“Is everyone as tall as you two?” a boy asked before hiding his face in shyness.

Aubri grinned and winked. “No. Nor are there many who are as good-looking as us.”

“If you lived here would you be a P or A?”

Aubri let me answer. “That’s a good question. In the Northlands we don’t put people in boxes like that. Academics aren’t better than practical people or vice versa. Old Europe is a small country with limited outdoor space while the Northlands is massive in comparison. We live in a place with huge woods and if you don’t like people you can choose to live hours away from your closest neighbor.”

That last comment made them talk among each other.

“I have a question,” a boy with large front teeth said.

“Go ahead.”

“What do you think is the strangest thing about our culture?”

Aubri and I exchanged a look and I gestured for her to answer this time.

“Besides the fact that so many of you live underground like moles, I would say that the strangest thing for us is that you don’t have romantic relationships.”

“Okay but what’s your favorite thing about our culture?” a boy shouted out loud.

Aubri smiled. “Well, for the most part you have good food, and for me, I would say that I’m allowed opportunities here that I wouldn’t necessarily have at home. I love my freedom to explore.”

Aubri picked a girl to ask the next question. She sat a little straighter and said, “Why are women so suppressed in the Northlands?”

Just as in the repair shop when Helmes had claimed the same thing, Aubri took offense. “We’re not!”

“But you just said that women aren’t allowed the same opportunities as men.”

“Yes, but it’s not like we’re treated badly or kept in cages.”

“Then why did you say that your favorite thing about living here is the freedom to explore?”

“I was talking about my work as an Explorer. As Indiana just explained, we used to have so few women that there’s no tradition for women working. We have to push our way into jobs that we find interesting.”

“Okay, but won’t it bother you to go home and not have the same freedom?”

After another hour of questions asked and answered, we left the school. Aubri was quiet and withdrawn.

“How about we take a late lunch break at home before we head back to work?” I asked.

We changed direction, but no matter how many questions I asked, she gave me short, non-engaging answers.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Once we were in the apartment, I kissed her and tried to move her to the bedroom, but Aubri seemed distracted and not in the mood.

“You have that implant now. We could go all the way,” I reminded her and licked her earlobe, but her usual playful energy was gone. With a sigh, I gave up and went to sit on the couch. “Okay, grasshopper, talk to me. What’s eating at you?”

Aubri took a chair and turned it around so she sat reversed. With her arms on the backrest, she said, “I can’t stop thinking about that question. The one about us women being suppressed in the Northlands.”

“Yeah, I’m offended too that they would think that.”

Aubri pinched the bridge of her nose. “How many times have we debated equality at the summits and how many times have I defended our way of living?”

I waited for her to continue.

“And yet, despite my passionate defense of our system, I chose to break free from it when I saw a chance.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I’m a complete hypocrite! Every time Freya’s role was discussed, I always sided with the men that Thor should be the heir and not her. I used the

same argument that my parents taught me: that the Northlands is the last place for free men and all that. But that kid today made me see that I'm talking shit. Sparrow and I would be damn good firefighters and Freya would be a world-class ruler. Most days I don't even think Thor wants the role as the heir. He's under so much pressure, and it doesn't come as naturally to him as it does to Freya."

"Which is why Thor will need our support."

Aubri lowered her hands and stared at me. "Yes, of course, but if your argument is true, that Sparrow and I weren't picked as firefighters because others were stronger and better, then why shouldn't Freya be allowed to rule? She's a born diplomat and she keeps calm under pressure while Thor shits a sheep. Be honest, Indy, who would you rather see as the next ruler?"

"Not her. The Northlands have always... "

"Stop! You sound like our fathers. What if it wasn't a matter of gender but personality, who would you say is the better fit then?"

I was torn. "Freya is cerebral. How would her army take her seriously when she's never fought in her life?"

Aubri scoffed. "Lots of leaders in world history weren't warriors themselves. She would have Mason and Solo to manage the army, and me if she lets me."

I frowned. "You really think Freya would be a better ruler than Thor?"

"It's possible. All I'm saying is that I feel that I've been too blinded by my pride in our nation to see that my difficulty with finding my place in society wasn't personal, but systemic. There's no room for me in the army and I can't be a firefighter. I could join the police force like Raven, but the few women who make it through hell week are given boring desk jobs. I'm starting to realize that I've been talking about the Northlands as the *best* place on earth, and it might be for men, but I'm not sure I feel that same way anymore as a woman."

It scared me to hear her speak that way. What if she decided to stay in France forever? Opening my mouth, I was about to talk some sense into her, but then Banni called her, interrupting us.

I overheard Aubri tell him we were on our way and it made me even more frustrated. I was so fucking close to potentially closing the deal with Aubri and now she was questioning her life in the Northlands and showing no interest in sleeping with me.

"Are you coming?" She put the chair back in place and moved to the

door. “It sounded like Banni was pissed about something. He said he’ll tell us what the problem is when we get there.”

CHAPTER 17

Bad News

Aubri

When Indiana and I arrived at the Exploration Headquarters we found Banni, Val, and Alex in a foul mood.

“What’s going on?” I asked Banni, who sat on the back end of the drone, sorting out some rope.

“Didn’t Simon tell you?”

“Tell us what?” Indiana picked up one of the ropes to help Banni organize them.

“The Northern group lost four out of five members on their last expedition.”

“What?” I dropped my arms to my side. “What happened?”

“Their drone malfunctioned and crashed. The remaining crew member, Sifan, survived because he wasn’t with them that day.”

“That’s awful!”

“I know.” Banni drew in a deep breath. “Told you this job is a risky business.”

“A malfunctioning drone is unacceptable.” Indiana kicked the side of his foot against the drone in front of us. “How old are these machines anyway?”

“Old.” Banni tied up the end of the rope he was holding and jumped down from the back end. “When Isaac stopped by this morning, he informed us that he wants two members from our team to join Sifan on the Northern team.”

“Why can’t they get some new recruits?” I asked.

“Sifan can’t train four new recruits alone. Especially not if they’re unmotivated and hesitant.”

“Why would they take on unmotivated recruits?” Indiana asked and worked quickly tidying up the ropes.

“Because this isn’t a job that normal people want, Indy. Being an Explorer is hard and dangerous work. With another four of us dead, quality recruits aren’t going to be lining up. Isaac told us that management is bringing the new Explorers later today and we’re apprehensive about the standard. You can expect that they’ll need intense training.”

“But why does the loss on the Northern team have to split up *our* team? Can’t they pick someone from another team? The five of us work well together.”

“They know we’re the strongest group of Explorers. After you two joined us, we’re twice as fast as any of the other groups.”

His comment made me feel proud, but then guilt hit me. “But does that mean management will move Alex and Val then? I mean, Indiana and I specifically made it a condition that we would be on your team, so they can’t move us, can they?”

“No, they can’t.”

Indiana frowned. “We don’t want to be the reason you’re losing your favorite colleagues.”

“It’s not your fault. Alex and I argued with Isaac before you got here this morning and we reached a compromise for now. Alex will team up with Sifan in the Northern group and train three new recruits. Val is staying with us and our team is taking on a new recruit too. As soon as that person is experienced enough to know what they’re doing, we’ll send them to Sifan’s team and get Alex back.”

I looked over to Alex and Val, who were talking in a corner of the hangar. “Was Alex onboard with that solution?”

“It was his suggestion, but keeping Val comes with a price. We’ve had to take over the lowest part of the Northern territory.” The way Banni was throwing off a weird vibe made me look to Indiana.

“If we’re so much faster, that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?” Indiana asked.

Banni answered in a solemn tone. “The area includes the worst place of them all. Paris used to be the capital of France and now it’s the place with the highest mortality rate among Explorers. I think that’s the reason that the Northern group has neglected the place for the past eight months. The testing is long overdue, and we’re ordered to go there next.”

“What’s different about Paris compared to the other ruined cities we’ve been to?”

“It’s cursed, Aubri.” Banni stacked the rolled-up ropes and placed a hand on the drone. “I don’t blame the Northern team for being scared of that city. It’s a massive place with old ruins everywhere and lots of hiding spaces for predators.”

“Can’t we do the testing from the sky or send in robots? Indiana asked.

“In some places, *oui*, but they’ve asked that we do ground samples. It’s been years since I was last there and since then I’ve heard stories. It’s not a place I want to go back to.”

“People exaggerate. I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I said in an attempt to be positive.

Both men looked at me with their foreheads full of frown lines.

“Well, I’m up for it,” I declared and received mumbled words in French from Banni, who moved around the drone with us following him. Looking back over his shoulder, he spoke to Indiana. “I’ve already canceled your fight on Thursday night. We’re leaving as soon as the new recruit arrives.” He stopped and faced us. “It’s a refuser.”

“A what?”

“A refuser is a woman refusing to do her duty and carry children. It’s a rare thing, but when it happens, they’re given the choice between prison and this work.”

“A woman is joining us?”

Banni nodded. “I’d rather take a male convict. At least they appreciate the freedom. Refusers are miserable company from beginning to end. Most times, it takes no more than one expedition to make them change their minds and have the children they’re supposed to have. It’s a waste of our time to train a person like that because they never stay long, but we have to do it.”

After we were done packing the drone, we helped Alex and his new teammate Sifan pack their drone in another hangar at the headquarters.

“Why is he even working?” I whispered to Banni with a nod in Sifan’s direction. “If he just lost four of his friends, shouldn’t he be home grieving?”

Banni and I were securing a raft to the drone and he spoke without slowing down. “People deal with grief differently. I’ve never taken time off to grieve and trust me, I’ve lost at least nine team members.”

I stopped working for a moment and stared at him. “How are you even functioning when you’ve lost that many?”

Banni’s brown eyes were stormy. “It’s when you slow down that it breaks you. The trick is to keep moving and not dwell on it. Your grief won’t bring them back, so why go there?” He pulled hard to tighten the knot.

We were almost done packing the drone when a group of people walked into the hangar.

Indiana and I stood back with Val and Alex while Banni and Sifan walked over to meet them.

“Are these the new members?” I asked Alex.

“The short one who’s speaking right now is our boss. He’s an A and treats us like shit. I’ve never seen the four others but from their crestfallen faces, I’d say they’re forced recruits.”

“But that boy with the pink hair looks like he’s twelve.”

“He has to be seventeen or he wouldn’t be here. It’s normal for recruits to be scared. They’ve heard it’s a suicide mission but they’re taking their chances.”

“You just said that they were forced.”

Alex shrugged. “When I say forced, I mean they’re choosing this over other unpleasant scenarios. It’s not their first choice. That’s why it was so refreshing for us to meet you two who actually enjoy Exploration work.”

“Then the woman in the back has to be the refuser?” Indiana said.

As if she could feel us talking about her, the dark-haired woman gazed in our direction.

Alex straightened up and squared his shoulders a bit. “*Oui*. She would be the refuser. It means that she just turned twenty-seven because that’s the deadline for how long a woman can avoid pregnancy before they have to pick between prison and Exploration work.”

I studied the woman. She was at least a head smaller than me and curvy with large breasts. I instantly disliked the way she sent flirtatious smiles in Indiana’s direction.

“Actually...” Alex leaned his head to one side. “I think I know her. Hmm.”

“Probably one of the many women you’ve been with,” Indiana suggested.

“Oh, *oui*.” His face softened. “I can’t remember her name, but I’ve definitely been with her. Ah, but it was a long time ago. Maybe she’ll go along with the five-year rule.”

“What rule is that?”

“It’s not an official rule, but in general it’s accepted to go for another round of sex if it’s been more than five years since you last fucked.”

Crossing my arms, I muttered low, “Sorry, Alex, but it looks like she’s got her eyes on Indiana.”

“Hmm, I think you’re right. It’s fine. Once their three times are over, I wouldn’t mind another go with her. She’s attractive.”

Indiana chuckled as if the whole thing was amusing to him, but to me there was nothing funny about it.

The thought of Indiana with this woman brought out the same reaction in me as the times we'd been in the underground fight club and I'd seen women come on to him. I hated that annoying feeling of jealousy making my stomach tighten into a hard knot.

My time in France was supposed to be fun, rebellious, and free. This was my chance to experiment and explore without feeling judged or limited in any way. So why was I sabotaging myself by entering into a sexual relationship with the one person I didn't want to hurt?

Did I really think that come December, Indiana and I could go back to the Northlands and pretend we hadn't been lovers for almost a year?

After wishing Alex good luck on his temporary team, our group brought our newest member back to our hangar. The flirtatious woman walked in front with Banni and Indiana while Val and I trailed along.

Watching Indiana being friendly with her brought up a disturbing thought that I'd done my best to not think about. I'd promised to marry an Nman when I returned to the Northlands. If I chose a large dangerous warrior like I'd always imagined, where would that leave Indiana and me?

My heart sank at the thought of the inevitable – he would go on to marry someone else as well.

There would be no more hugs or kisses between us. Any contact would be cordial and polite. Our families were friends, which meant that we would watch each other with our different partners. He would have children with someone else.

My deep groan made Val look at me with a questioning look, but I couldn't tell him how a fierce possessiveness had me pressing my molars tightly together.

Indiana had hinted several times that he wanted more than sex from me, but I'd avoided talking about our feelings for each other. How long could I insist this was all about exploring our sexuality, when clearly I was madly in love with him?

"Let's do a quick round of introductions," Banni said when we reached our hangar. Placing a hand on his chest, he started, "I'm Banni Armel and I'm the leader of this team. I've been doing this work since I was seventeen and I'm good at it. This is *Merle Noir*, she's our drone and an old lady that we take good care of. Val here doesn't speak much, but if you complete six months in this job, you'll get a brain implant so you can connect with us without words. Then you'll see how funny he can be."

Val raised a hand and gave a quick smile to the woman watching him.

“And then we have our newest members of the team, Aubri and Indiana. They are from the Northlands but joined our team six weeks ago. It’s a shame that they’ll leave us at the end of the year, because they are both superior Explorers.”

I raised my chin with pride and exchanged a smile with Banni.

“Why don’t you introduce yourself to the team,” Banni encouraged the woman.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and spoke in English. “I’m Britany Armel, and I’m scared of the thought of a person growing inside me.” She gave a theatrical shiver. “I’m happy that you all look so skilled because I have no idea how this all works.”

“That’s fine, we’ll train you,” Banni assured her. “We believe in learning by doing.”

Britany gave a short giggle and looked up at Indiana with another flirtatious gaze.

I pressed my lips together and looked the other way.

“All right, it’s getting late and we better get going. This time we’re going north to Paris.”

“Why does it have to be today?” Indiana frowned. “Why not leave tomorrow morning?”

“Orders from the A’s. It’s out of my control.” Banni turned to Britany. “Let me find you a uniform.”

When he walked away, Indiana asked Britany. “Are you an academic or a practical?”

“Practical. I worked in a store that sold lingerie. Academics aren’t given the choice of exploration work.”

I crossed my arms. “Then what happens when an academic refuses to carry children?”

“Then they’re demoted to an entry level job. I heard of a top scientist who was placed in a dark room doing boring data entry work.”

“That makes no sense. If she was able to do important work as a scientist, why not use her talent?” I thought of my conversation with Indiana earlier today about women’s lives in the Northlands and it hit me that in Old Europe women were still not in full control of their lives.

“Because if we women had a choice, many wouldn’t want to bear children. They make examples of those of us who refuse.”

Banni came back with a uniform and asked Britany to put it on. Unlike Indiana and me, who had gone to the restroom to change, Britany stripped out of her clothes and down to her sexy underwear as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She wasn't toned and her stomach wasn't flat like mine, but she oozed femininity with her soft shape. I hated the way she leaned forward to put on the uniform. She might as well have shoved her large tits into Indiana's face.

Banni talked to Britany as if he hadn't noticed her being half naked. Val walked around the drone, checking one last time that everything was secure.

Indiana and I on the other hand were frozen in place, with his neck growing redder by the minute.

"How do I look?" Britany spun around and spread her arms out.

"Ehh... fine," Indiana said and broke out of his shock that a woman had just stripped in front of him. "You look fine."

"The sleeves are a bit long. Would you mind helping me fold them?" Britany took two steps forward and held out her arms to him.

The need to make a snarky remark made me roll my eyes and walk away.

"Get on board," Banni ordered.

I was the first to climb in and take a seat by the window. On every expedition we'd been on so far, Indiana had sat next to me, but this time, he waved his hand and told Britany, "Ladies first."

She giggled and climbed in to take the seat next to me. With three seats in the front and three in the back, she was now literally between me and Indiana.

When he got in and took his seat, Indiana joked that it was a tight squeeze back here. The place I felt squeezed the most was my heart.

"It's okay, I don't mind being close to you," Britany told him and put her hand on his thigh.

Her flirtatious giggles sounded like cackles to me and I wanted to punch her with my elbow and tell her to remove her witch claws from my friend.

Control yourself.

I looked out the window as Val and Banni got in and then the drone lifted a little from the ground and moved forward, out of the hangar. Once we were clear of the building, the drone soared upward and away from the populated area.

Next to me, Britany and Indiana were talking. I kept my focus on the outside of the drone because I knew that seeing her touch him would make

me snap.

CHAPTER 18

Paris

Indiana

Britany sat close to me and kept touching me when she spoke. She was fawning over my every word and I felt flattered. But most of all, I was relieved to see Aubri's reaction. She wasn't Magni Aurelius' daughter for nothing. Jealousy ran in her blood and the fact that it seeped out when Britany showed an interest in me told me that Aubri was still invested in me.

If only I could find a way to make her admit that this idea of hers that we were exploring sex together without obligation was a fantasy.

"I noticed that you and Banni have the same last name. Is that a coincidence? I mean since you don't live in families, how are your last names determined?"

Britany smiled. "It's not a coincidence. Each year a last name is chosen for children born that year. In general, we don't use our last names much but if people ask me if I'm an Armel or Zay, I know they're trying to guess my age."

"So everyone born in the same year as you is also called Armel?"

"Yes, people who are one year older than me are called Zay, and the ones who are a year younger have the last name Bazille. It goes according to the alphabet, you see."

"Huh. I had no idea. I have a friend called Belle Dupont, but I always assumed that was her unique last name."

She smiled. "No, she shares it with everyone born that year. But see, it's a clever system because you can quickly tell if people are older or younger than you, just by asking their last name."

"Fascinating."

"You can ask me about anything. I'm completely open." Britany leaned closer.

"Thank you. Our cultures are very different."

"So, I've heard. There was a picture of your delegation a few years back when you were here. I remember seeing you and thinking you were *très beau*."

I didn't understand the last two words, but from the way she let her gaze run down my body I got the idea.

"Thank you."

“I also liked the two other men in the picture. You Northmen are *délicieux*.”

My brow went up in surprise. I couldn't imagine that I'd ever get used to women coming on to me so openly. And especially not when she was telling me she felt attracted to Thor and Mason as well. Sometimes living in Old Europe felt like falling down a rabbit hole where everything was done opposite from what I knew back home.

“Mason is Aubri's brother, did you know that?” I leaned forward to look over at Aubri. She had turned her body and was looking out the window, seemingly uninterested in our conversation.

“Which one is Mason?”

“The one with red hair. He's married now.”

I don't think Britany understood what being married meant because she carried on and spoke about how she and her friends had seen the pictures and found us Northmen both intimidating and interesting.

“I'm not going to lie. When they gave me the option of doing Exploration work, I asked if I could be on your team.”

“Mine?”

“Yes, I saw on the News that you were an Explorer now. Since I didn't want to be inseminated or go to prison, I figured I might as well try to get the best out of my time by getting to know you.”

“Right.” I wasn't sure what to say or think. Looking over to Aubri again, I wished Britany wasn't sitting between us. I wanted to ask Aubri if she was okay, but with the way she refused to look in my direction, it was hard to connect to her.

“Hey, grasshopper.” Leaning forward, I placed a hand on her thigh.

When Aubri turned, it was like seeing Magni look back at me. The hard shell and simmering anger that I'd been intimidated by as a boy was right there in her eyes.

“What?”

“You okay?”

She moved her leg to avoid my touch. “Why wouldn't I be?”

With Britany between us, there wasn't more I could say, so I leaned back in my seat and looked out the window next to me.

The journey to Paris felt endless as Britany kept talking for almost three hours until we reached our destination. It was ridiculous how slow this drone was, and it made me miss our superior ones back home.

“We’re here.” Banni tapped the ceiling with nervous energy.

Looking down I saw how vegetation had swallowed a massive city in ruins. Britany leaned against me to see.

“Oh wow. I’ve seen pictures of this place when it was the great capital. This is sad,” she said.

Her sweet perfume smelled nice, but I felt cramped by her and pulled as far back in my seat as possible.

“See that weird iron construction popping up above the trees to the right?” Banni pointed. “At one point it reached high in the sky and was called the Eiffel Tower. It’s incredible that they were able to build stuff like that six hundred years ago.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I wish I had a time machine so we could go back and warn them,” Britany said.

“What makes you think they would listen to you?” Aubri asked without looking at Britany. “You can’t even get your own government to listen to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The reason you’re here is because a woman’s body isn’t her own in this country. To them, you’re nothing but a breeder. You’re being punished for setting your boundary. Your government isn’t any better than the one four hundred years ago. They still think they know what’s best for the people. My uncle is the same.”

I gaped. Aubri had always shown a watertight solidarity and loyalty toward Khan. It had to be that question from the student today that was still messing with her head.

“It wasn’t the European countries that bombed Europe. It was...”

Aubri cut Britany off. “I know what happened, but even if you went back, they wouldn’t listen to you. How would you even prove to them that you’re from the future?”

“I could show them pictures and tell them our story of survival.”

The drone descended and landed in a large meadow with a ruin that looked like an old church. As we exited the drone, the women were still arguing about time traveling.

“You said that you’d been here before, right?” I asked Val and Banni.

Val shook his head, but Banni confirmed it with a nod while looking around as if watching for dangerous animals. “I did my first two years as an

Explorer in the Northern group and I loathed this place.”

“Did something bad happen?”

“We were attacked by wolves and I have scars from fighting them off.”

“You fought wolves?”

“*Oui*. In self-defense. I barely survived and my friend got mauled before we scared the wolves off. We tried getting him back home to see a doctor, but by the time we got there it was too late for them to do anything. I’ll never forget his soul-ripping screams of fear when the wolves attacked. I *hate* wolves.”

Banni gathered our group and kept looking around as he spoke in a grim tone. “I want everyone to stay close. Britany, all you need to do is observe what we’re doing. Save your questions for when we’re back on the drone. I want us out of here as fast as possible.”

Wherever I looked there was evidence of how this once bustling city had come to a shrieking halt when the bombs fell. A public transport vehicle hung half suspended above ground where the rail system had collapsed. Moss and fungi grew on the walls and seats.

We collected samples of vegetation and small pieces of old brick. We measured air quality and filmed the area for documentation.

Britany kept close to me and had her hands folded around her waist while scouting for potential danger.

“I don’t like this place. It’s scary.”

“It’ll be over soon,” I comforted her while scraping off fungus from one of the ruins.

Val, Banni, Aubri, and I were all working fast to secure the samples needed for the scientists. I was reaching for another sample container when a loud bang made Britany scream and cling to me. Pivoting around, I faced the direction of the sound and saw an old rusty bucket was rolling over the ground.

“Probably just rats knocking that thing down,” I said, and looked to Aubri, who stood facing the same way with her hands on the knife strapped to her thigh.

“Do you want me to investigate?” she asked Banni.

“No!” Banni’s gaze darted around. “I’m not getting any readings of large animals close by. Nor is Val. We should be fine, but...”

“But what?” I asked and wished the body reader on my wristband worked here.

“It’s not always a hundred percent.”

“Why the fuck not?” I groaned.

“We’ve been surprised by large animals before. The body detector shows it, but if we’re distracted by other things, we don’t always see it.”

“Then what’s the use of a brain implant?” Aubri asked and squatted down to continue her sampling.

“It’s the same as if you have your wrist band showing you something, but you miss it because you’re looking away. Val and I have so many alerts going off in our mind all the time.”

“Are you almost done?” Britany asked after our being on the ground for around half an hour.

“Almost.”

I placed my sample in the robot that was with us, and then I reached into my pouch for a new kit. “Why do the scientists even need this many samples?”

“That’s none of our business. We just do as they tell us,” Banni barked. It was clear to me that his nerves were on edge so I tried to make small talk to ease the tension.

“I want to see the laboratories they work in.” My gaze went to Aubri. “We could ask Victor to show us.”

“Victor from the delegation?” Britany asked and lit up for a moment. “You know him?”

“Of course we know him. We’ve had to tolerate his arrogant ass at every summit for more than a decade. But seriously, I want to see what they do with all these tests.”

“Could you introduce me?” Britany asked while still keeping too close to me.

“To Victor?”

“*Oui*. I’m a major fan.”

Her admission made me stop and stare at her. “Did you say fan?”

“*Oui*, Victor is incredible.”

Aubri snorted. “She’s right about that part. He’s definitely *something*.”

“Trust me, Britany, you don’t want to meet Victor. He’ll disappoint you with his lack of humor and annoying personality. The man is self-absorbed and he would start an argument with his reflection just to hear his own voice.”

“Maybe that’s true, but we Europeans are all indebted to him because of

his genius work, and I've read interviews with women who said that he's a genius in *all* aspects."

"Stop talking, you two. Focus on the testing so we can get out of here," Banni ordered and scanned the area with concern before he continued working. "There's a river nearby that we need to get samples from. Follow me."

We were finishing up when Val made a sudden warning sound.

Banni was quick to react, "Something is coming, go go go," he shouted and directed the robot to return to the drone.

"Aubri, stay with me," I ordered as I pulled Britany's arm and began running. But my young grasshopper wasn't listening to me. With her knife out, she was sprinting back to the drone.

Britany was in a sheer panic and whimpered as Banni and I urged her to run faster.

"Do you see one or more?" I shouted to him.

"I see four large bodies approaching from northwest. They're moving in the direction of the drone."

"Wolves?"

Britany was slowing us down and it worried me that Aubri was too far ahead. I should be by her side in case she was attacked.

Aubri was almost by the drone when she came to a full stop.

"Keep going," Banni shouted to her, but she held up her hand and turned her head in our direction. "It's elk."

"Elk?" I didn't stop running until I was by her side.

"There." She muttered low and nodded to four majestic elks about fifty feet away. "Banni, should we shoot one and bring it back as a sample?"

"No. All we need is to collect animal droppings and I already did that. We don't have orders to bring back animals this time."

Banni's nerves were still on edge when we went to the river for water samples. No one said a word while we worked fast and focused. He was visibly relieved when we were done and could finally return to the drone.

While he and Val loaded the robot into *Merle Noir* and got onboard with Britany, I pulled Aubri aside.

"Next time there's a threat, don't pull shit like that on me. I told you to stay close, and instead you sprinted ahead."

She pushed her tongue against her cheek and met my eyes with an angry stare. "It's not my fault you didn't keep up."

“We have a recruit who was scared and unable to protect herself. You know I was raised better than to leave a woman who’s in danger.”

Aubri pushed past me with a grunt.

“Don’t give me that attitude, young grasshopper.”

She stopped and looked back over her shoulder. “Or what? Are you gonna punish me?” With an eye roll she got into the drone.

Rather than sitting between Britany and Aubri, I chose to squeeze in with Val and Banni in the front.

I’d had such high hopes for today. Aubri and I were supposed to have made love for the first time and declare our love for each other. None of that had happened. Instead a teenager’s question had made Aubri spiral into some kind of existential crisis about her role as a female in the Northlands. She was supposed to realize that she was in love with me, but instead I was getting the feeling that she was starting to see me as an oppressor.

Twilight was setting in as we flew south to a nearby lake where we set up camp for the night.

With Aubri hardly looking at me, I focused on setting up the tent while Val got a fire going.

“This is exciting,” Britany purred and came to look inside the tent when it was done.

“Go help the others with dinner,” I told her.

Britany complied but as she walked away, she slid her hand over my shoulder and biceps and whispered. “Just make sure that I sleep next to you tonight.”

I wanted to say something, but my brain was temporarily stunned as Britany walked off with her hips swaying from side to side. It took a second for me to gather myself, but when I did, I saw Aubri watching me with something close to disgust on her face.

Satan’s balls and dancing devils, this just isn’t my day!

CHAPTER 19

Angry Nman

Aubri

I was fuming and close to pulling a Magni stunt of jealousy.

Only my stubborn pride prevented me from telling Indiana how I felt about him flirting with Britany in front of me.

We had become lovers over these past weeks and now he was showing interest in another female.

Hell no!

I may have been the one to insist that our sexual exploration didn't mean we were a couple, but I hadn't been with anyone else despite the endless offers I got from both men and women.

My long natural red hair seemed to be a turn-on for them or maybe it was the fact that I spoke a different language and came from the other side of the world. Either way, I had been offered plenty of opportunities for sex and I hadn't acted on any of them since that night with Lucille. The exploration I'd done with Indiana had been enough for me, but if he was going to flirt with Britany then I would show him how that felt.

Banni came carrying more firewood and put it down next to Val, who was getting a bonfire going for dinner.

"Can I help?" I offered.

"*Oui*, you can help get the pots and the food." When Banni and I walked to the drone shoulder to shoulder, I made a small joke and laughed with him.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him.

"Starving. What about you? You've lost weight, you know. I don't see you eat as much as you used to."

He was right. I hadn't had much appetite lately. A sudden thought popped into my head, reminding me of something that I'd once told Belle. She had asked me what being in love felt like. I had given her the same answer that my mother gave me; that it was a state of mind where you can't eat, sleep, or drink. Was that why I didn't eat much these days? Was this all part of my being in love with Indiana? I scowled back in his direction.

Too proud to admit my feelings for him, even to myself, I changed the subject and asked Banni, "So, are you interested in Britany?"

He gave me a warm smile. “To be honest, I’m not feeling the spark and I don’t think she feels it either.”

“Wait, are you saying there has to be a spark for you to have sex? I thought the requirement was nothing more than availability.”

He grinned and nudged my shoulder with his. “This may surprise you but I’m picky.”

“Are you?” I raised my brow to underline that I didn’t believe him.

“I am. By our standards anyway. But then I can afford to be since I get plenty of offers.”

“Were you hoping to get an offer from me?” I asked with a wink.

Banni looked over to Indiana, who was done setting up the tent and had moved to sit in front of the firepit.

“I was, but Indiana told all of us not to touch you.”

“He’s not in charge of my body. I am!”

Banni ran a hand through his short black hair and stopped in front of the drone. “I’m not gonna lie. Sleeping with you would be...” He bit his lip and gave me a charming grin. “As long as Indiana doesn’t get aggressive and give me trouble that is. We need to be able to work together and you two aren’t as relaxed about your sexuality as we French are. Are you even able to separate sex and emotions?”

“Of course.” I didn’t even convince myself.

“Good, because if we sleep together you can’t fall in love with me.”

I laughed. “Trust me, that’s not gonna happen.”

“Good. You know what they do with people who fall in love here?”

“What?”

“They give them therapy.”

“Why? People can’t help who they fall in love with.”

“Ah, that’s an old-fashioned belief. We’re taught from childhood to control those unhealthy feelings and most of us do it without any problem.” We picked out some cans, bread, and apples and walked back to the fireplace.

“Everyone knows that falling in love is dangerous and leads to irrational behavior,” Banni continued. “Every French person has heard of the three-hour massacre that killed half a district.”

“Have you never been in love?”

“Nooo.” He shook his head like the idea was an insult.

“But you must have felt something for the women you slept with.”

Banni flashed his teeth. “I’ll tell you what. If you sleep with me tonight, I

promise to tell you how I feel about you when we're done."

Again, we laughed.

With a quick side glance to Indiana, I saw Britany talking to him and sitting way too close. The jealous dragon inside of me wanted to spew fire at them both but instead I moved closer to Banni and smiled wider.

It was stupid and immature of me to flirt with Banni. The sane part of me knew that I should talk to Indiana about my feelings, but I'd never been good at that sort of thing. To be honest, I had so many confusing feelings that I didn't know what to tell him.

Leaning closer to me, Banni whispered in my ear. "We have twenty minutes before dinner is ready. Want to go for a walk in the forest with me?"

The offer was right there. Driven by my need for Indiana to feel the pain I was feeling, I whispered back, "Maybe."

Banni raised his hand and played with my hair. We were standing close with Indiana's stare burning on the side of my neck.

I had heard Britany tell him that she wanted to sleep next to him tonight, and I'd seen him stay with her when we were both in danger. Indiana had always been mine and now this voluptuous dark-haired beauty was sweeping him off his feet right in front of my eyes.

Fueled by insane pain in my chest, I leaned in and kissed Banni on the cheek.

He smiled and nuzzled his nose against mine, whispering low. "I promise to be good to you."

Banni was such a fantastic man but sleeping with him as an act of revenge was something I could never do.

"Listen. I'm not interes..." I had only said the first few words in my sentence when my elbow was jerked back and my feet lifted from the ground.

"What are you doing?" I yelled as I hung over Indiana's shoulder. "Set me down!"

Banni protested. "Indiana, you can't just..."

But he didn't get a chance to finish either before my body swung around as Indiana turned and growled. "Get the fuck away from me, Banni. I told you never touch her."

"She said that you're not her boss. Aubri is an adult."

Indiana's voice vibrated with rage when he sneered, "Touch her again, and I'll kill you!"

The threat made Banni take a step back. He had seen Indiana fight and

knew he could back up his words. I could tell Banni was afraid for me, but I was excited by Indiana's gruff and territorial behavior.

"Put me down, you orc," I provoked him as he kept me in a strong hold and carried me in between the trees.

He was panting from walking fast and carrying me at the same time.

"I swear that I'm gonna kick your ass when you set me down. You don't get to tell me what to do or who to be with. Don't act like you fucking own me when you're busy flirting with other women."

Indiana waited until we were away from the others before he put me down and when he did, he backed me up against a tree with a hand on each side of my head.

I leaned my head back to meet his glare head on.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? Did you want me to kill Banni, huh?" he sneered.

"He's none of your business." I pushed at his chest, but he didn't move an inch. "If I want to fuck Banni, I will!"

With a growl, Indiana grabbed my neck. "He's not the man for you."

"How would you know?" My heart raced so fast that I was out of breath.

"Because *I'm* that man and you fucking know it."

I snorted and fought back when he forced me to the ground.

With my nostrils flaring and my core on fire from arousal, I taunted him. "You think you have what it takes to claim me?"

Indiana pressed my shoulders against the ground, getting nose to nose with me. "Yes!"

The fire in his eyes matched the heat in my stomach. My body was already attuned to him from weeks of sexual play and without thinking, my hands pulled at his shoulder to get him closer to me.

It was January and far too cold to be naked in the wild, but he still ripped open my uniform and felt me up.

"Get your hands off me," I said and hit his shoulder.

He was quick to pin my hands above my head. Pulling them together, he used one hand to hold me while his other hand went back to my breast and squeezed possessively.

"You aren't strong enough to be my mate," I said and wriggled my body.

Indiana answered by using his strength and weight to press me down and keep me still. "You're wrong!"

"You think you have what it takes to satisfy me?" My tone was mocking.

“Don’t try keeping me in line.”

“You’re a fucking brat, grasshopper, but you’re mine and *he can’t have you.*” In a rough movement, Indiana pulled down the bottom of my uniform.

I loved fighting him and feeling his strength and determination. “I’ll fuck whomever I want to.”

Indiana pushed a finger inside me. “You already are.”

We were staring into each other’s eyes with anger and frustration crackling like energy between us when he held up the finger that he’d just fucked me with. It was glistening from moisture. Still keeping me pinned down, he pushed down his pants and without asking for my permission he entered me with a low growl.

Boring my fingers into his shoulders, I closed my eyes and felt a deep sense of satisfaction. This was what I’d been waiting for all along. Maybe women like Pearl and Freya would be disturbed by the primitive, raw nature of our mating, but being claimed was my ultimate fantasy.

When Indiana kissed me with a ravenous hunger, I bit his lip. In response he squeezed my chin and spoke in a gruff voice. “Do that one more time and I’ll spank you. You’re my woman, Aubri. You were always mine and I’m not taking *any* shit from you.”

“You think you can control me, but *no one* can.” The overwhelming anger with him for flirting with Britany, and the insane raw desire I felt for him at that moment, made my voice break a little. “I don’t belong to *anyone*. I’ll fuck whomever I want to fuck.”

Sliding in and out of me, Indiana challenged me, “Who do you want to fuck, Aubri?”

With the way my body was pushing against his and meeting his every thrust, the answer was obvious, but I remained in stubborn silence.

Indiana’s familiar face was close to mine, but he didn’t look like my old friend. He was the domineering Nman I’d come to know in our bedroom. Pressing his cock deeper, he filled me completely and asked, “Who do you want between your legs?”

My heart was racing fast, and I was panting from our fighting and fucking.

“Say it!” he demanded.

“No.”

“Fucking say it! Surrender to me!”

My inside voice was screaming yes, but my stubborn outside voice said,

“No.”

Indiana didn't give up. He kept fucking me with deep angry growls and the friction between our bodies felt like we were merging together. “You're *mine*, Aubri.”

Pressing my body further down on the moss and leaves of the forest floor, Indiana stared into my eyes with complete conviction. “All you need to do is admit that we belong together.”

It was as if my soul took over for my stubborn body in that moment. Reaching up, I weaved my hand into Indiana's hair. At first, he moved his head, probably expecting me to hurt him again, but when my other hand cupped his face and pulled him closer, he didn't resist.

“Yes.” My one word was nothing but a soft whisper into his ear.

He slowed his rocking movements for a moment. “Yes?”

I smiled and in the last twilight of the day, I said the word with more force. “Yes, I'm yours, Indy.”

“Say that again.” The hopeful expression on his face made me smile.

“Seeing you flirt with Britany made me crazy.”

“Not as crazy as seeing you kiss Banni made me.”

From that moment, our bodies took over the talking. Deep eye contact, passionate kisses, and intertwined fingers said all we needed to say.

I wrapped my legs around him and moaned when he increased his pace again. “Say I'm yours.”

With his face pressed against mine, and his hands fisted into my hair, he growled. “You were always mine, Aubri. You just didn't know it.”

He was right. I hadn't realized my feelings for him until we moved here, and even then, I had fought against my love for him. Not any longer! Clinging to him, I whispered for him to come inside me. “Make me yours.”

With the implant there was no risk of pregnancy.

Indiana was rough and punishing, but I loved every second of it.

“You. Are. Mine!” Each word came out with force and then he bottomed out deep inside me and groaned. “I'm coming.”

I bored my nails deeper into his shoulders and leaned my head back. “Yeesss...”

The growl that followed from Indiana was similar to the times I'd seen him take down large warriors and growl with satisfaction.

For a moment we lay panting in silence. When he tried to pull out of me, I tightened my legs around him. “Wait.”

Brushing back some of my hair, he kissed me. “What is it?”

“Just so we’re clear. If you touch Britany, I’ll cut your dick off.”

Indiana chuckled. “That would be a shame now that we know how much fun we can have with my dick inside you.”

He moved us into another position with him sitting against a tree with me on top. It gave me a chance to pull my pants up and close my uniform. We were fully dressed again, but I wasn’t ready to let go of our closeness just yet.

“There’s no need for you to worry about Britany. I was never interested in her or anyone else. I’ve been in love with you for a while, Aubri.”

“When did you know?”

“That moment when I thought I was dying after that huntsman stabbed me.” Picking a leaf from my hair, he smiled. “I’ve made a mess of your pretty hair.”

“Is it muddy?”

“Mm-hmm, a little bit. There’s some on your cheek as well. Doesn’t matter; you’re still beautiful.”

I kissed him again and as we sat there with him leaning against a tree and me astride him, a sound broke the night. We both froze and listened. A threatening growl made the hair on my neck stand up. And then another joined in, and another.

Looking in between the trees, I met the chilling sight of wolves looking straight back at us. They were standing with their teeth bared and their heads low, ready to attack.

CHAPTER 20

Attack

Indiana

Aubri had finally surrendered to me. Sitting with her in my arms, I felt grateful and complete. And that's when my life went from bliss to horror in a matter of seconds.

The bone-chilling sound of snarling and growling came from all around us and in the last light of the day, I saw eyes watching us and outlines of wolves creeping closer.

Aubri reacted on instinct. Getting up in a smooth movement, she pulled her knife and spread her arms out to make herself look large.

I quickly rose to my full height, grabbed for the nearest stick and growled right back at the wolves. "Don't you fucking dare come closer. I'll bash your brains out," I threatened them in a gruff tone full of aggression. It didn't stop them. Instead their circle around us grew smaller as they kept creeping closer with their teeth bared and their eyes fixed on us. I counted at least nine. These wolves were smaller than the ones we had in the Northlands.

"They're gonna go for me because of our size difference," Aubri said.

I growled again and took a step forward, swinging the stick through the air. The wolf closest to us moved back but at the same time the others attacked. Aubri screamed and stabbed her knife into the head of a wolf coming at her. A howl of pain from the wolf sounded at the same time that I screamed from the excruciating pain of being bitten in the back of my leg. Pivoting around, I smashed the heavy stick against the skull of a wolf behind me and knocked it out. I was panicking about keeping Aubri safe when I had three wolves attacking me and distracting me from helping her.

A victorious shout from her and the sound of another wolf whimpering was a good sign, but the attack was relentless, and they were forcing Aubri and me apart.

These wolves were the size of large dogs. Picking up one of them, I threw it full force at another wolf while letting out a brutal scream. It made some of the other wolves back up a little. Hearing Aubri yell, I turned to see her on the ground wrestling a vicious wolf with its sharp fangs in her arm.

The second of inattention to my attackers cost me the advantage that I'd

had over them just a moment ago. As I went to help Aubri, four of them attacked me at the same time.

We're fucked! The thought registered as I fought like a beast against the demons attacking us.

And then, out of nowhere, Banni came storming like a cyclone of destruction. With a solid kick he drew one wolf back before he used his knife to slit the throat of the wolf biting Aubri. Banni's coming to our rescue gave me a new surge of strength and I managed to twist the neck of one of the wolves attacking me. With a roar, I stomped on another wolf, who howled in pain and whimpered off. Banni stabbed a knife into the third of my attackers, and finally, the remaining wolves retreated and ran away.

Banni was shouting in French and throwing sticks after them. Aubri was holding on to the arm that was bleeding and as soon as I walked toward her, I felt the sting of the wound in the back of my leg.

We were all shaking with adrenaline.

"I've never seen a wolf pack that big," Aubri said. "Where we live it's usually no more than six to eight wolves; this pack had at least fifteen."

With a hand to the small of her back, I nudged her forward. "Come on. Let's get back to the drone and clean your wound."

Banni walked next to us, constantly looking left and right as if expecting another attack any second.

"Thank you for helping us. I know how much you fear wolves and how much it must have taken for you to attack them."

Banni nodded. "I was terrified. If you could feel how much my heart is still pounding, you would understand. But wolves took one of my friends already and I couldn't stand by and see them take two more."

"We definitely owe you a favor." I walked slowly and dragged my leg a little.

Banni put his hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"One of them got the back of my leg, and my hands and arms are pretty scratched up."

"I'm sorry. I should have come sooner, but I was on my way back to the others when I heard you scream."

"What do you mean?" Aubri asked.

"Well, when Indiana dragged you off, I was worried he might hurt you, so I followed. It was confusing to me that you were hitting each other, but since you didn't cry for help, I didn't want to interfere. I figured the rough

sex was just the way of the Northlands, so I walked off to give you privacy. I was back with the others when we heard the screams. Val had to stay with Britany, who was freaking out, but I ran as fast as I could.”

“We’ll find a way to repay you,” I promised, feeling relieved to see the forest ending and the bonfire ahead.

Banni smiled. “You know what I want.”

My head was still full of the wolf attack so I couldn’t think straight. “We do?”

“He wants us to bring him with us to the Northlands when we visit this summer,” Aubri said.

“Oh, right. We’ll have to ask Victor to get permission then.”

Aubri snorted. “We’ll never get permission and you both know it. After what happened with Belle, they’ll deny all travel unless it’s for the summits.”

“But then maybe Banni could take Belle’s spot on the delegation now that it’s open,” I suggested.

“Me? No, not a chance. They’re already discussing the candidates on the News and they’re all A’s. If I’m to ever leave this country, you’ll have to smuggle me out when you go back for the summer.”

“That could get us in a lot of trouble.” Aubri sounded pained so I tried walking faster.

“I just saved your lives,” Banni exclaimed. “Besides, I guarantee the government would never know. My friends would cover for me and say that I’m sick.”

Caught up in the moment, I felt so grateful to Banni for coming to our rescue that I agreed. “As long as you’re sure we can pull it off without your government finding out, then I’m happy to bring you back home with us.”

Banni flashed a wide grin. “Now, *that* will be an adventure! I can’t wait to see Belle again and experience this magical land you keep telling me about.”

“What would your government do if they found out that you had left with us?” Aubri asked.

“I’ve been wondering that myself. I don’t think it’s ever happened before. Typically, people are punished with either prison or community service, but I’m already working as an Explorer, so I don’t see how they can punish me further.”

Val came running toward us. I guessed that he already knew what had happened from the brain link he shared with Banni. He had an emergency kit

in his hands and led us to the fire pit, where he sat Aubri down and looked at her arm.

Banni disappeared but returned with a sleeping bag that he placed in front of me. “Lie down and let me look at your wound.”

I complied and gave a grimace when he sprayed an anti-bacterial cleanser onto my wound. “The suit protected you somewhat. It’s not too bad, but it will take time to heal. Let me just apply some adhesive to close the wound.”

“What about Aubri?” I asked.

Val turned and said the longest sentence I’d ever heard him say in English. “Aubri will be fine.”

“I was so worried,” Britany said and kneeled down next to me. In order for Banni to clean my wound, he had exposed my butt and leg. I lay on my stomach resting my head on my crossed arms and couldn’t see Britany.

“Does it hurt?” She placed a hand on my back and it caused Aubri to sneer.

“Get your hands off him.”

I smiled and winked at my woman, loving every moment of her possessiveness.

Britany on the other hand had no experience with jealous people and pushed her luck. “I’m just asking him if his wound hurts.”

“Touch him again and you’ll be the one hurting,” Aubri threatened her.

Britany finally got the message and pulled her hand away.

“It’s a Northlander thing,” Banni explained to her. “They haven’t learned to control their emotions. You saw how Indiana reacted when Aubri kissed me.”

“I wouldn’t bring that up if I was you,” I told him in a gruff voice. “Aubri was playing a dangerous game and it could have ended badly for you.”

“I’m just trying to tell Britany not to take it personally. It’s hard for us to understand your behavior.”

“Well, it’s simple. Aubri and I are a couple now. Unlike you Europeans, we have no need to fuck a hundred different people. All we want is each other.”

Britany, who had moved away from me, wrinkled her nose up. “That sounds incredibly boring and selfish.”

I smiled and exchanged a long gaze with Aubri, knowing that loving her would never get boring.

CHAPTER 21

Pickup

Five Months Later

Aubri

On the sixth of July, after asking for five months, Indiana and I finally got a chance to visit the laboratory.

We spent the morning with Celeste, who showed us around the building where she worked.

After giving birth to her third child, she had earned a promotion to head of the environmental department. We listened as she went over what happened to all the tests that we brought back and educated us on the strategy behind which areas to clean first.

We soaked up everything as she introduced us to people and showed off the five different labs specializing in marine life, botany, geology, climatology, and limnology.

“What is limnology?” I asked.

Celeste gave me one of those patient smiles that always made me feel like I was stupid for not knowing.

“Limnology is the study of inland waters. So that means lakes, rivers, streams, reservoirs, wetlands, and groundwater.”

“Ah, you mean fresh water,” Indiana said and looked up as Victor came walking into the lab.

“No. It can be both freshwater and saline,” Celeste explained before spotting Victor as well.

Stopping in front of us, Victor looked like a doctor with his white lab coat. “Are you enjoying your guided tour?”

“Yes, it’s fascinating to see what happens with all the tests that we risk our lives for.” I crossed my arms. “So, Victor, tell us again, which lab are you working in?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you. My work is classified.”

“Come on, you can tell us, we’re all friends,” Indiana pressed, but Victor didn’t budge. Instead he looked straight at Celeste and spoke in French.

After living for six months in Old Europe, I could pick up some of what he said. “I know you’re talking about my uncle, what is it?”

Victor stood in his typical stoic pose when he answered, “I tried contacting you and Indiana, but when none of you answered, I reached out to Banni, who told me you were with Celeste today.”

“That’s not what you just told Celeste. I heard you mention my uncle Khan.”

“*Oui*. He has sent his drone to pick you two up and take you home for the summer.”

“Today?” My eyes grew. “But I thought they were coming tomorrow.”

“Apparently, they are eager to get you back home. I believe your brother has come to fetch you.”

“Mason?”

Victor shook his head. “No, I was referring to Indiana’s brother, Jones.”

“Jones is here?” Indiana lit up.

“Yes, and a woman. I’m not sure who. The drone is expected to arrive in forty minutes. You have time to go home and pack what you want to bring. I’ll meet you at the landing place.”

“Why? We can find it ourselves.”

As if Victor suspected foul play, he gave a bored smile. “It’s just a precaution to see you off safely.”

“But surely someone less important and busy could do it. We don’t want to disturb you,” I insisted.

Victor walked away, throwing a last comment over his shoulder. “I’m doing it as a personal favor to our prime minister.”

Indiana and I jogged from the environmental headquarters to our apartment. After sending Banni a message saying that we were being picked up and where we wanted him to meet us, we packed a few things and headed to the outskirts of Old Europe.

It was the sweetest sight to see the large diamond-shaped aircraft descend from the sky.

Victor came toward us with a cloak that made him look like he’d time traveled from a different century.

“I see you decided to come out as a wizard?” Indiana joked.

The edges of Victor’s sharp red lips lifted enough to break his permanent serious expression for a second as he lowered the hood so we could see his thick dark hair.

“I’m told capes are in high fashion now,” Victor said and leaned his head back to follow the drone descending. “You must be excited to go home.”

“I can’t fucking wait to see everyone.”

“Same.” I shifted my balance from one foot to the other with impatience.

When the aircraft landed, I gave a shriek when I saw Sparrow’s face in the window. The second the door opened we flew into each other’s arms and kept hugging while rocking from one side to the other.

“Mmm, you have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” she whispered.

I squeezed her one last time and pulled back to smile at her. “Not as much as I’ve missed you.”

Sparrow and I had been friends since we were toddlers. Unlike my cousin Freya, Sparrow was adventurous like me and a great fighter. As children, we used to build treehouses and play in the wild for hours. And as we got older, we’d been each other’s confidantes when it came to crushes, dreams, and secret desires. It killed me that I hadn’t been able to share with Sparrow that Indiana and I were together now. It was something I wanted to tell her in person.

“Wow, you look so different, Aubri. Your hair is much longer, and your make-up is... different.”

“You don’t like it?” I asked with a grin. “I’ve just adapted to my environment.” My eyeliner was orange and drawn in a bold way compared to the more subdued and natural make-up we wore in the Northlands.

“It looks sort of futuristic,” Sparrow said and looked to Victor while I greeted Jones, who had been hugging Indiana.

“I know who you are.”

Victor raised an eyebrow, but let Sparrow continue.

“Mason and Thor told me what you said to Freya about dying rather than living with her.”

“So?”

Sparrow walked closer to Victor and looked up at him. “Not that you deserve my kindness, but I’ll still give you this advice; stay away from Khan. He knows what you said to his daughter, and should you ever step foot on his lands again, it will end badly.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No. It’s a valuable warning. I heard rumors that the political situation between our countries is volatile and I’d hate to see a pretty head like yours get shipped back to France detached from its body.”

Placing an arm around Sparrow’s shoulder, I laughed. “Victor knows that he owes Freya an apology, right, Victor?” Sparrow, Jones, Indiana, and I

were staring at him.

Victor raised his chin. “As I’ve told you numerous times, what I say or do is none of your business. I’m here to make sure you get on board the drone and leave in good order.”

“Then you can leave now that you’ve seen it’s not an invasion of your country. Jones and Sparrow will need to stretch their legs before we fly off. There’s no need for you to stand around and wait for that.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. We’ll see you in August for the summit,” Indiana said to support me.

“Feel free to run up and down the ramp a few times if you must. I’m afraid that’s all of Old Europe you’ll see,” he told Sparrow and Jones.

I narrowed my eyes, provoked by his rudeness.

“It’s fine. We were told before we landed that we wouldn’t be allowed to spend time in Old Europe and that we were expected to leave right away after picking you up,” Jones said. “It would have been nice to see where you live, but maybe we can do that another time.”

“We’ll show you from above. I’m sure Victor can live with that solution.” Without waiting for his answer, I nudged Sparrow back into the drone and then I stopped in the doorway turning to Indiana. “Shit, I forgot the clock.”

“What clock?” Jones asked.

“This antique clock that we saved from a ruin and had restored for Christina. It’s at the Exploration Headquarters.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll stop by and get it on our way,” Indiana assured me.

With the four of us inside the drone, we took off, flying over the tiny country and making a quick stop by the Exploration Headquarters on the opposite side.

We landed the drone close to our team’s hangar, and then I ran inside to meet Banni.

“You ready?”

He nodded with eagerness.

I felt like a naughty child and kept looking left and right to make sure no one saw us before we sprinted to the drone.

Banni whistled when he got inside and saw the luxurious interior.

“Jones and Sparrow, this is our boss and friend, Banni Armel, who has saved our asses more than once. He’s coming with us to the Northlands.”

Jones reached out his hand. “Good to meet you, I’m Indiana’s brother, Jones.”

“*Bonjour.*” Banni smiled at him and then he turned to Sparrow and held out his hand to shake hers as well.

Sparrow pulled back a little and placed her hand on her collarbone.

Indiana pushed down Banni’s hand and pointed to a seat. “You have to be family to touch a woman in the Northlands. Now sit down quickly so we can get home.”

Even though there had been messages back and forth between us and the Northlands, I was eager to catch up on everything that we’d missed at home.

“So, what’s the newest?” I asked.

Jones sighed. “Thor got into a massive fight with Khan last week. He spent four nights at our place.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Khan wanted him to marry Astrid Bell. Remember her?”

I nodded. “She’s from a good family and she’s pretty. I could see why she would be a good match for him.”

“Yeah, well, Thor wasn’t having any of it. He even said that he won’t take part in this year’s festival because he knows how everyone is watching his every step.”

Sparrow’s eyes glistened when she pulled her legs up and smiled at me. “I’m so excited to tell you about the fierce fighters that your dad lined up for you to choose from. They’ll be at the festival. We’re all dying to know who you’ll pick.”

“Right, but the thing is...” Jones wet his lips and pulled them in for a moment before he continued. “The men they’re making you choose from, they’re all...”

“Yes?” I met his gaze. “What is it?”

Jones seemed shy all of a sudden. “They’re all strangers and I was thinking that if you would prefer someone you feel safe with, then I’m ...”

“Hmm?” I waited for him to finish his sentence, but from the way his neck and face reddened, I suddenly understood. “Oh.”

“I’ve always liked you and if you... I mean there’s a lot of pressure on you, but...”

Indiana, who was sitting next to his brother, slapped a hand at the back of his head. “Are you trying to propose to my woman?”

“Ouch.” Rubbing the back of his head, Jones frowned at his older

brother. “What do you mean by *your* woman?”

“I claimed Aubri, and she accepted me.” The pride on Indiana’s face melted me and when Sparrow and Jones stared at us, I happily confirmed it.

“It’s true. Indiana and I are together.”

Sparrow squealed out loud while Jones’ face fell.

“Are you serious?”

Indiana nodded. “Dead serious.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sparrow exclaimed.

“Because we wanted to tell you in person. The plan was to tell everyone at once, but since Indiana couldn’t keep his mouth shut, now you know.”

Sparrow reached out her hand to me. “Congratulations. I’m so proud that I know before your family. You couldn’t have picked a better man.”

“Hmm... She could have picked me,” Jones argued.

I gave him a smile. “You’re too young for me, Jones. And way too nice.”

Jones dipped his head in Indiana’s direction. “He’s nice too.”

Indiana and I exchanged a smile before my face split in a grin. “I used to think the same but living with him for six months has taught me what a domineering ass he can be.”

Jones sunk back in his seat looking upset.

Reaching over to squeeze his knee, Indiana said, “Hey, come on, little brother. Can’t you be happy for me? I’m getting married to the woman of my dreams.”

Jones crossed his arms. “What about my dreams? First, Mason married Belle and now you snatched up Aubri.”

“Astrid Bell is still available,” Sparrow said in a sing-song voice. “If Thor doesn’t want to marry her, maybe you could swoop in and take your shot.”

Jones lowered his arms and looked thoughtful. “Maybe, but he told me it’s because he heard she has a thing for a man called Jaxon. Thor doesn’t want an arranged marriage to a woman who’s in love with someone else.”

“You know what you should do, Jones,” Banni said in his lovely French accent. “You should come live with us for a while and have some fun. Our women would love a man like you and they would be lining up.”

Jones scrunched up his mouth. “Indiana told me about that in one of his vid messages, but I prefer the chase.”

“The chase?” Banni tilted his head as if the concept were alien.

“Yeah, from what Indiana said, sex is just a pastime for you. I don’t like

that. It should mean something.”

Sparrow chuckled and addressed Banni. “Didn’t Aubri tell you that although our men are large and rough, they are romantics at heart?”

Banni smiled back at her. “I’ve seen Aubri and Indiana together, and they weren’t what I consider to be romantic. Looked more like they were fighting than loving each other.”

Sparrow raised a brow and looked to Indiana. “Is that true? Please tell me you never hurt Aubri.”

“It’s complicated.” Indiana moved in his seat. “When I claimed Aubri it took a little persuasion and things got a little rough.”

Sparrow’s gaze went to me. “From your smile, I take it you weren’t hurt too bad.”

“Actually, I was, but that was from that pack of wolves that attacked us. Not from Indiana’s... ehh... persuasion.”

“Wait, the claiming happened *that* night?” Reaching for my arm, Sparrow studied the scar. I had already told her about the wolves, just not the part that led to Indiana and me being alone in the forest at night.

“It’s scary to think about what could have happened if your friend hadn’t come to your rescue,” Sparrow pondered.

“Banni. My name is Banni.”

“Yes, I know. Aubri says that it means outcast.”

“That’s right.” He stretched his legs on the recliner and grinned. “I like your drones a whole lot better than ours, and from what I’ve seen so far, your women are exceptionally gorgeous too.” He ended his sentence by winking at Sparrow, who blinked her eyes, not used to such direct compliments.

Indiana groaned. “Remember what I told you about staying out of fights in the Northlands? Don’t say a woman is gorgeous in front of her husband or family members. They might get protective.”

“But Sparrow’s husband isn’t here,” Banni said defending himself.

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Why not? You have to be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. How did you manage to stay unmarried?”

Sparrow stared at Banni, who had the same shade of caramel-colored skin as her. “I’m the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen?”

He nodded. “You must hear that all the time.”

She looked to me and then back to him as if she wasn’t sure if he was messing with her. “Not exactly.”

“Well, then now you know.” With a confident grin he turned to Indiana. “Is there anything to drink on board this fine machine?”

Jones showed where the cold drinks were stored as we flew through the sky toward the people that we loved the most.

I couldn't wait to see my family's reaction when I told them that I'd picked the Nman that I wanted to marry.

CHAPTER 22

Homecoming

Aubri

There was an entire welcoming committee when we landed in front of the Gray Mansion.

Mason, Belle, Dina, Thor, Freya, Khan, Pearl, Christina, Alexander, Lara, and my parents were all there along with Sparrow's parents Kya and Archer.

I received hugs and kisses from the family, and Mason squeezed me hard when he lifted me from the ground.

"It's good to see you, sis."

I grinned. "I'd forgotten what a giant you are. How is married life?"

Beaming, Mason set me back down and pulled Belle against his body. "Couldn't be happier."

"Belle."

"Banni?" I loved seeing the surprise and complete disbelief on her face when he came to hug her.

"How are you here?" Her eyes teared up. "Did you come for the wedding?"

"I came to see you and to experience the Northlands."

Banni's gaze went to Belle's large stomach and back up to her soft smile. A long exchange of French passed between them and this time I was able to make out that he told her she looked radiant and healthy.

"Can you believe Banni is here?" Belle said to Mason and dried her eyes.

"Good to see you again." Mason held out his hand to Banni and the two men shook hands.

"Aubri, we can never thank you enough for what you did for us," Belle told me.

"You don't need to thank me," I assured her and quickly changed the subject. "When is the due date again?"

"August thirtieth."

I felt both excited that I was going to be an aunt and disappointed that I would be back in Old Europe before my niece or nephew was born. It saddened me that I wouldn't get to hold the child until the end of December.

Focusing on the positive, I smiled. “At least I get to be here for your big wedding party. Are you excited?”

Mason drew in a sigh deep enough to make his chest rise. “Mom has gone overboard, but that’s to be expected. It’s just a bit much for Belle.” I picked up on the worried glance that Mason shot to his wife.

“What’s wrong? You don’t want a large party?” I asked Belle.

Her gaze fell to the ground. “I don’t want to be ungrateful, but it seems out of proportion to me. I feel so heavy and tired because of the pregnancy that the idea of this massive event feels exhausting to me.”

Mason rubbed her back. “Belle doesn’t like the attention and there will be a lot of press. Dad and Khan insist that the event be transmitted to the entire country so it’s a lot of pressure.”

“I see.” Giving Belle a quick peck on the cheek, I whispered in her ear. “I might be able to help you with that.”

“How?” she asked.

With a mischievous smile, I winked and blended back into the crowd to hug the ones I hadn’t greeted yet.

“There are drinks in the park,” Khan called out to everyone as I walked over to hug my dad and mom once again. With them on each side of me, we walked through the house, my dad’s arm around my shoulders, and my mom’s arm linked under my elbow.

“You don’t know how many times these fuckers talked me out of coming to bring you home.”

I laughed and looked up at my dad. “I’m glad you didn’t. I’ve had an incredible adventure so far.”

Exiting through the large French doors, I took in the colorful flowers and the lushness of the lawn, hedges, and trees in the park that I’d loved so much. After living in Old Europe, I would never again take nature in the Northlands for granted.

“Here.” Indiana came to my side and gave me a drink.

Khan clinked his glass and we all turned to him. “Don’t worry, this won’t be a long speech. Let me just officially welcome you back and tell you that we’ve missed you both. Unfortunately, this is just a summer break, but when you return this December for good, we’ll have a massive party to celebrate that your oath to help Old Europe in return for Belle’s freedom is paid in full.” Raising his glass, Khan bellowed. “To Aubri and Indiana.”

Everyone cheered and raised their glasses to Indiana and me.

“Thank you.” Indiana addressed our families. “Thank you for your warm welcome. It means a lot to us. Living in Old Europe has been hard because we’ve missed you all so much. However, it’s also been an incredible experience and we’ve made good friends. Banni here is one of the biggest badasses outside of the Northlands and we brought him here to meet you all.”

Banni stood next to Jones and smiled as Indiana continued.

“On the day Aubri chose to stay in Old Europe, she made a promise. She promised that she’d come back safe.”

“She also promised to come back and marry a strong Northlander,” my dad interjected and lowered his brow while looking straight at me. People laughed because of his silent way of saying *I’m keeping you to that promise.*

Indiana straightened and moved a little closer to me. “I’m dedicated to helping Aubri keep her first promise of returning home safely.”

“That’s my son,” Alexander exclaimed with pride.

“I’m glad you are proud of me, Dad,” Indiana said as my heart raced in my chest from the bomb that I knew he was about to drop. “I think I’ll make you even more proud when I tell you that Aubri intends to keep her promise of marrying and that the strong Nman that she has chosen is me!”

Eyes widened, and outbursts of joy and surprise sounded from the group of family gathered.

“Is that true?” my mom asked with eagerness.

I felt like I was glowing with love when I took Indiana’s hand and declared loud and clear, “It’s true. We’ve chosen each other.”

A new wave of people wishing to hug and congratulate us had my lips hurting from all the smiling I did.

Our moms were delighted, and I saw my dad pat Indiana’s dad, Alexander, on his shoulders and joke, “Don’t think that just because we’re friends, I’ll give your son an easy time.”

Alexander laughed. “If he can handle Aubri, he can handle you.”

The two men embraced in a manly hug and I soaked up the lovely feeling of connection and love that was all around me.

Half an hour later, I circled over to speak to Banni, who stood touching some flowers. “What do you think so far?”

“I’ve never seen this kind of flower.”

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“What’s it called?”

I shrugged. “No idea, but I’m sure my cousin Freya can tell you. She’s

like a small encyclopedia.” I waved Freya over.

“Banni is curious about this flower, do you know its name?”

Freya squinted her eyes in the bright sun and touched the small pink flower. “This one is a plant native to this region called Pacific Bleeding Heart. What I like about it is that the flowers are nectar-rich and attract hummingbirds and bees.”

When Banni and Freya kept going through the flowerbeds to discuss flora, I returned to Sparrow and hugged her from behind.

She was standing with her mother Kya, who had always been one of my favorite people in this world.

“Sparrow was telling me that Banni is your boss in Europe. How long has he been doing ecological restoration work?”

“Oh, he told me that he was seventeen when he started.” Leaning back, I called out to my friend. “Hey, Banni, how old are you now?”

“Me?” He pointed to his chest and then his eyes studied Sparrow and Kya for a second. “I’ll be twenty-seven in March, why?”

“I was just trying to calculate how long you’ve been an Explorer. Since you were seventeen, right?”

“*Oui.*”

“So almost ten years.”

“Why didn’t you just ask him how long he’d been an Explorer instead of calculating the years?” Freya asked as if she was trying to understand how anyone could think like me.

“Because...” I thought about it and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Freya and Banni moved toward Kya, Sparrow, and me. Kya reached out her hands to him. “I’m Kya.”

Banni looked from her face to her hands and back again. “Indiana warned me not to touch any of the women here.”

“I’m from the Motherlands. It’s taken many years, but by now my husband, Archer, understands that I greet people the way I want to greet them.”

Banni took her hands and they stood smiling at each other before he let go.

“I don’t know if Aubri told you that Archer and I run an experimental school where we have students from the Northlands, Motherlands, and Old Europe.”

Banni nodded. “You’re the parents of Sparrow, who is Aubri’s best

friend. Yes, I've heard of you. I should have guessed that you are related to the most beautiful woman in the world. You even have the same afro as her."

"Afro?"

Kya and Sparrow exchanged a look of confusion.

"Your curly hair is called afro hair, or at least it's close to being afro hair. I guess now that I look closer your curls are a bit larger than a real afro, but you have the volume for sure."

"What's my hair called?" I asked.

Banni frowned as if that was a weird thing to ask. "Red."

"No, but I mean is there a name for my hair type as well?"

"How would I know? I'm not a hair stylist, but everyone knows what an afro is. It was super trendy last year back home. Everyone was wearing wigs in different colors with large afros. Now it's the asymmetry trend that's big, but of course, fashion changes all the time."

Sparrow laughed. "Can I just say how much I love your accent? The more you talk, the more I want to experience Old Europe. The idea of people walking around with large wigs in different colors sounds hilarious."

"Mm-hmm." Kya agreed. "We would love for you to come and teach about the ecological restoration work you do."

"Wow, that sounds fancy when you say it like that. Ecological restoration work." He said it slow as if tasting the words. "Hmm... I like that."

"Would you come and meet the students?" Sparrow asked. "They are all between ten and fifteen and they ask great questions."

"I can talk about what we do on the squad, but I should warn you that I hated school as a kid, and I probably won't be great at teaching."

Kya didn't seem worried. "How long are you staying?"

I answered for him, "We're going back after the summit in early August."

Tilting her head, Kya asked, "How did you get permission to leave France? Belle taught at our school a few months ago and she told us that your government won't allow anyone to leave."

"We smuggled him out," I admitted and received a reproachful look from Kya.

"Aubri, please tell me you're not serious."

"Banni saved our lives and we couldn't say no to showing him the Northlands. Don't worry, we got him out and we'll bring him back with us when we return in five weeks."

Kya's hand went to her hairline. "What if something goes wrong and they

find out? I don't think you understand the tension that the situation with Belle has created. The men have been close to declaring war on Old Europe several times, Aubri. If not for Pearl, Freya, and Jonah..." Kya looked over her shoulder. "This could be disastrous."

"Relax, Kya. It's not the same as with Belle."

"How is it different? What do you think will happen when Banni decides that he wants to stay as well?"

Banni laughed. "I'm an Explorer. Going new places is exciting to me, but I don't intend to stay here. I have all my friends at home that I need to get back to. They're the ones covering for me while I'm here."

"And how exactly will they cover for you being gone for over a month?" Kya asked with a tone of concern.

"They will send in reports with my name on to make it look like I'm still working. If a supervisor stops by, they'll say I felt sick and went home. I'm not worried. It's so rare that the scientists take time to stop by our headquarters that I suspect no one will notice that I'm gone."

Kya pressed her lips together before muttering. "Let's hope you're right. I will try not to worry too much about it."

"Banni, would you allow me to introduce you to my brother, Thor," Freya said with a smile and tactfully changed the subject.

When the two of them walked off, I told Kya and Sparrow, "I just had an idea. What if Banni stays at your school some of that first week in August? I know he wants to spend time with Belle of course, but it would be wonderful if you could entertain him since Indiana, Freya, Thor, and I will be at the summit in the Motherlands."

"Sure, that would be great," Kya assured me before changing the subject to the romance between Indiana and me.

"When will the wedding be?"

"I'm not sure. Let me go and find out." Kissing them both on the cheek, I moved on to find my parents standing by the water fountain, talking with Indiana's parents.

"Plotting and planning already, are you?" I smiled.

"We are. We were just discussing that you could have a beautiful winter wedding when you get back from Old Europe in December. Maybe on New Year's Eve," my mother said and reached her hand out to me.

I took it and thought about her idea. "Why wait that long? I heard that Belle is exhausted from the idea of the lavish wedding you planned for her

and Mason. If we had a double wedding, I could shield her from some of the attention.”

My dad tapped the side of his beer. “What is it about you always coming to the aid of Belle?”

“I can’t help it. It’s been that way since I first met her.”

“But sweetheart, you deserve to have your own wedding.”

I laughed and waved Mason over. He came with Belle, holding her hand, and since he’d been talking to Indiana, my handsome husband-to-be tagged along.

“Mason, can you please explain to Mom and Dad that we would be fine with a shared twin wedding?”

His eyes widened. “You would do that?”

“If it means that I can marry Indiana next week, absolutely. I’m not stupid. I know Dad won’t allow us to sleep in the same bed until we’re married despite the fact that we share a bed in Old Europe.”

“You *what?*” Magni exclaimed and looked to my mom. “You told me that they had separate bedrooms.”

My mom crossed her arms. “I had to, or you would have invaded the country to get Aubri back home.”

“You *knew* they were sharing a bed?”

My mom’s gaze went to me and Indiana. “No, but I suspected that was the case.”

“And you, did you know as well?” my dad asked Christina, who put her hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, sweet Nature, will you calm down, Magni? There’s no harm done. Indiana told us they alternated sleeping on the sofa, but we’re not stupid. I don’t know about Laura, but I left France hoping they would fall in love... and they did.”

Magni frowned and stabbed his finger into Indiana’s chest. “You better tell me you didn’t have sex with my daughter.”

I reached out and pulled my father’s hand down. “If he did it’s because I wanted to, so mind your own business. Indiana and I are adults and the world is different from when you were young.”

Indiana looked a bit pressured but stood his ground. “My relationship with your daughter is completely consensual, sir.”

“I think a double wedding is a great idea,” Mason said to move the conversation away from sex. “The only thing that would be better is if Aubri

and Indiana take over the whole thing next week, so Belle and I are off the hook.”

“That’s not happening,” my father said. “I want the whole country to see that my children are marrying and expanding the family.” His gaze fell to Belle’s stomach. “It will be glorious.”

“Okay, but at least let Indiana and Aubri do the interviews with the Press. Belle and I have already done so many and we’re tired of answering questions.”

“Don’t worry.” Laura took Belle’s other hand. “The moment the Press hears that Aubri is back and getting married they’ll want to know everything.”

“I was praying for something like this,” Belle said with a grateful sigh.

Mason leaned down and raised her chin before he kissed her softly. “We’ll make it as easy on you as possible.”

“Thank you.” She rubbed her stomach. “It would be different if I wasn’t carrying a giant baby around. This child will be like a one-year-old when he or she is born.”

“That’s the Aurelius genes for you,” my father said with pride. “We breed physically superior children.”

“So do we,” Alexander declared and squeezed Indiana’s shoulder.

“Slow down on the beers, you two,” Christina said. “I know you’re celebrating, but if you keep it up, you’ll be sobbing with joy soon.”

We all laughed because of the expressions on Magni and Alexander’s faces. They were old-school and insulted by the idea of them sobbing in public.

“Where’s my little brother?” The sharp voice that broke through made us turn to the French doors.

Raven, Indiana’s older sister, came walking with her husband Leo, who was in his police uniform. Jayden, their twelve-year old son, was the first to reach us and give Indiana a big hug.

“Satan’s balls, you grew, boy.” Indiana held out Jayden to study him for a second. “What kind of muscle madness is this? What are they feeding you at that school?”

“You should ask Archer and Kya that question,” Raven told Indiana and spread out her arms to hug me. “Come here, you crazy woman.”

She was shorter than me and I couldn’t resist lifting her from the ground. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I truly missed you, my rebel friend,” she whispered back.

Ever since I was little, Raven had been my mentor and taught me to fight. She had encouraged my strong will and told me to never let anyone tell me I couldn't do something.

“I apologize for us being late, but Leo got caught up at the station.”

“It's fine, but you missed a wonderful announcement.” My mother smiled like a cat who just caught a large fat mouse. “Aubri and Indiana are getting married.”

“No fucking way!” Leo stared from me to Indiana. “How the hell did you manage that?”

“I've got skills,” Indiana said with a confident grin.

“That's brilliant.” Raven pushed at Indiana's shoulders. “Who would have known you had it in you? Here I thought you were a nice boy.”

“He is,” Christina said defending her son, but Raven laughed out loud.

“Not if Aubri picked him. She would never go with a sweet and gentle guy.” Leaning her head back she grinned up at Indiana. “I'll bet you're a beast in bed. Is that it?” Her question was aimed at me but with our parents standing right there, I joined her laughter rather than answering.

“Wow, you know how to disperse a group,” Mason told Raven with a crooked smile as our parents spread out to tell the good news about next week's double wedding.

Raven shrugged. “Ahh, don't be naïve. They're beasts themselves. They just hide it in front of us.”

“Maybe your parents hide it, but our parents can't help themselves,” Mason said and looked after Magni and Laura. “I've seen my dad smack her butt at the morning buffet and she pushed back by taunting him to do it again.”

“Did you hear that?” Raven asked her son Jayden. “You always complain that Dad and I are all over each other, but Mason turned out fine.”

“For the most part,” Mason grinned and tousled Jayden's hair. “It's good when your parents love each other, don't you think?”

He scrunched up his face. “I guess, but I wouldn't mind if they toned it down a little.”

Indiana pulled my back against his chest and placed his arms around me while kissing my cheek. “I wouldn't know how to tone down my love for my young grasshopper.”

“Aww, you two...” Belle raised her hands to her chest. “That's so

romantic.”

“That’s it!” Mason bent down and picked Belle up in his arms, bridal style. “I can’t have Indiana make you swoon like that. I’ll fucking show you romance.”

We howled with laughter as my brother carried off his wife toward the house.

“What’s going on?” Khan called from across the patio. “Is Belle feeling all right?”

“She will! I’ll make sure of it,” Mason called back without turning.

CHAPTER 23

Bridal Festival

Indiana

Thirty years ago, I would have fought to marry Aubri in a bridal tournament. If I was skilled enough to make it through all the bloody fights as one of the five champions, I would have stood half beaten, praying that she would choose me.

Today, I would make men across the country green with envy when I married Aubri Aurelius while looking my best.

She was the strongest and most stunning Northlander woman but anyone who thought that I'd won her without a fight was mistaken.

My fight for my woman had taken years and cost me excruciating emotional pain at times. But it was all worth it a thousand times over, now that she was mine.

The yearly bridal festival was a massive event that attracted people from all over the Northlands – a full week of festivities, fights, comedy, and couples-matching. At the end of it all, there were weddings bringing hope of a new generation and love to those who longed for it.

The grand event of it all was the double wedding of the Aurelius twins.

The largest arena, which had been bloody from fights yesterday, had been transformed into a romantic setting with flowers, ambient lighting, and rose petals strewn on the stage. The arena was packed with family, friends, and important members of the public.

Mason and I looked sharp as we stood on the stage waiting with Khan for our brides.

Banni sat in the front row with my family and it made me happy that Belle had an old friend here as well.

Jones waved at me and I noted that he seemed over his disappointment that Aubri had chosen me and not him. He was lip-miming something. Squinting my eyes to see better, I frowned and tried to pay attention.

With his face directed straight ahead to me, his eyes went to the right as his lips moved without sound.

Not understanding what he was trying to tell me, I moved my gaze to see what he was trying to point out. That's when I saw Astrid Bell.

Holding up his right hand, he crossed two of his fingers.

Finally understanding that he was hoping to impress Astrid Bell, I gave him a thumbs up and hoped that this time he would succeed.

The whole arena fell silent as my best friend and I stood back to back and watched the women we loved walk toward us from each side of the stage.

Aubri looked spectacular in a dress that highlighted her long, toned legs, and beautiful figure. She hadn't covered up her scars or the tattoo she had on her shoulder.

She had been seventeen when she had the tattoo made. I'd always found the motif of a grasshopper fitting for someone who fought like she could fly. Ever since then, I'd called her my young grasshopper despite the fact that I was only three months older than her.

While Khan performed the ceremony, I stood transfixed by Aubri's presence feeling like she and I were alone on that stage. I had known this woman her entire life and I could tell the story of each of her scars.

The one on her arm from the wolves that attacked her would always be special because that was the night that she accepted me as her mate.

"Will you, Indiana Boulder, take Aubri Aurelius to be you lawfully wedded wife?"

Her gaze went from Khan to me and I saw our whole life flashing by in a second. The fearless girl who climbed the tree that even Mason and I were scared to climb. The stubborn woman who wouldn't give up trying to impress Huntsmen twice her size.

"I do!" I said loud and clear, feeling like my chest was about to burst with gratitude and love.

"And do you, Aubri Aurelius, take Indiana Boulder as your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do."

Khan turned and asked Mason and Belle to commit in public as well, but I hardly registered any of it. I was so engulfed in the moment of looking deep into Aubri's blue eyes and seeing her love shining back at me.

"I now declare you man and wife." Khan touched my shoulder. "Mason and Indiana, you may now kiss your brides."

The rush of lifting Aubri from the ground and kissing her made me feel like a giant conquering the biggest task in the world. My young grasshopper was mine and now everyone would see it for themselves. I hoped that every bastard who had doubted or ridiculed me in my life was watching my

moment of glory.

When I set her down, Aubri shone with happiness. Taking my hand, she moved across the stage with her bouquet of flowers in her hand. Looking back over her shoulder she gave me a blinding smile that would have made me follow her over a cliff.

We partied with our friends and family until two in the morning. It had been at least two hours since Mason and Belle had snuck off to enjoy their second wedding night.

After a hectic week back in the Northlands, I was excited for a two-day honeymoon in the mountains where I could have Aubri to myself a little.

“Do you wish that we weren’t going back to France?” she asked me as we lay in bed the morning after our wedding.

“Yes and no. I like the work we do with Banni and the team. It’s so different from my work in the family business. I don’t know... there’s something satisfying about cleaning the earth, and if Celeste is right and zone fifty-four tips over to green before December, that would be extremely satisfying.”

“Can you imagine?” Aubri brushed her hand across my naked chest. “I want it to happen next week so I can see them start building in that zone. Honestly, I just want everyone living underground to have an apartment with windows showing them the weather outside.”

“It’s going to take a long time to build that many apartments.”

“Did I tell you about my strange conversation with Val where he told me that he preferred to live below ground?”

“Yeah, you told me, but I think you misunderstood him. Your French isn’t that strong yet.”

“I understood him fine. I asked Banni about it and he said that there are many who feel that way. They prefer what they know.”

“Weird. I couldn’t even imagine living that way. Banni doesn’t want to live underground, does he?”

“No, he’s hoping to get an apartment above ground someday.”

I played with her hair. “I was thinking that we should show him Alaska while he’s here. Or the Rocky Mountains. We could invite some of the others and take a trip before the summit.”

“I don’t think Belle would want to go. With the size of her stomach, I still can’t believe that she’s not expecting twins.”

“Maybe she is. Isn’t her likelihood of having twins bigger with Mason

being a twin?”

“Since he’s not the one producing the eggs, that would be a no. Still, we don’t know if either of Belle’s parents were twins, so we can’t know if she’s likely to have twins herself.”

“But wouldn’t the doctors have told her if she was expecting two babies?”

“I would assume so.”

“That’s what she gets for choosing a mate like Mason. His size should have warned her off.”

Aubri stretched and winked at me. “There’s a chance of us having twins. Would you like that?”

“Hmm... sounds like hard work.”

“I thought you loved children.”

Playing with her hair, I held a lock to my nose and sniffed in the amazing scent of her. “I do love children, but one at a time is fine with me.”

Rolling to her back, Aubri mused, “The idea of twins appeals to me, but maybe that’s because I am one.”

“Are we discussing having kids now?” I moved to lay with my torso on top of hers. “I thought you said that you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it until we were married.” Wiggling her eyebrows, Aubri held up her hand to show me her ring again.

“But you have the implant.”

“I know.” She caressed my face. “Obviously, I’m keeping the implant as long as we’re in France. I’m still trying to understand everything that has happened these past six months. I feel like I’m a different person from the Aubri who left the Northlands. Maybe it’s because I’m turning twenty-eight this year, but since you and I got together, the idea of children is growing on me.”

“You know I’m up for it, so why am I sensing a ‘but’?”

She circled my lips with the tip of her finger. “It’s just that I’m not sure what to do with myself. I wanted to be in the army or a firefighter. Now that I’ve been an Explorer, I know what I’m capable of and I want to use my gifts somehow.”

“You should.”

“How?”

“You’ll figure it out. You’re Aubri, the toughest woman on the planet.”

She closed my nostrils with her fingers and licked the bridge of my nose

to tease me.

I pulled back and dried my nose. “Eww,”

“What? I can lick your cock, but not your nose?” She had that mischievous look in her eyes that always turned me on.

“Go ahead, lick my cock, I won’t complain.”

She slid off the bed and challenged me with a grin, “Why don’t you make me?”

A playful growl sounded from my throat as I set off in a chase.

“Are you gonna force me to the floor and stuff your dick in my mouth?”

“I’ll spank your ass if you keep running from me.”

“Yeah?” She stuck her tongue out and squealed when I knocked over a chair to get to her.

My blood was pumping as I chased my wife around the room. Her attempt to get to the bathroom and close the door failed. I caught her and picked her up with a low growl. “You can never outrun me, little grasshopper.”

“I don’t need to. Grasshoppers can fly.”

Turning her around in the bathroom, I pushed her over the sink and smacked her naked ass. The sound of my hand landing on her creamy skin excited me so I did it again. “You like it when I spank you, don’t you?”

“You call this a spanking? I thought you were caressing my butt,” Aubri teased.

Meeting her gaze in the mirror, I saw her bite her lip in a sexy way.

Smack! The sound filled the bathroom and made her groan out loud while leaning her head back.

I yanked her hair and bent down to kiss her. When our tongues met, she returned my passionate kiss and then she bit me.

Letting go of her hair I straightened up and watched my tongue bleed in the mirror.

“Whoa, I can’t believe you fucking went there.”

There was fire in Aubri’s eyes, and I knew she understood what she had just done.

Pushing between her shoulder blades, I held her down and reached for the lotion on the counter. “I told you what I’d do if you ever bit my tongue again. I’m guessing that since you did it, you must want it.”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The fact that she didn't struggle when I poured lotion between her cheeks told me she was on board. "If you were a good girl, I wouldn't have to punish you like this." I gave her a firm look and used my thumb to spread the lotion around her back entrance. "You think you run this show, but you're wrong."

Her breathing was heavy as she watched me in the mirror. I studied her expression when I pushed my thumb inside her.

"I told you I'd fuck you in the ass if you bit me again and you didn't believe me."

Aubri made sounds but didn't voice an objection when I fingered her in the one place that she hadn't allowed me to enter yet.

A whole week of our sleeping apart had built a mutual appetite. We'd already had sex twice since we arrived in the hotel at three this morning. The first time had been loving and sweet with declarations of love. The second time had been amazing morning sex. Now, her invitation to anal sex had taken things to a whole new level.

While warming up her back entrance, I pushed my erection inside her pussy and taunted her some more. "I guess now we'll know how tough you really are. I imagine having a cock my size pressed into your tiny asshole is going to hurt."

She still didn't answer but closed her eyes and met my rocking movements.

"This is what happens when you bite my tongue." Pulling out of her, I aimed at her back entrance and pressed inside. Her eyebrows furrowed and her mouth opened in an "Oh" sound.

I moved back and forth and added more lotion to make it less painful.

Aubri winced a little when I pushed in deeper.

"That's it, babe. You can't be a true explorer and leave this amazing part of your body undiscovered." I was rocking in and out in a steady pace and loving how tight she felt.

"Do you realize that I've been in every corner of your body now; this is the last frontier."

Aubri moved her hand back and placed it against my hip.

"Do you like the pain?" Still feeling the sting from where she had bit my tongue, I kept going while watching her in the mirror. "You wanted this."

"Yes." She locked eyes with me and it was an incredible rush to see lust shine from her.

"Are you gonna be a good girl now?"

A bratty smile spread on her face. “Never.”

Placing my left arm around her lower belly, I fucked her harder while yanking her hair back again. “Are you sure?”

“You wouldn’t have married me if you wanted a good girl.”

Pulling her face around to kiss her, I agreed, “You’re right about that.”

She bit me again and laughed when I smacked her ass for it.

Having anal sex with Aubri was a sexual fantasy of mine and the tightness around my cock made me reach my peak faster than normal.

With my fingers drilled into her hips, I growled and pushed in and out three more times before I covered her gaping anus with my semen. “Fuuck!!!” I blinked a few times memorizing the erotic sight of the visible proof that I’d conquered another part of my woman.

CHAPTER 24

Our Home

Aubri

I had been to Victoria's Island more times than I could count. This was where I'd gone to school and where my two best friends had lived.

Sparrow had grown up with her parents in a house on the grounds of the experimental school, and Indiana in a beautiful old house that had been built before the Toxic War.

Indiana had his own house on the island now and when he brought me there after our two days at the mountain hotel, he carried me over the threshold.

I laughed at the silliness, but Indiana insisted, "My mom told me it's an old tradition from ancient times."

"You just love to carry me, admit it."

"I do!" He nuzzled his nose against mine and kissed me.

Once inside, he sat me down and looked around in his open-space kitchen and living room. "What do you think?"

"I've been here before, you know."

"Not as my wife." His smile was boyish and so proud that I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"Did you forget that I helped you pick out the decor? Well, Sparrow and your mom helped too, but still. It's a fabulous place and you know that I love it."

As he engulfed me in his arms from behind, his beard tickled my cheek. "That first week when we shared a bed in our apartment, I kept fantasizing about making this house *our home*."

"Did you fantasize about carrying me over the doorstep?"

"Mm-hmm." He picked me up again and walked through the living room, up the staircase. "And I especially dreamed about carrying you into our bedroom and placing you onto my bed."

"*Your* bed? If this is *our* home, then shouldn't it be *our* bed?"

Indiana pushed open the door to the bedroom and carried me across the floor. The room was bright except for the masculine charcoal gray color on the wall behind his bed. Indiana had chosen a solid bedframe made of wood

from the forest behind the house. But my favorite parts of this room were the three floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the beautiful pond.

Placing me on the bed, Indiana quickly got down beside me. We snuggled up and looked out at the breathtaking view with the million shades of green and the ducks swimming on the pond.

“This is a happy place,” I whispered.

“Now it is.” Indiana tightened his hold around me and kissed my temple. “I still can’t believe that this is real.” He pinched my arm.

“Ouch. Why are you pinching me?”

“To make sure it’s not a dream.”

“You idiot.” I laughed. “You have to pinch yourself; not me.”

He pinched me again and buried his head against my neck. “Are you sure you want to call your husband an idiot?” His hands were wandering and I heard that arousing undertone of lust in his voice that turned me on.

“Hello?”

We stiffened for a second, listening.

“Indy and Aubri, are you here?”

“Yes, Mom, I was just showing Aubri the curtains you made for me in the bedroom.” With a smile, Indiana got off the bed and pulled me with him.

We walked out of the bedroom and found Christina standing by the entrance with a plate of cookies in her hands.

“Your father said that I should wait for you to come over, but we saw you land, and I wanted to welcome you to your home.” She held out her hands with the plate. “I baked these for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Indiana jogged down the stairs and across the room to give his mom a hug.

I followed and smiled wide. “Hey, neighbor.”

Christina reached out her arms to me. “I’m sorry if I interrupted anything. I promise to not come over unannounced again, but I’m still floating on a pink cloud of happiness that you two are here. It’s been difficult these past six months.”

Since Indiana’s parents owned an entire island with amazing wilderness and tranquility, he had built a house not far from them. The walk between the houses wasn’t more than three minutes.

“I never thought about the pain my time in Old Europe would cause you. When Indiana volunteered to stay with me, I tried to tell him to go home, but you know your son.”

“Yes, he’s a protector like his father. They can’t help it, I think.”

Indiana had taken the cookies and was already chewing on one. “Mmm, these are good.” From his tone I could tell he was being polite. Christina loved to spoil us with homemade food and cakes, but she had an unfortunate habit of being too generous with the salt.

“I actually have a gift for you.” Biting my lip, I fetched the box that I’d brought with me from Old Europe.

“What is it?” Christina asked as I placed the box on the large dining table.

“Come open it.” I was dying to see her reaction to the old clock.

The three of us gathered around the table just as there was a tap on the door.

“Come on in,” Indiana called out to his father Alexander, who we could see through the glass in the door.

“I figured it was safe since you didn’t kick your mom out.” Alexander gave us both hugs and shone with joy to have Indiana back home.

“They brought me a gift.” Christina nodded to the box on the table. “I was just about to open it.”

Alexander took a stand on Christina’s other side and encouraged her: “Well, go on then, let’s see what’s inside.”

I was impatient and wanted her to rip the box open, but Christina was an archeologist and exercised restraint and patience as she uncovered the treasure that we had brought her.

“Is this...?” She gulped and slowly lifted the old clock out of the box to set it on the table.

“We retrieved it from the ruins of an old city called Bordeaux.”

“How is that possible? The state of this clock is impeccable. I wouldn’t have thought anything could survive without damage.”

“Oh, it was damaged, but Banni took us to a repair shop that specialized in old stuff. They restored the clock for you.”

Christina pulled out a chair and sat down to study the clock up close. She was clearly in awe and kept making sounds to underline her amazement. “The level of craftsmanship is mind-blowing. I can’t believe you brought me a real rococo clock.”

“It’s a peace offering for taking Indiana away from you for this year.” Since she was sitting, the rest of us followed and sat down at the table.

Christina’s face softened as she touched Indiana’s shoulder, and then

emotions overtook her. She waved her hand in front of her face while tears pooled in her eyes.

“Mom, why do you get so emotional?”

“It’s weird. When you give birth to a little boy no one prepares you for what’s ahead,” she said in a brittle voice. “These six months that you’ve been gone, I’ve thought about how fast my time with you went by. A boy will go through all these stages from baby, to toddler, and then they run around in the woods getting bruises that hurt you more than them. It’s like loving a lot of different people who all answer to the same name and call you mom, but they look different and their needs change as they grow. The thing is that the morphing from one age to the next happens so gradually that you don’t even notice that your little boy is gone until you see a picture of how he used to be. Suddenly your boy is a man with a beard, who’s taller than you and speaks with a deep voice. It’s strange, but these past months I thought a lot about how being the mother of a son is sort of like going through a slow break-up. You start out as the center of his universe only to see him break away and eventually leave you.” Christina dried away a tear and looked to me. “And of course, you want him to leave you. That’s the whole idea, you know.”

I was moved by her words and took her hand. “I’ll be good to Indy. I promise.”

“I know you will.” She squeezed my hand. “I’m just sappy because Jones began building his own house too, and Lara met someone at the festival that she’s falling in love with. It’s all wonderful, but it also means that we’ll be alone in that big house soon.”

Alexander reached across the table for Christina’s hand. “It’s about time. I’ve shared you with these brats long enough.” He winked at her.

“How about you enjoy the quiet time before you’ll have grandchildren scratching your floors and needing your time? Aubri and I definitely want children at some point.”

“See,” Alexander smiled. “Nothing to worry about. Everything will happen in its own time.”

For a moment we sat smiling around the table, then Alexander took a cookie. “You know, sweetheart, sometimes I feel like all the Motlander mothers are softening the men of this country, but then when I hear you talk about your love for our children...” He took a bite and sighed. “I don’t know if this generation of children realize how lucky they are.”

Indiana and I exchanged a smile.

“We know,” Indiana said. “At least, I’m deeply grateful that I have two women in my life who love me.”

“And a father too,” Christina said.

Alexander chuckled low and finished his cookie. “I don’t know about that. Maybe I can admit to loving him a little. But mostly when he agrees with me, and when he brings me cold beer.”

“Argh.” Christina shook her head at Alexander, but we all shared in his laughter.

“Anyway, we were hoping that you’d come over for lunch,” Christina said and pushed her chair back. “I’ll just pack this gorgeous clock, so nothing happens to it.”

“What are we having?” Indiana asked her.

“I baked the loaf of bread that you like so much. Your dad is grilling a salmon to go with the salad I prepared and there are some delicious dill potatoes and vegetables.”

“Your mom also made a peach pie for dessert.”

I grinned at Alexander. “Oh, we’re definitely coming for lunch. My mouth is already watering from the thought of a homemade meal like that.”

“I can imagine. French food can never beat your mom’s cooking,” Alexander said with pride and took the box from Christina. “Here, let me carry this thing.”

Indiana took my hand as we left our house to walk with Alexander and Christina to theirs. “New things are great, but I prefer the familiar.”

“Is that why you picked me?” I teased.

“No. I picked you because you’re the woman I admire the most.”

“You admire me?” Of all the things he could have said, expressing his admiration touched me deeply.

“Mm-hmm.” Leaning closer, Indiana whispered in my ear so that his parents couldn’t hear him. “And you also drive me completely insane with lust.”

I intertwined our fingers and swung our hands back and forth feeling a childlike delight in my chest. Who would have thought that I could find my perfect match so close to home?

“By the way, you two, did you hear what happened to Banni while you were enjoying your honeymoon in the mountains?”

“No, what happened to him?”

“Pearl and Freya took him to the Motherlands to visit Athena and Finn.”

“They did?”

“Yes, they thought that since this might be his last time to leave Old Europe, he should get the chance to see both the Northlands and the Motherlands.”

“Wow, that’s great. He’ll love Finn and Athena.”

Christina looked back over her shoulder and smiled. “They’re coming back tomorrow, and they might bring Linea if they can get her to come.”

“That would be a miracle,” I said because despite our parents being close friends, Linea hadn’t come with them to the Northlands for at least four or five years.

“How old is she now?” Indiana asked.

“Twenty and as wise and kind as her mother.”

“It’s a shame that she’s so sickly. It seems that every time her parents come up here, she’s never feeling well enough to come with them.”

Christina shrugged. “It’s an excuse. It has to be since she always looks strong and healthy when we go down there.”

“Maybe she just doesn’t like the Northlands.”

“Maybe,” Christina agreed. “I wish I knew why though.”

We had reached the house and I took a deep breath. “Mmm, it smells delicious in here.”

“That would be all the baking I did this morning. Now, how about you two gather Jones and Lara and then Alexander can find some wine for us. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes.” Christina stopped on her way to the kitchen. “We want to enjoy as much time with you as we can before you leave for the summit.”

“Don’t remind us. It’s going to be a lot of drama this year.”

“Because of Belle?”

“Yes, and because Victor still needs to apologize to Freya,” I said.

“That’s right. He keeps saying that it’s between him and Freya and the rest of us should butt out, but Mason, Thor, Aubri, and I are determined to show him that we’re all Freya’s protectors and no one gets to hurt her on our watch.”

CHAPTER 25

Summit of 2466

Indiana

As with every year since I was sixteen, we went to the yearly summit.

This year it was hosted by the Motherlands in a cozy beach town that was a four-hour drone flight south of us.

“Remember that you can’t tell anyone that Banni is in the Northlands,” Aubri told the others before we left our drone.

Out of the Motherland delegation, Holly, Lachlan, and Oliver had all won a seat on the Council in the spring election while Harper and Doreen were still hoping to make it one day. The five of them were kind and inclusive by nature so it was no surprise that they lit up when they saw us.

“How is Belle doing?” Doreen asked Mason. “We’ve been so worried after what happened in December. We were told by Jonah that negotiations were made that allowed her to stay in the Northlands.”

“That’s right. We’re married now and expecting our first child in three weeks.”

“Wow. And is Belle feeling well?”

“Yes, she’s tired from the pregnancy, but otherwise she’s happy.”

The first year that we went to a summit in the Motherlands, we had slept in tents. This time, we were placed in five small beach huts with three people in each.

Sitting in a large half circle of chairs on the beach, we were catching up and waiting for the French to arrive when Oliver received a message.

“Lying Lavender, this is bad. Listen, everyone. Our friends from Old Europe had an emergency landing due to mechanical problems with their drone. Luckily, no one is hurt, but they’re stranded about ninety minutes away from here.”

“I’m not complaining. That means we get tonight without Victor,” Mason joked.

Oliver didn’t laugh. “We’ll have to arrange for a drone to get them.” Turning to his fellow Motlanders, he began a discussion. “They’re in the desert. There won’t be any drones close. We could send one from here.”

Freya resolutely stood up. “It’s fine. I’ll take our drone and fetch them.

It's bigger and faster anyway."

Thor sighed. "Why do you always have to be so damn altruistic? Now I have to go with you and I'd much rather enjoy the sand between my toes here on the beach."

"You don't have to come. We're in the Motherlands. I'm safe here."

"I'll go with her," Oliver offered.

"None of you have to go. We can send the drone if you have the exact coordinates," I pointed out.

"I know, but what if there are problems flying it back? I prefer to go myself."

I arched a brow trying to understand how Freya's peculiar mind worked. "You're willing to spend three hours to pick up a shithead who insulted you? Why?"

"So we can get this summit going. I didn't come here to sit around in beach chairs. We have an important agenda that I would like to tackle."

"All right." I threw my hands up. "Suit yourself."

While Freya and Oliver took off, the rest of us enjoyed our time on the beach. Aubri and I swam and kissed in the water.

It was almost nine before the French delegation arrived. By then the rest of us had already showered and had dinner.

The Motlanders were excited to meet the newest member that had taken Belle's place. Listening to the questions and answers between the woman and the Motlanders, I learned that her name was Zola and she was the youngest member of the parliament. The Motlanders showed great concern for the French, who had traveled for over twelve hours. Greeting them with big hugs they urged them to sit down and have some food.

We Northlanders kept back a little until the French came to greet us and introduce Zola. Since Aubri and I had seen Celeste, Isaac, and Victor recently, we greeted them with nods of our chins.

"Maybe this should motivate you to invest in newer drones for your Explorers," I told Isaac and Victor, who were both personal advisers to the Prime Minister.

Victor answered in a dry tone. "We would love to but as you know we've been prioritizing getting our citizens up above ground."

Freya came to sit next to Aubri, who instantly asked the question that was burning on my mind as well. "Did he apologize to you?"

Freya looked up at Victor, who still stood proud in front of us. "Sort of."

“Sort of isn’t good enough. Did or didn’t he apologize to you?”

Freya looked thoughtful. “He said that he was sorry my feelings were hurt.”

Standing in front of my beach chair, I groaned. Mason and Thor were quick to position themselves close to me with all three of us looking down at Victor.

“What’s going on?” Oliver asked with concern in his voice. “We’re all friends here and yet I’m sensing some strong tension going on.”

Aubri rose to stand with her brother, Thor, and me. “That’s because this dickwad said some unacceptable and inexcusable things to Freya.”

“Oh my, what did you say to upset the Northlanders this much?” Oliver asked as the rest of the summit participants came to gather around us.

The only thing revealing inner turmoil in Victor’s mind was the reddening of his face and the vein on his temple that was protruding. His facial expression and tone remained calm as he answered, “I believe that what we’re witnessing is another example of the lack of confidence that Northlanders seem to have in their women. They’re using their physical size to create a threatening tension; I’m being bullied into apologizing for something that is between me and the woman I allegedly offended.”

“If you mess with one of us you mess with all of us,” I told him in a no-bullshit tone.

“Hmm...” Victor smiled as if I’d cracked a joke.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about how you said that you refer to us French as bees because you think we have a beehive mindset. That’s amusing since you seem to be much more linked to each other’s emotions than we are. You are all personally offended by an insult given to someone else in your group. I find that interesting from a social studies perspective. I’m trying to think of another group of primates who exhibit this type of behavior.”

“Stop comparing us to monkeys and just give the apology to my sister that you owe her.”

“Owe her? I don’t believe I owe her anything since I haven’t taken anything from her.”

“What did he say that was so bad?” one of the Motlanders whispered to another and received the answer, “I don’t know.”

Freya got up from her chair as well. “How about we focus on why we came here? We have a long list of important things that need to be discussed.

I don't want us to start off with bad blood. We're here to make the world a better place and on the grand scale of things, my feelings aren't important."

"I would disagree. We can't make the world a better place if we can't even have a nice tone among the fifteen of us," Holly interjected. "Victor, we understand that you're a proud man and being put on the spot like this is clearly making you defensive. How about you and Freya walk with me to sit by the water for a few minutes? I'll be happy to mediate between you. Maybe it will be easier for you to meet her with empathy and respect when we aren't all staring at you."

"Thank you, Holly, that's a great suggestion, but I'm sure Victor and I can have a civil conversation without a mediator." Looking up at Victor, Freya gave a regal swing of her hand toward the water. "After you."

With a curt nod, he walked past us in the direction of the gentle waves that were rolling onto the sand, creating a calming soundtrack to this intense beginning to this year's summit.

"No touching," Thor shouted after Victor. "And if you make her cry, I'll fucking bury you in the sand."

"After I drown you," Mason yelled.

Freya and Victor ignored their outburst and continued to the edge of the water about fifty feet away from us.

Aubri, Mason, Thor, and I were all standing with our arms crossed, keeping an eye on them.

"How about we give them a moment of privacy to figure things out?" Holly suggested.

"I'm making sure he doesn't touch her," Thor said in a deep voice.

Celeste placed her hand on him. "Isn't the whole issue that Victor refused to touch Freya? From what I heard she offered to move in with him and have children with him. You would think that if he had any interest in touching her, he would have simply agreed."

She had a point and lowering my arms, I muttered to Thor and Mason, "Freya will call out if she needs our help."

"Good." Oliver patted my shoulder. "The French missed the arrival dinner, but we can still have a lovely evening and catch up, can't we?"

"Sure."

We sat around a large bonfire and chitchatted with the others for over two hours before Victor and Freya came back. All this time, we'd kept an eye on them as they sat next to each other talking by the water.

“What the fuck took so long?” Thor asked with a scowl in Victor’s direction.

“You wanted us to talk and we did.”

Mason curled his upper lip. “Yeah, but *what* did you talk about? I’ve never had a two-hour conversation in my life.”

Victor shrugged. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that what I do or say is none of your business.”

Thor grabbed Freya’s shoulder. “Did he apologize to you?”

“He did.”

When Thor looked skeptical, Freya arched a brow and repeated. “Victor gave me a heartfelt apology that I’m satisfied with.”

“Hmm.” I gave Victor a hard stare. “Good decision.”

“Great!” Holly clapped her hands. “Now we’ll put the unease to rest and close that chapter. I know you don’t want a healing love circle, but we could do a fun friendship game instead.”

“Is it the one where we have to compliment each other?” I asked with a frown.

“Yes, do you want to start, Indiana? What positives would you say about us Motlanders? And now that you’ve lived in Old Europe for six months it should be easy to find something to praise them for.”

Thor groaned and covered his eyes, but Freya nudged me with a “Go ahead.”

Inhaling long and hard, I thought about it. “My favorite parts about the Motherlands are the beaches. And my favorite part about Old Europe is that it’s so fucking different.”

“Indiana!” Doreen covered her mouth. “Language please!”

I rolled my eyes. “My point is that Old Europe might be tiny but the way it’s built in levels is clever. Their love for vibrant colors in fashion and architecture is unique, and sometimes I feel like I’m on a different planet.”

Freya went after me. “What I like about the Motherlands is the inclusiveness. You always make us feel welcome and although you’re sometimes too sensitive for your own good, I can see how it’s that very empathy and sensitivity that we, your neighbors, benefit from.”

“What do you mean?” Thor asked with his lips turned downward.

“With their size they could have overtaken both the Northlands and Old Europe if they had wished to. We are lucky that Motlanders are pacifists and show a tolerance for our different ways of living.”

“Thank you, Freya, that’s a mature observation,” Oliver said and bowed his head.

“Old Europe...” Freya tapped her lips. “Hmm... I suppose I admire their focus on cleaning up the world.”

“That’s a matter of survival,” Celeste pointed out.

“True, but the tenacity to keep on working on solutions for future generations is admirable. Each generation of survivors have bettered the circumstances until you were finally able to live above ground again. Your investment in science has allowed you to speed up an otherwise slow process of breaking down the radioactive pollution around you.”

“Thank you, Freya,” Isaac said, and I swear I saw the edge of Victor’s lip twitch in a tiny smile.

The next in line to speak was Celeste, who leaned forward and weaved her fingers around her knee. “The thing that I always look forward to when coming to these summits in the Motherlands is Holly’s tight hugs and Lachlan’s innocent jokes. I don’t mean it in a condescending way, but there’s an adorable innocence about you Motlanders. You wouldn’t hurt a fly and I love that you’ve turned your society upside down. In France the people running our country are the ones attracted to power, which is the way it’s been in most places throughout history. You’ve blocked those people from running your country by selecting Council members based on their values and lack of ego. The way that the five of you have been trained from childhood to put the people first is beautiful. We have scandals with corruption in France and our prime minister is...”

“Celeste!” Victor’s sharp tone cut through and made Celeste pull back in her seat as if he had physically slapped her hand.

“*Oui*, well, anyway...” She looked a little flustered and gave a nervous smile. “The thing I love about the Northlands is the abundance. You have so much room to roam, gorgeous nature, and always enough of everything. The list of what I don’t understand about your culture is endless, but when you drink and ease up, you are some of the loveliest people to be around.”

Oliver was next and with his face lit up from the fire in the middle of our circle, his large nose looked even bigger. “I know this might sound funny coming from a Motlander, but I appreciate the directness of the Northlanders. Sometimes polite people imply so much that I miss what they’re trying to say. With you Northlanders it’s incredibly easy to read the situation because you don’t know the word passive-aggressive. If Victor had insulted one of us,

we probably wouldn't have demanded an apology but rather dropped hints that we expected it. Obviously, I'm appalled at your threats of killing Victor, but at least you address a situation head on and deal with it rather than slowly building up resentment over time. I've noticed in the past that once you've solved a disagreement, you're able to move past it quickly."

I gave Oliver a nod. "Thank you."

He smiled and continued. "I'm always in awe of the level of education that you people from Old Europe have. It's amazing to me how sharp your solutions are when we have complex problems to solve."

The French thanked Oliver and then all eyes looked to Victor, who was next. He remained quiet.

"Victor, what about you?" Holly encouraged him.

Pushing a hand through his dark hair, he puckered his red lips a little and looked like a sullen child who didn't want to be here. With a sigh, he said, "Motlanders are too concerned about individual lives to ever reach ambitious goals. And Northlanders are too busy crawling on the floor for crumbs to notice the cake on the table."

Thor immediately took offense and pushed to the edge of his seat. "We aren't fucking crawling for anyone!"

Doreen was quick to ease the situation, "Victor, dear, you need to stick to the rules of the friendship game. We are looking for the positives here, not what you see as negatives."

He lowered his brow and seemed to think hard. "All right. I like that the Motherlands have added forty-three men to their Council over the last two decades. Equality should be essential in any civilization and holding men responsible for something their forefathers did was always a vile example of misandry."

"What's misandry?" I whispered to Freya.

"Hatred, contempt, or prejudice against men and boys in general."

"For once I agree with Victor," Mason said and pointed to him. "But just for the record, you're the worst at giving compliments. Didn't anyone tell you that a positive thing wrapped in an insult is still an insult?"

Victor waved a hand in front of his face and moved to the side to avoid the drift of smoke from the bonfire. "I never claimed to be a people pleaser."

"What's your favorite part about the Northlands?" Holly asked him.

Victor looked utterly bored as he crossed his ankles. "That it's so far away."

Celeste and Isaac snickered, but three of the Motlanders broke into disturbed gasps, and Holly gave him a firm “Victor!”

He sighed. “Alright. I’ll try to take this stupid game seriously.”

“Yes, and be honest, please. There has to be something you enjoy when you’re in the Northlands.”

“I’m always honest.” He shifted in his seat. “What I enjoy most in the Northlands is running in nature and playing chess with...” He looked at Freya for a split second before he finished his sentence. “With worthy opponents.”

I watched Freya for her reaction, but she had placed her hand by her mouth so I couldn’t see if she was hiding a smile or a yawn.

Once all fifteen of us had shared our favorite things about the other countries, we moved on to chitchat.

People moved around, getting drinks and changing conversation partners. “Isn’t it great to feel how everyone is starting to relax again?” Holly asked me.

I looked at Thor talking with Celeste and Oliver, and Mason laughing with Doreen, Harper, and Isaac.

“Yes, maybe playing the friendship game wasn’t a bad idea.” I clinked my glass with Holly, who still had her bangs cut super short. “By the way, congratulations on making it to the Council.”

“Thank you.” She smiled widely and placed her hand on my upper arm. “It feels good to be able to vote and put forward suggestions. I’m so honored to be given this important role for my people.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great,” I said.

“Are you touching my man?” Aubri came from behind and it immediately made Holly retract her hand from my arm. Breaking into a small laugh, Aubri assured her. “Don’t worry. I know you’re not here to seduce Indy and I doubt you could, even if you tried.”

“It’s just so unnatural for me not to touch people that I speak to. For us Motlanders touch is a form of connection and way of expressing our friendship. I assure you that my touch wasn’t sexual in any way.”

Aubri rubbed Holly’s back. “I know. I was just messing with you. Now tell us, are you ready for tomorrow’s showdown?”

“Showdown?”

“The first debate. I saw that one of the subjects is opening up borders. It could get heated.”

“Mm-hmm.” Holly rubbed her forehead and lowered her voice a little. “We’re aware, but our negotiations with the French have stalled, so we were hoping this summit might be a new breakthrough. We strive toward a borderless world with freedom of movement and thought for everyone.”

“We’ll never agree to that. We want our sovereignty.”

“I understand, but at least you Northlanders aren’t keeping your citizens trapped or denying visitors.”

I exchanged a gaze with Aubri knowing that like me, she was thinking of Banni, whom we had smuggled to the Northlands. He was at the school this week, but once Aubri and I left Old Europe in December, we would most likely never see our friend again.

“I won’t ever support a *no* border policy, but I’ll support an *open* border policy,” I told Holly.

Aubri stood next to me and stuffed her hand into my back pocket. “Is it wrong that I’m kinda excited about the bloodbath tomorrow?”

Holly clicked her tongue. “Let’s hope we can keep it civil.”

“You saw how prickly Victor was tonight. His claws will come out once we pressure them. Especially if we Motlanders and Northlanders gang up on them.”

Holly jerked her head back. “Oh, no, Aubri, don’t say that. We don’t like the idea of ganging up on anyone. We’re looking for a win-win situation, but we haven’t found it yet.”

“You know what, Holly, if Victor gives you trouble, Indiana and I can always bury him on the beach and pretend he drowned.” Aubri and I laughed at Holly’s displeased expression and the shake of her head before she left us.

“It’s so much fun to play with the Motlanders. A few threats of violence and they always vanish quickly.” I pulled Aubri in for a long hug. “I’m gonna miss sleeping with you tonight.”

“Me too.” She kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear. “Wanna have a swim with me at five tomorrow morning? We could watch the sun rise and make love in the ocean.”

My lips spread in a wide grin. “Hell yes!”

CHAPTER 26

Bunch of Nudists

Aubri

On the morning after our first night in the Motherlands, I got up early to spend a magical time with my husband. I was smiling and whistling as I came back from playing with Indiana in the ocean and washed the sand out of my hair using the outside showers.

“Good morning.”

The male voice made me turn to see Isaac come out from the small beach hut next to the one I shared with Freya and Harper. As usual, he was sporting a colorful outfit.

Still in my bathing suit, I turned toward him. “Good morning.”

“Do you have to whistle this early in the morning?”

“Did I wake you?”

“*Oui.*” He yawned. “Why are you so happy at six in the morning anyway?”

“Why are you so grumpy? You’re on a beach, Isaac, what’s not to enjoy? Indiana and I got up early to see the sunrise and swim for a while. You should try it tomorrow.”

He groaned and brushed both hands through his hair while yawning again. “It is nice, isn’t it?”

“Mm-hmm.” I was distracted when my wristband showed Sparrow was calling me. Turning off the water, I answered her call.

“Hey, what’s going on? You never call me this early.”

“I set my timer because I figured you would be busy with important meetings all day and something happened that I *have* to talk to you about.”

“I’m all ears.” To get privacy, I walked back down to the water while finger brushing my newly washed hair with my free hand.

“It’s about Banni.”

“Look, if he’s trying to charm you into sleeping with him, you can tell him from me that he needs to back the fuck off.”

Sparrow’s face was small on the screen of my wristband, but I could tell she was biting her lip. Aiming for a beach chair standing close to the water, I held up my wristband and pushed a button. “Wait a minute, let me just bring

you up so I can see you better.”

Sparrow’s upper body with her curly hair and expressive brown eyes was projected up in front of me.

“Damn, that’s a nice beach. Now you’re making me jealous. Is the water warm?”

“Yes and yes, but hurry up and tell me what’s going on with Banni. Is he hurt?”

“No, he’s fine. But something weird happened and I wanted to ask you about it.”

“Then do it. I feel like you’re holding me in suspense and I’m curious.”

“Okay, okay. So, you know how we’re doing summer camps at the moment and my parents had invited Banni to come and talk about his work in France.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, there’s a girl here this week called...” She trailed off. “Argh, it doesn’t matter what the girl’s name is. The point is that her mom came to pick her up and she was talking and laughing with Banni.”

“Yes?”

“I swear I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I overheard some of their conversation and it was the most insane thing ever. The woman told him that she’s a widow and that she’d had heard about the French system where they sleep around without any concerns.”

“And?”

“And she invited him to come and visit her.”

I chewed on my lip.

“Aubri, why don’t you look shocked? Did you hear the part about the woman straight up asking Banni to have sex with her? I mean what else would an invitation to her house mean.”

“Did he go?”

“That’s the weirdest part. He declined.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She was pretty and they seemed to have good chemistry. Normally, nothing this juicy ever happens on this island and I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Tilting my head, I smiled at my best friend. “In a way it’s sort of sad that the wildest thing to happen on Victoria’s Island is a bit of flirtation and a rejection.”

“You’re right, but that’s the thing I can’t figure out though; why did he reject her? I thought you said the French sleep with everyone they meet.”

“Hmm... I don’t know. It’s weird to me too. Although, he did tell me once that he’s picky about whom he sleeps with. Maybe she just wasn’t his type.”

“Maybe.”

“You could ask him.”

“Me?” Sparrow shook her head with gusto. “No. What if he mistakes my question for interest? I shouldn’t even be gossiping with you about it, but I just couldn’t fall asleep last night because it’s so confusing. I mean what man would reject a woman... unless...” Her eyes lit up as if she just had a breakthrough. “Do you think he’s not into women at all? Have you actually ever seen him with a woman? Maybe it’s all just a front he uses because he’s uncomfortable with his homosexuality.”

I laughed. “Your brain is a magnificent mess of loose connections; do you know that? Even though I haven’t personally seen Banni have sex with anyone, I don’t believe he turned her down because he isn’t attracted to women in general. The French truly don’t care about who you sleep with and there’s no shame about homosexuality. I can’t see him gaining anything from pretending to like women if he doesn’t.”

“Not like Walker and that damn Harris.”

I groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“Ah, come on, Aubri, don’t blame yourself for crushing on Walker. You hardly knew him, and there was no way that you could know he was gay.”

“I *am* blaming myself because the reason I pushed Solo and Mason so bloody hard to let me come on that training camp with the Huntsmen was to get to know Walker. And then he almost killed Indiana.”

“I shouldn’t have reminded you. It’s just that when Banni rejected that woman I figured that he was hiding his sexuality like Walker, you know?”

Looking back toward the beach houses, I could see the delegation members coming outside one by one. Holding a hand to my mouth, I snickered. “You won’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“What?”

I turned and pointed the camera discreetly in the direction that would allow Sparrow to see for herself.

“What the hell? Are they showering together?”

“Mm-hmm. Those two women between the yellow and the green house,

that's Doreen and Holly. See how they're just yapping away as if showering naked outside isn't a big deal?"

"It's because they're nudists. The Motlander children are the same here at the school, did you forget?"

"No, but at least they shower inside and with their own gender. Anyone can walk by and see them."

Sparrow laughed. "I think someone just did."

I looked back over my shoulder to see Isaac talking to the showering women. "Yeah, the French don't care about nudity either. And you want to know the craziest part? They all think that *we're* the weird ones."

Sparrow chuckled. "Maybe we are. Son of a sea lion, I think two naked men are running toward you."

I turned my head again to see Lachlan and Oliver race each other to the ocean. They were butt naked and laughing as they ran past me and threw themselves into the waves.

Sparrow covered her mouth as her shoulders bobbed up and down with laughter. "Oh, wow."

I laughed. "Don't you just wish you were here with us?"

"So I could see dangling dicks around me? Sure!"

It was soothing to laugh with Sparrow and I felt my chest squeeze. "I've missed this. Being able to connect and share the smallest things. I wish Old Europe didn't have that stupid block on communication."

"I know. And the rule that we can't visit you. I would love to come and see where you live and go to that fight club you told me about."

I grew a little serious. "Indiana and I were talking about how weird it will be that, once we leave Old Europe in December, we might never see Banni or any of our friends again."

"Yeah, but if the summits continue, you will visit France every third year. Maybe you can see him then."

"It would be brief because these summits always have a tight schedule. You know what I wish?"

"What?"

"That you and I could do Exploration work, but in the Northlands, you know." I squatted and let my hand draw circles in the sand.

"Yeah, that would be awesome." She laughed. "But then you and I should be the bosses and have all the large men working for us."

"Ha... that would be the day." I kept drawing in the sand and then all of a

sudden, an idea hit me. “Wait a minute...”

“Hmm?”

“We freed Belle...”

“Yes, you did...”

“What if we could free Banni too?”

“I’m all for it. But how would you do that?”

My mind was spinning. “Lucifer’s ass. I just had a fucking epiphany. What if by freeing Banni, I could free myself and maybe even you as well?”

“I love where this is going but you have to tell me more.”

With impatience and eagerness, I blew her a kiss. “I don’t have time to explain, but once I have it all figured out I’ll tell you everything, okay?”

“All right. Armor up, warrior, and go free both yourself and Banni.”

“I will and hey, thank you for sharing the latest gossip from the island with me. You’d better get to the bottom of why Banni rejected the widow or you’ll be mystified forever.”

“You really think I should ask him?”

I was walking back toward the cabins. “Asking is often the fastest way to getting an answer.”

“Hmm...maybe I can find a clever way to bring it up without asking him directly.”

“Let me know how it goes. I’ll talk to you later.”

As soon as I ended the call, I scanned the beach for my delegation and saw Thor standing fifty feet away looking out on the ocean with a coffee cup in his hands.

“Thor.” Excited to share my idea with him, I ran. But once I got there, I could tell something was off about him. “You okay?”

“I honestly don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Because of all the nudity?”

Thor was the youngest of us and with his hair newly cut short on the sides, his ears looked bigger than normal.

“Can’t you just ignore it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It’s not that. I’m in a cabin with Zola and Oliver.”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t figure out if the French set her up to it, but she crawled into my bed last night.”

My eyes blinked in quick succession. “Who, Zola?”

He nodded. “I’ve had offers from the French in the past, but I woke up

with a woman literally lifting my cover and cuddling up to me.”

I could tell Thor was shocked and placed my hand on his elbow. “What did you do?”

Scratching his neck, he moved his hand with the cup enough that coffee spilled over the top. “I did nothing.”

“You did nothing?”

“I was so baffled by her being there that I froze.” He met my gaze. “It was so fucking awkward.”

“What did Zola do then?”

“I think she was hoping for me to participate but when I didn’t, she simply went back to her own bed.”

Looking past Thor’s right shoulder, I scanned for Zola and saw her talking with Celeste and Victor.

“Do you want me to talk to her?”

“Nooo.” Thor looked horrified. “Why would you?”

“Just to tell her to stay in her own bed... unless, of course, you changed your mind and want a French adventure.”

Thor lowered his brow and muttered, “I’ll deal with her myself.”

I shoved his shoulder playfully. “You sure you don’t want your badass cousin to protect you? I promise to scare the crap out of her.”

“No, Aubri. Just forget that I told you.”

“Ohh, come on. You would do it for me.”

Thor was just about to drink from the cup but stopped the movement in midair. With his brow raised, he scoffed. “If you came and told me that one of the men here had crawled into your bed, I would tear his limbs off.”

“I appreciate it, cousin, but we both know you wouldn’t have to do anything because if someone crawled into my bed without an invitation, I’d deal with them myself.” With a pat on his chest, I leaned in. “I actually wanted to talk to you and the others about a brilliant idea I had.”

It took Thor three minutes to call our delegation together and when I explained my idea to them, they were excited.

“It’s brilliant, but do you think we could get Khan and Magni on board?” Indiana asked.

I turned to Thor, who was chewing on his lip with a thoughtful expression. “Hmm... I get why you want to use your expertise and obviously it could help a lot of people, but a project like that is expensive. For Khan to put Exploration work on the budget, he would need a good reason.”

“Leave that to me. I know just how to sell this to him,” Freya said.

All eyes looked to her as I asked, “How? Are you going to explain how many people would benefit from this?”

Freya smiled at me. “Nope. I’ll present it as an opportunity for the Northlands to show our superiority and gain influence. And to close the deal fast, I’ll sprinkle it with the allure of my mother seeing Dad as altruistic and visionary. Their twenty-ninth wedding anniversary is coming up on Friday and he’s stressed about what to get her. Cleaning the world would be the perfect gift.”

I chuckled. “You’re bloody brilliant, Freya, do you know that?”

Indiana rubbed my back and laughed with me while talking to Freya. “Your parents are so funny. There’s nothing your dad wouldn’t do for your mom, is there?”

Freya arched a brow. “There is.”

Without her saying it out loud, we all knew she was hinting at the fact that Khan still refused to change the law that would make it possible for her to be his heir. Despite Thor’s being younger than Freya, he was in line to take over the Northlands one day.

Thor ignored his sister’s comment and clapped his hands together. “Okay, so we have a plan then. Freya, call Dad and work your magic. In the meantime, I’ll go talk with the Motlanders and see what they’re willing to give us if we help them convince France to open their borders. I’m thinking that they could revisit the contract for new drones that they’re buying from us. They reduced the yearly order by fifteen percent this year.”

Mason pushed his hands through his hair. “Hell’s bells.”

“What?” Thor asked.

“Are you truly going to ask the Motherlands to pay the Northlands for doing something we’re eager to do?”

“Not pay directly. Just increase the numbers of drones they order from us yearly.” With a shrug, Thor walked away with a last comment hanging in the air. “It’s politics.”

CHAPTER 27

Agenda

Indiana

We hiked three miles to a cultural center that the Motlanders were proud of.

Holly, who was the youngest of the Motlanders, opened our first day of debating with a speech.

“So much of history was lost after the war. The survivors were few and, unfortunately, they didn’t have the resources to bury all the dead and restore what had been destroyed. Their decision to bury whole cities was probably what saved them, but it also left a painful void that we’ve collectively been grieving for centuries. For the longest time, the strategy was to not talk or think about the past. Generations before us were solely focused on moving forward and creating a better world for everyone. We still are, but with the contact with the Northlands and Old Europe, a new curiosity has risen in the Motherlands to understand our roots. This cultural center was built with the help of archeologists. Everything is replicated to show how some of the original people on these lands lived. I encourage you to walk around and take in the beautiful patterns and drawings on the fabric of the tents here.”

“Tepees... they’re called tepees,” Doreen called out to Holly.

“Oh, sorry, yes. Anyway, according to the history there were many different groups of people living in small areas and each group held on to an identity of belonging to a certain tribe. Sometimes feuds would happen because of territorial disputes or... ehh...” Holly looked around as if trying to think of something. “Well, I’m not sure why they would argue, but apparently when they did, the leaders of the different groups would come together in a tepee like this and have a peace meeting. That’s why we thought it would be perfect for us to have our first debate in here today.”

“That’s fine, but can we at least have chairs to sit on?” Mason asked.

“They didn’t have chairs back then.”

“They probably didn’t have drones either, but that’s not my problem. This is the year 2466 and I don’t want to sit on the ground for a whole fucking day.”

“Don’t worry, Mason, we’ve brought cushions,” Oliver said.

“A cushion isn’t the same as a chair. All you yoga-loving people might be flexible enough to sit on the ground for a whole day, but we Northlanders aren’t. Well, maybe except for Freya and Aubri. Look, I’m fine sleeping on the ground if I have to, but I’m gonna be one grumpy fucker if you ask me to sit cross-legged for hours. Ask yourself if that’s good for the debate.”

“If you’re getting a chair for the Northlanders, I would like one too,” Victor said.

“Me too,” Celeste added and was quickly followed by the other three Europeans.

Holly’s shoulders sank. “All right, we’ll find chairs for you, but just for the record, we didn’t set it up this way to torture you. We did it to imitate a real peace meeting.”

“You did it to show off how flexible you are.” Aubri’s tone was playful and held no malice.

I knew from experience that my wife was extremely flexible herself. Her fighting style was based on her acrobatic jumps and kicks. Sitting like this wouldn’t have bothered her, but Thor, Mason, and I were stiffer, and I was pleased that Mason had protested against sitting on the ground.

“Are we smoking a peace pipe as well?” Victor asked as we waited for the chairs to be brought in.

“A what?”

“The ritual of the peace meetings included sharing a pipe of tobacco.”

The Motlanders whispered among themselves before Lachlan answered, “Even if that’s true, no one today knows where to find tobacco.”

“You don’t find it. You grow it and turn it into the product that can be smoked in a pipe.”

“All right, but since you seem to know so much about tobacco, do you have any?” Holly asked Victor.

“No. It wasn’t considered fundamental or beneficial for human consumption, so it didn’t make it into the survival bunkers.”

“Then how do you know about these sorts of things?”

Victor sighed. “Because I studied history in school. Didn’t you?”

The way he said it made me want to kick him. Victor was so arrogant and an expert at dropping hints at how intellectually superior he found his people to be compared to the rest of us.

“Victor, turn it down,” I told him. “The Motlanders might be too sweet to call you out on your rude arrogance, but we Northlanders won’t stand for that

shit.”

“Let me guess, you’ll *kill me?*” he said in a bored tone.

“Nah, but we just might whip out the chessboard and let Freya humble you a little.” Mason, Indiana, Thor, and I all laughed because Victor’s loss to Freya in chess at the first summit had haunted him for years.

After fifteen chairs were brought in, we sat with our delegation in a large circle where everyone could see each other.

“All right, I hope you are all comfortable now and ready to begin today’s debate,” Holly started. “As per tradition, each delegation has made a list of things they wish to discuss during this summit. Some of these things are recurrent from previous years.”

“Can we strike male aggression?” Thor asked. “I’m tired of telling you Motlanders every year that your history books are wrong.”

Holly’s mouth turned downward. “On behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Motlander women who have moved to the Northlands, we think it’s important to emphasize that history can never be allowed to repeat itself. Women’s right to decide over their own bodies must be protected.”

Isaac spoke up. “I would like to support Thor and have the point removed from the agenda. We French have already made our position clear. Women will continue to be requested to give birth to at least two children. It’s a matter of survival for us. We debated this subject at length two years ago and our stance on the matter hasn’t changed. You may also recall that we argued that your view on male greed, pride, and aggression being responsible for the Toxic War is historically incorrect.”

Freya spoke up. “It’s nothing new that people in power define history or that the next generations accept it as truth. Personally, I’m happy to discuss male aggression if there are current issues that concern you Motlanders. But I too would like you to acknowledge that the responsibility for the Toxic War and the near annihilation of humanity doesn’t lie with men entirely. The people in power when the war broke out were both men and women.”

Aubri was moving in her seat and I looked over with a questioning look. She was just about to say something but then Holly bowed her head and spoke.

“I hear you and we’re willing to shelve the subject of male aggression for now. Should time allow it, we’ll visit it again, and if not, we shall bring it up as a subject for next year’s summit. Instead let’s move on to the subject that the Northlands have raised about worldwide communication. I give the floor

to Thor.”

My cousin rose from his chair. “Now that Indiana and Aubri live and work in Old Europe it sucks that we can’t call them. We suggest that we agree on a worldwide communication network where everyone can talk to everyone.”

The Motlanders leaned forward and quickly conversed before Oliver rose. “We support the suggestion.”

All eyes went to the French delegation members, who all sat with their arms crossed. Slowly, Victor rose but he took time before he said, “We’ve already discussed this subject with our prime minister several times. It’s been a topic in parliament hearings as well. The consensus is that we can’t allow open communication.”

Groans came from us Northlanders, and the Motlanders whispered among themselves.

“However,” Victor continued, and it made us all pay attention again. “We might be open to discussing access for our people to a worldwide social network.”

“You would?” Holly expressed the surprise we all felt.

“If we’re compensated enough.”

Mason threw up his hands. “That makes no sense. Why would you let your people be on a social network, but not be able to call anyone outside the country?”

“Who would they call?” Celeste asked. “Our people don’t know anyone outside of Old Europe.”

Lachlan was given the floor and he spoke with enthusiasm. “A worldwide social network would be a great way to build friendships. We are happy to invite you all to join us on our largest platform called Fun with Friends.”

Freya kept her face neutral but the rest of us Northlanders laughed. “I’ve seen that shit. It’s nothing but inspirational quotes and cute animal videos.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Lachlan asked.

I stretched my legs and stuffed my hands under my thighs. “We prefer something a bit more entertaining like drone racing, crude jokes, porn clips, and funny pranks.”

Victor crossed his arms. “Somehow I doubt your definition of funny pranks would match the Motlanders’ idea of wholesome entertainment.”

“Says the man without humor,” I barked back.

Wringing his hands, Oliver drew his eyebrows close. “We don’t mean to

disrespect the size of your countries, but from a practical and logistical perspective it would make sense that you join our platform.”

“Why?” Aubri raised her chin and frowned at Oliver.

“Well, because there’s one point seven billion of us versus twelve or thirteen million combined Northlanders and Europeans.”

“But isn’t Fun with Friends censored?” Thor asked. “Our people would violate your stupid rules about proper communication all the time.”

“Fun with Friends is part of our WiseShare network, which is monitored by the librarians. It’s true that we have to follow certain rules. Crude talk won’t be tolerated.”

Freya took the floor. “I’ve had conversations with Jonah and Pearl about a shared social media platform in the past. For those who haven’t been on Fun with Friends yet, I’d like to explain the difference between what we know in the Northlands and Motherlands.”

People were nodding so she continued.

“The biggest difference is that platforms in the Motherlands are limited to using tool technology. It’s part of the postwar protection law that was established back in 2061. Tool technology means that the system has to work as a tool *for* you and not the other way around. In the Northlands, we don’t have that law and social media platforms are allowed to use tactics aimed at keeping the users engaged for as long as possible. Algorithms are designed to attack the human reward system in the medial forebrain bundle and create an addiction.” Freya pointed to her head.

“Are you sure?” Doreen used a skeptical tone.

“Yes. I understand it’s hard for you to believe because you’ve never experienced anything like it. In the Motherlands a game or social platform cannot *want* anything from you. But in the Northlands, there are ads for you to click on and notifications nudging you to come and spend more time on the platform.”

“So? We can just ignore all that. We don’t need fucking librarians to protect us from crude content,” I argued.

“There are other issues with our social network platforms. Because they are designed to make you want to spend time on them, they will show you what you want to see and eventually skew your worldview.”

Thor leaned forward and frowned at his sister. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Whenever you click the barfing bin

or the chopped-off head, you're telling the system that you disagree with a post and the algorithms will know not to show you that sort of thing again. Before long you end up in a bubble on your platform with people who all agree with you. You might even think that everyone thinks like you."

Leaning back in his seat, Mason groaned. "I don't see the problem. Why would I want to see something I disagree with?"

Freya's shoulders fell. "I'm pointing out the differences, not telling you what's right or wrong. In the protection law of 2061, it is stated that a breakdown of civil communication led to increased division and outrageous lies, which flamed the Toxic War. The Motherlands value censorship because history shows that lies spread faster than truth. Democracy depends on shared truths while autocracy relies on shared lies."

I glared at Freya. "Why are you defending the Motherlands? You've always been a believer in free speech."

"Indy, I'm not defending the Motherlands. I'm simply explaining a topic that I've discussed many times and know a lot about."

"Yeah, well, if you know so much then explain what autocracy means," Mason said.

Victor snorted, but Freya patiently explained. "Autocracy is when one person has complete power. In the Motherlands and France they have democracy, where they vote to decide who leads their country."

"Anything else is a dictatorship," Isaac interjected.

"We had an election too," Mason pointed out

"Yes. Once, back in April 2449," Freya confirmed. "That's seventeen years ago. A true democracy would require regular elections."

"Still, Khan was *elected* by the people," Mason said with a pointed stare in Isaac's direction.

Freya stuffed her hands in the pockets of her flowery summer dress. "I think we should save that conversation for another day."

With Freya sitting down, Thor turned to the Motlanders. "Give us an example of what you would censor."

"Isn't it easier to ask them what they wouldn't censor?" Isaac interjected.

Lachlan answered, "Our librarians censor polarization. Attacking or alienating a group isn't allowed."

"Don't you people long for freedom of speech?" I asked.

"We have a moderated version. Most speech is allowed, but nothing that is aggressive, demeaning, or hurtful. You know that."

Mason stood up and stretched for a second. “So, are you saying that if we were all on the same network, I couldn’t insult Victor?”

“You would be warned if you did,” Holly answered.

“Ahh.” Throwing a dismissive hand gesture, Mason scoffed. “That would never work for us. Insulting Motlanders and Europeans is our national sport.”

“Well, now that you’re bringing it up.” Oliver and the other Motlanders exchanged glances that warned me they were about to get as confrontational as Motlanders could. “We are concerned about the political tension between your countries.” Oliver forced a polite smile. “With the threats from Monsieur Moreau to not send a delegation this year, we worried that there might not be a summit this year. We’re relieved to see that the bonding our three delegations have done over these years is paying off now. Here we are, communicating despite the conflict that lingers between the Northlands and Europe.”

Victor leaned forward and placed his hands on his thighs. “What’s your point, Oliver?”

Holly stood up next to Oliver and placed her brown hand on his white shirt. “What we’re trying to say is that your countries are like two bubbles and everyone within those bubbles agrees that people in the other bubble are wrong. You’ve surrounded yourself with the likeminded for so long that you have a low tolerance for people with other opinions or values.”

“At least we’re not fucking keeping our citizens hostage,” Mason exclaimed.

The five French kept their stoic calmness, but their down-turned mouths and creased foreheads revealed that they didn’t appreciate Mason’s outburst.

“Mason, we understand that you’re personally invested in this subject, but let’s keep this debate civil and constructive,” Holly pleaded. “And unless you’re presenting, please sit down.”

As Mason sat, Thor stood up again. “A shared social media platform is fine and all, but what we should be talking about is open borders.” He looked straight at the French. “Do you like being prisoners?”

“Thor, be constructive please,” Holly pleaded with a disapproving tone.

Turning to her, Thor spread out his hands. “Just because you’re afraid of pointing out the obvious doesn’t mean I can’t do it. They said they would be open to a social media network, so why don’t you ask them what their price is?”

Holly took a second and then she asked in a level voice, “Victor, as the

leader of your delegation, can you share with us what it would take for your government to agree to a worldwide social network?"

Victor raised his chin. "At last, a relevant question. In order for us to consider such a thing we would need to be compensated with substantial resources to clean our lands and build housing for our people."

"You should add a few drones as well," Celeste whispered to him.

Holly folded her hands. "Please define what substantial means to you.?"

Victor tapped his fingers on his thigh. "We want to double the current speed of the cleaning efforts and we want resources to build units above ground to house ten thousand people within the next two years."

"You want us to *double* the speed?" The Motlanders looked disturbed by the outrageous price.

My gaze went to Freya, who hadn't said much. Her expression was passive as I waited for her or Thor to share the plan that we Northlanders had already brewed this morning. When Freya rose from her chair, I saw Aubri bite her lower lip and hold her breath. What Freya was about to say could change Aubri's future.

"I suggest that we take a break. It will allow the French time to search for the sanity they seem to have lost. In the meantime the rest of us can discuss with our delegations what resources we can offer Old Europe at this time."

Victor scowled at her, and Aubri looked disappointed, but Freya's suggestion was accepted.

"Let's take a break and meet back here in twenty minutes," Lachlan said.

As we walked out of the tepee, Aubri whispered to Freya, "Why didn't you present the plan we talked about?"

"Patience, Aubri, patience."

CHAPTER 28

Negotiations

Aubri

When we resumed the meeting, the tension in the tepee was thick. The body language of the French was closed off and defensive and it occurred to me that this was similar to a physical fight where the parties were prepared for a hard battle.

Each country had their own agenda and in the last twenty minutes, the five of us Northlanders had strategized about how to sell our plan and make it look like we were presenting a gift to the French.

Of course, Freya and Thor disagreed on the method, but I had high hopes that our offer was too good to resist for the French.

Doreen started out by saying, “We want to acknowledge what a significant step it would be if every person on this planet had accessibility and freedom to be part of a social network. A platform allowing for friendships to flourish across the planet is what we’re hoping to achieve with the help of our fellow delegations from the Northlands and Old Europe. We truly believe it would be a great accomplishment that we could all be proud of. Here is our contribution to make it possible.” Doreen handed Victor a piece of paper.

He read it through and handed it to Simon, who shared it with the other French while Victor nodded his head to Doreen and turned to us.

“And what are you willing to pitch in?”

Thor rose and leaning back on his heels, he stuffed his hands in his pockets like it wasn’t a big deal. “We talked about it, and we are willing to help you more than double your cleaning efforts.”

Victor’s left eyebrow arched. “And how do you plan to do that?”

“How many Explorers do you have now?”

“We have eight teams of five Explorers. Currently I believe our number is thirty-five.” Victor looked to Isaac and Celeste for confirmation.

“Thirty-three,” Celeste answered. “We’re hoping to get it up within the next few months.”

Thor pulled his hands from his pockets and rolled his thumbs. “In that case, I’m confident that we can more than triple the speed.”

“Care to explain how?” Victor said with slight impatience.

“By increasing the total number of Explorers from thirty-three to one hundred.”

Simon snorted. “That’s impossible.”

“We’re not talking about reluctant, unqualified French people who see the job as a last resort. We would recruit and train sixty-seven Northlanders who are as strong and qualified as Aubri and Indiana.”

With a quick side glance to Victor and Isaac, Celeste exclaimed. “As the head of the environmental department, I can confirm that Aubri’s and Indiana’s special skill set has been helpful.”

Victor crossed his arms. “Even so, we couldn’t accommodate sixty-seven foreigners when we barely have enough housing for our own citizens.”

Thor was quick to retort. “It wouldn’t be a problem if you let your people travel and move to other places.”

The French looked uncomfortable as they moved in their seats. I had a pretty good idea that they all wished they had the power to set their people free, but it wasn’t up to them.

“Your government is so afraid of losing people, but what if you opened up and accepted outsiders? That’s what we did in the Northlands and our country grew by more than fifteen percent.”

“Yes, and it changed your culture,” Victor pointed out. “How many times have we heard you mention that the old Nmen aren’t happy with the changes?”

“Change is inevitable,” Freya said and took the floor. “If you’re blocking change, you’re blocking progress.”

She and Victor locked eyes for a long moment before she continued. “Indiana and Aubri have proven that outsiders have a lot to offer your people. You wanted to double the speed of the environmental work that you’re doing and we’re offering you the manpower to cover wider areas and work faster. You would be a fool to decline our gift.”

Ka-dong, ka-dong, ka-dong. I could hear my own heartbeat and held my breath as Freya stood facing Victor.

“I would argue that it’s foolish to take a gift that could blow up in our faces,” he said with his lip curled up.

“The Northlanders that we could send you would be excited about doing Exploration work. They would have the right attitude and skill set,” Freya emphasized.

“That would be amazing,” Celeste exclaimed as her gaze went to Aubri and me. “With a hundred Explorers we could have twenty teams going full speed.”

Freya smiled. “Exactly! So far, your teams have focused on France, but our people could focus on the neighboring countries and help speed up the process of cleaning Europe.”

Isaac and Victor were muttering low and then Isaac asked, “You’re willing to give us sixty-seven Explorers in exchange for our accepting social media?”

“And free travel for your people,” Freya added.

Victor arched a brow again. “Is that your attempt at being funny?”

“We’ll settle for social media,” Holly chimed in. “Free travel can follow later.”

Holly received an annoyed glance from us Northlanders and Thor was quick to put her in her place. “Northlanders never settle. If the French aren’t ready to open their borders fully yet, then we want a declaration that they’re working in that direction. For now, we want to see the French ban on international communication lifted.”

Mason pointed to Victor. “If you’re willing to let your people join a social network, then you might as well let them call and mail as well.”

Victor stood and spoke on behalf of the French. “Obviously, a larger cleaning effort would be interesting to us, but it’s not just a matter of more Explorers. We would need to match them with labs and technicians who can analyze the samples they bring back. As Celeste pointed out, we don’t have what you consider appropriate accommodation for them.”

“Those are practicalities that we could surely figure out along the way,” Freya argued.

“We could help with scientists,” Lachlan said quickly.

“Yes, and maybe the Explorers could be trained to do some of the tests themselves,” Aubri added.

Victor still had his arms crossed. “I appreciate your enthusiasm and generosity, but it’s not as easy as you make it sound. There are things you haven’t considered.”

Freya angled her head and spoke directly to him. “I’m sure there are, but if we work together, we could do something truly magnificent. Aubri and Indiana are trained and understand what the job entails. Aubri has gracefully agreed to lead the training of the Explorers in the Northlands. That way we

could send fully trained teams to you with drones and equipment. We will, of course, make sure they understand the basics of your culture and are ready to do their job from day one.”

Despite his impassive façade, I could tell Victor wanted the results that a small army of Explorers could achieve. “You think they could ever understand our culture?”

Everyone in the room was quiet. Even Freya had no assurances to give.

“It all sounds great. You would send strong and skilled men to clean up Europe, but the thing you’re forgetting is the destruction those same men could cost us. Northlanders have less emotional control than children.”

“Don’t you fucking compare us to children,” Mason barked and snorted, “Go snack on a snake, Victor.”

Victor kept looking at Freya while throwing a nod in Mason’s direction. “Your cousin just made my case that Northlanders are easily riled up, and it’s no secret that you’re all possessive and jealous by nature. We would love to accept your generous offer, but you would have to guarantee that we won’t have another three-hour massacre.” Victor was just about to sit down but then he changed his mind and continued. “Think about it. How would you find sixty-seven men who could live by our law of sleeping with a sex partner no more than three times?” Victor’s challenging stare wandered over each of us Northlanders until it landed back on Freya. “Tell me, Freya, could you live by that law yourself?”

She didn’t blink and stood like a queen as she tilted her head a little. “That depends who I’m having sex with.”

“Don’t let him mess with your head,” Thor warned her.

“It’s a fair question,” Simon argued. “Aubri and Indiana have lived in Old Europe for seven months and except for that one threesome they had in the beginning, I doubt they’ve slept with anyone else than each other.”

My face flamed red as I felt my cousins and brother stare at me.

“You had a threesome?” Mason asked with disbelief.

I cleared my throat but couldn’t find any words.

“Simon, how the fuck did you even know about that?” Indiana asked in a harsh voice.

Simon shrugged. “Everyone knows. It was in the News after your lover posted that picture of you two having sex.”

I was fuming and scooted further down into my seat while Freya placed her hand on Mason’s shoulder. “Indiana and Aubri are married. What

happened between them is water under the bridge.”

Simon continued, “My point is that they didn’t change partners like us French but stuck to each other like Northlanders. If you send tens of Northlanders, we’re bound to have problems with them socially.”

“Maybe the time has come for you to abandon your artificial system of keeping people apart,” Freya suggested. “Why not allow people to fall in love and live happy lives?”

Victor gave a mocking laugh. “Maybe we’re the happy ones, did you consider that? We get to fuck a new person every night.”

It was almost as if Freya flinched a little, but her voice was calm when she answered, “If it’s so great, then I’m sure our Explorers will have no problem assimilating.”

“Oooh, I’m excited. I say we accept,” Celeste exclaimed.

Freya folded her hands with a tiny smile. “What about you, Victor? Do you accept our proposal?”

I couldn’t help feeling that Freya was pushing Victor’s buttons on purpose. She had used the word proposal and it seemed like a reminder of the time he had rejected her cruelly. Even though her suggestion to be with him back then had been nothing but a mind game, I still didn’t understand why she would give him the power to reject her twice.

Victor touched his nose and looked away. We all waited for a long moment, before he met her gaze again. “We’ll need to clear it with the parliament, but yes, I hope that we can soon accept your proposal.”

CHAPTER 29

Details

Aubri

After a long and exhausting day of debating in the tepee we enjoyed a traditional feast served by people dressed in colorful clothing.

Later, when we walked the three miles back to the beach houses that night, I held hands with Indiana and talked with Celeste who was walking by my side.

“That massacre, that Victor mentioned, I’ve heard about it before, I think. What happened?”

“Oh, you mean the three-hour massacre?” Celeste said. “Well, it’s something we all learn about in school. It was the biggest mass murder since the war, but it happened way back in the twenty-second century. There have been movies and books about the tragic story of Amélie. She was a woman in her thirties who had sex with a man named Pierre. The story goes that he became obsessed with her and couldn’t handle that she moved on to have new lovers. One day, he came to talk to her and apparently seeing her with another man made him lose his mind in jealousy. In a rampage that lasted three hours, Pierre first killed Amélie and the man he found her with. After that, he went around the district with an axe and killed everyone he could find, shouting that they had all slept with Amélie. People tried to fight back and take the axe from him, but he was a strong construction worker, and the nature of the survival bunkers is like a maze of connections. Eventually, they managed to isolate him and detain him. Once Pierre settled down, he was horrified at what he had done. We saw recordings of his testimony where he talked about feeling insane with jealousy and having no control. He was crying and saying how much he regretted not getting help when he realized that he had fallen in love.”

“Wow, poor guy,” I breathed.

“Poor *guy*?” Celeste gave me a puzzled look. “What about the people he killed?”

“No, I mean it’s such a sad love story. It’s tragic that it came to all those people dying.”

“*Exactement.*” Celeste nodded. “That’s why something like that can

never happen again. Falling in love is dangerous.”

“Just because one person loses his mind doesn’t mean everyone else will. I think love is magical.” Indiana lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of my hand.

“Hmm... You’ve been together for months now. How are you not tired of having sex with the same partner? Don’t you long for variety?”

We laughed and it made Celeste laugh with us.

“Will you at least invite others into your relationship?” She chuckled.

“Are you fishing for an invitation?” I asked.

She gave a mischievous grin. “I would be up for it if you two are.”

“We’re not,” Indiana said fast. “I’m not sharing my woman with anyone.”

Squeezing his hand, I smiled and felt completely at peace with my decision to marry my best friend.

When we reached the beach, we saw Thor standing in front of Victor and Isaac, who sat on the porch in front of one of the small beach huts that served as our houses this week.

“I’m telling you that we have integrated over a million women from the Motherlands and not all of them have been faithful. It’s not as if our men have gone on killing sprees because things didn’t turn out the way they hoped.”

“Do you have people in jail for violent crimes fueled by jealousy? Yes or no?” Victor asked.

“Probably, but for every man who misbehaves, we have millions who don’t. We wouldn’t send anyone to Old Europe without preparing them for your weird view on free sex. That should be fucking obvious.”

“We are not the weird ones! You are!” Isaac claimed.

To break up the argument between Thor, Victor, and Isaac, I made a suggestion. “How about we start out small?”

When they shifted their focus to me, I continued, “We could train twenty men and see how they do in France.”

Victor sat with his feet on the steps to the porch. With his yellow shirt and blue vest, he reminded me of a colorful version of an old-fashioned banker. “Tell me how you would explain our culture to others when you’ve clearly not adapted to it yourself.” His gaze fell to Indiana’s and my fingers, which were still intertwined.

“That’s a good point.” I pretended to be thinking and then I said, “Tell

you what, I'm willing to select and train the best Explorers you've ever seen, but I'll need an expert on your culture to train them with me. If you convince your prime minister to send Banni with me and Indiana when we go back in December, then he can explain everything about your culture."

Victor placed his elbows on the porch behind him and leaned back.

"That's not a bad idea," Isaac, who sat next to Victor, said. "Banni is experienced and we know he's a great instructor."

"I doubt he would want to live in the Northlands," Victor pointed out.

"Why the fuck not? The Northlands is the best country in the world," Thor insisted.

Victor shrugged. "Sure, if you like pine trees, good beer, and celibacy."

Thor was just about to say something but closed his mouth with a scowl. "Talk to your prime minister. Hopefully, he's smart enough to know he would be a bloody fool to say no to our gift."

"I will call him later when it's morning in France."

"Good." Thor looked to me and Indiana. "I fucking wish they had beers or booze here, I need a drink."

Mason placed his hand on Thor's shoulder. "Let's go for a walk."

Indiana whispered in my ear. "Come on, I think Mason brought some weed."

"Nah, it's fine. You go. I'll check up on Freya."

I had spotted Freya walking toward the water. She had been standing by the corner of the hut listening in on the discussion between Victor and Thor without saying a word.

"Freya, wait up." Running to catch up to her, I placed an arm around her shoulder. "What's wrong? You did amazing today. We're on track to get everything we want."

"That's great."

"Why are you not happy?"

Freya looked down as we walked toward the sound of the waves crashing up against the shore.

"I'm just tired." Stopping, she folded her arms around her midsection and looked out over the water. Her gorgeous green eyes appeared darker than usual in the red hues from the sunset, still lingering to color the night sky.

"Talk to me."

It was rare for Freya to complain but I sensed her heart was heavy, so I pushed a little more.

“Are you tired of debating or tired from a lack of sleep?”

“I’m tired of...” She sighed and surprised me when she leaned her cheek against the arm I held around her shoulder. “It’s complicated, I guess.”

“Is it the thing about Thor being the heir?”

“No.” Her tone was soft.

“Is it the hurtful things Victor said?”

She sighed again. “It’s easy to make the mistake of judging people by your own standards.”

“You’re wondering how he could be so cruel when you would never speak so harshly to anyone, is that it?”

Her silence confirmed it.

“Why do you care what that bloated ass thinks or says? And what were you thinking sacrificing yourself that day you offered to stay in exchange for Belle?”

“It was a gamble, Aubri. A mind game that I would have won if you had given me more time. I knew Victor would reject my offer. He was already using his influence to talk the prime minister out of his ridiculous demand that one of us should stay.”

“Yeah, I sort of figured that much, but...”

Freya took my hand. “You wanted an adventure.”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

There was no judgment coming from her, just a wistful whisper. “I can relate.”

I turned to look into her eyes. “But you never liked adventures.”

With a sad smile she tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I do. I just prefer a different kind of adventure than you.”

Pulling her in for a tight hug, I muttered close to her ear. “Then I hope you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

We were walking back to the cabins when we heard howling and laughter.

“Well, fuck me sideways,” I breathed and gaped as six people came running naked hand in hand.

It was all the Motlanders and Celeste.

“Come on, it’s time to skinny-dip in the moonlight,” Holly shouted as they ran past us to the water.

Doreen, who was closest, reached for my hand. “Join us.”

I laughed. “You people are crazy.”

We stood watching them with smiles on our faces when the other Europeans came walking in a group of four. Zola, Isaac, Simon, and Victor were as naked as the other six had been and made comments about us uptight Northlanders having to learn how to live a little.

“What’s wrong with swimwear?” I shot back while laughing.

Freya squeezed my hand as we stood back and saw all the members of the other two delegations play in the water.

“Is it wrong that part of me wants to be out there with them? They’re like free-spirited children.”

I laughed. “Go ahead.”

Looking over my shoulder, she dipped her head. “They would never let us.”

I knew she was talking about our brothers and Indiana because I could hear their voices behind me.

“We’re adults, Freya. If we want to skinny-dip, we shouldn’t have to ask permission.” With a strong sense of rebellion in my stomach, I stepped out of my shoes, and began unbuttoning my shorts.

Freya’s eyes widened.

“Who has authority over your body?” I challenged her and pushed my shorts down.

“What are you doing?” Indiana called out to me.

With a broad grin, I turned to him and saw him ten feet away with a puzzled look on his beautiful face.

“We dare you three to go skinny-dipping with the rest of us.”

The men had been smoking weed and were in a good mood. “Ah, up your butt and around the corner. You’d never do that.” Mason laughed.

But Freya and I worked fast and in the moonlight she pushed her summer dress over her shoulders and let it drop to the sand.

“Oh, fuck.” Thor clasped his hands in front of his eyes when his sister removed her bra. Freya and I ran off in nothing but our panties.

“Aubri, wait up.” Looking over my right shoulder, I saw Indiana stripping out of his shorts and t-shirt.

With an intense rush of freedom Freya and I ran into the waves, laughing from the outrageousness of it all and screaming from the fear that in a minute the men would drag us out.

Doreen and Holly were quick to include us in their stupid games of spraying water and jumping with childish glee.

Freya had never looked more beautiful to me than in that moment when she reached her hands up to the moon, leaned her head back, and howled.

I howled with her and so did Doreen and Holly. Soon several of the others joined in on the howling, and we stood there, not as council members, but as friends who had known each other for more than a decade.

“What the hell, grasshopper.” I turned with a bright smile to see my husband behind me.

Indiana didn’t look mad but pulled me close and covered my naked breast with his body. “I thought seeing you topless was just for me.”

“You and the moon.” I planted a big kiss on his lips and closed my arms around his neck.

“Freya, have you lost your fucking mind?” Thor stood with his feet in the water, while Mason sat on the sand with a goofy, stoned giggle.

“Come join us,” the others encouraged them.

“We’re not having an orgy so calm down, little brother,” Freya told him and turned her back on him.

“Just let it go and have some fun,” I encouraged Thor.

He went to sit down next to Mason while calling out to me, “I’m blaming you for this, Aubri. You’re a bad influence on Freya.”

I laughed. “She was the one who wanted to go.”

“It’s true. I’m having a small adventure. You should try it.” Freya kept her arms in the air and spun in a full circle. With the water covering her nipples it was innocent, but Thor tore a hand through his hair.

“Mason, why are you not in the water?” I asked my twin.

“Honestly, I’m seeing three moons right now and Harper has six tits.”

Harper laughed and shook her breasts in his direction. “Count again. The moonlight is messing with your vision.”

There was no reason to tell her that Mason had been smoking weed, since it wasn’t legal in the Motherlands.

Indiana and I were on the outskirts of the large group. The red hues were gone but the moon offered enough light for us to see the other’s outlines.

He turned me around and let my body float on the water while getting between my legs. Moving my panties to the side, he played with my clit.

I felt like a naughty rebel and looked around to see if anyone was watching us. No one was.

Freya was laughing with some of the Motlanders, while two shapes were standing closely together. Squinting my eyes to focus, I recognized Isaac and

Doreen kissing. And further away there was another couple making out. I guessed it must be Zola but couldn't tell who the man was. Maybe Oliver... or wait, was it Victor? It was hard to tell in darkness, but it couldn't be Thor since he still sat next to Mason on the beach.

With the other two couples not hiding their kissing, I decided that Indiana and I didn't have to either. Pulling myself up to sit on his hips, I kissed him and playfully suckled on his lips. He lowered us deeper into the water and moved my panties to the side. I made a sound between a giggle and a moan when he slid inside me without anyone noticing.

"Mmm... you're the best grasshopper in the world, do you know that?" Indiana's voice was raspy and loving.

I answered him with another kiss.

CHAPTER 30

Ride

Indiana

On our last morning of the summit, I was eating breakfast with Mason and Thor when Victor approached us.

“I have a favor to ask.”

We all stopped eating and listened. Like us Nmen, Victor was a proud man and for him to ask for a favor was unexpected.

“Our drone was supposed to arrive this morning, but I’ve been informed that the mechanics found another critical issue. Since Aubri and Indiana are flying back to France anyway, I was hoping our delegation could get a ride?”

My pulse sped up. We couldn’t give them a ride when we had Banni to bring home.

“Ehhh... You know that we’re not flying directly. We’re going back to the Northlands first to drop off Mason, Thor, and Freya,” I answered.

“We figured, but it will still be faster for us than waiting here for a drone to arrive from home.”

“How long do they need to repair your drone?” I asked.

“They don’t know. Could be days or weeks.”

We were quiet.

Victor scanned our faces with a displeased wrinkling of his forehead. “Your drone has the capacity and you’re going to the same destination so what’s the problem?”

“Ehh...” Thor played with his fork. “There’s no problem. Of course, you can get a ride.”

Dipping his chin, Victor gave a short “*Merci.*”

As soon as he was gone, I blew out a breath and ran a hand through my hair. “What the fuck do we do about Banni?”

Thor groaned. “I don’t know but saying no to Victor would have been suspicious.”

Mason stuffed a large strawberry into his mouth and chewed. “You’ll have to hide Banni in the luggage compartment.”

Pushing my plate away, I got up from the table.

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to Freya. I’ll bet she can come up with a solution.”

Mason and Thor followed me and together we found Freya and Aubri, who were enjoying their last morning on the beach by collecting seashells.

“What’s wrong?” Aubri asked as we came toward them with serious faces.

“We have a problem,” I said.

Thor quickly elaborated. “Victor asked for a ride for the French delegation.”

Aubri’s face stiffened. “You said no, right?”

“How rude would that have been? You’re going to France anyway. I couldn’t exactly tell him that you smuggled out one of their countrymen and that you have to bring him back.”

Freya was playing with a large shell in her hands as she listened. “Maybe we can talk to them and have them swear their secrecy. That way you could all fly back there together.”

“No way, they all work for the government in one capacity or another,” Aubri said.

“Hmm...” She looked down at the shell and rubbed sand off the edges. “Then what are you going to do?”

Picking up a stone, I threw it into the ocean. “We just got them to agree on Aubri and Banni training the new Explorers. If they find out about Banni, they’ll shit sheep.”

Aubri’s head hung down. “We can’t just send him with a different drone. Old Europe scans the area and sees all incoming aircraft.”

“I have an idea.”

We all turned to Freya but she just hummed softly, the signature signal that she was thinking.

“What’s your idea?” I asked with impatience.

“I see two options. Either Banni follows in a drone under the pretense that you forgot something at home, and we sent it to you. Or he avoids being detected by landing in a different part of Europe where he can be picked up by his Exploration team.”

“That’s risky.”

“Yes, I imagine that Victor and the others are going to seek out Banni soon after returning to Old Europe. They will want to know if he’s willing to move to the Northlands for a while and train Explorers with Aubri. If he’s not to be found, they’ll know.”

I shook my head. “They won’t know because Val and his other friends are covering for Banni and making it seem like he’s sick.”

Freya’s face remained impassive. “You forget that Banni has a brain implant. They can track him if they want to know where he is.”

I crossed my arms. “If that’s true, it’s wrong on so many levels.”

She shrugged. “Yet practical if an Explorer gets lost in the wilderness. His team can track him down and rescue him.”

Thor rubbed his forehead. “Freya has a point. Banni needs to be back home before you and the French delegation arrive. It needs to look like he never left. I don’t want to involve Khan and Magni in this mess. Aubri, is Banni still with Belle?”

“No, he’s with Kya and Archer.”

“All right, then here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll send my personal drone to the school. Aubri, you call Sparrow and have her explain everything to Banni. My drone will drop him off somewhere in Europe where the others on your team can pick him up.”

“Sounds like a risky plan, but I guess it’s the best one we have,” I muttered before we all went quiet as Holly and Oliver came toward us.

“Are you ready for the closing session?” Oliver asked.

“Sure.” Freya gave a convincing smile, hiding the fact that we were just discussing something of high importance.

While Aubri disappeared to call Sparrow, the rest of us joined the other delegations for the last stretch of the summit. The Motlanders had us all talk about our favorite part of this year’s summit and our hopes for next year.

“My favorite thing was to see everyone again and to make a new friend.” Doreen smiled at Zola.

“For me the highlight was how we worked together on our plan to speed up the cleaning of Europe,” Freya said. “And of course, spending time on this beautiful beach.”

“What are your hopes for next year?” Holly asked Freya.

“That we continue our work together to improve the lives of everyone on this planet, humans, animals, and plants.”

“Well said, Freya.” Holly beamed. “That is so beautiful, and to hear it from a Northlander is touching.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Thor asked with a frown.

Holly shook her hand. “My apologies if I said that wrong, Thor. We’ve just come to expect a different tone from your delegation. To hear Freya

include the well-being of animals and plants is new. I can't help feel a sense of pride that maybe we Motlanders have influenced her a little through the many debates over the years."

"Hmm." Thor looked to his sister and back to Holly.

Aubri joined us and managed to lock eyes with each of us Northlanders, silently telling us without words that Banni had been warned.

After we'd all shared our favorite part of this year's summit, we said our goodbyes.

All the Motlanders sent their greetings to Belle and made Mason promise to share pictures of their baby after the birth.

With the French delegation joining us, the diamond drone was at capacity when we took off.

Zola's excitement over the luxurious aircraft was amusing to me. I didn't blame her because Aubri and I knew the French exploration drones well.

"I still can't believe how silent this machine is," Zola said.

"You flew in it when Freya went to get you after your drone broke down," I pointed out.

"*Oui*, but I'm still amazed. This is all still new to me. You've all seen the entire world, but I'm excited to go to the Northlands and see your mythical country myself."

Aubri and I had joined our seats together and she sat with her legs over mine. "It's a magical place for sure, but so is Old Europe."

"It's hard to compare the two places," Victor commented.

"I've heard you have houses as big as districts."

We laughed at Zola's wild exaggeration.

"What else did you hear about us?" Mason asked.

She smiled. "That you are fierce, unpredictable, and innocent at the same time.

Thor had just swallowed a ball of water and coughed while smacking his chest with his fist. "Did you say *innocent*?"

"*Oui*."

Thor looked to Mason as if he wasn't sure whether to be amused or offended.

Mason just grinned. "She must be talking about you and Freya, 'cause there's nothing innocent about me and those two love birds." He nodded to Aubri and me.

Thor wrinkled his nose. "I'm not an innocent."

“Perhaps what Zola meant was *inexperienced* rather than innocent,” Celeste said, and it sounded like she was trying to make Thor feel better.

Thor raised his chin but seemed unable to find a verbal comeback.

With one side of his lips drawn upward, Victor mused, “It’s something that amuses us to a great extent. You Northlanders are brave people in most areas but not when it comes to exploring something as fundamental as your sexuality. All those self-imposed rules and naïve expectations as to the union of two people.”

“What’s naïve about it?” Freya asked.

Victor drummed his fingers on his armrest. “The notion that one person will fulfill all your needs. It feels naïve that you would buy into such a fairy tale.”

“Aubri and Indiana look happy,” Freya pointed out. “Seems to me that they have a deep and profound connection while all you’re doing is scratching a wound of loneliness by being with a new partner over and over.”

“At least we have variety,” Isaac interjected.

“Is doing the same thing with different people more variety than doing different things with one partner?” Freya shrugged. “Call us innocent all you want, but personally, I’m not envious of your constant chase for a physical release with strangers.”

I was waiting for Victor to give some clever counter argument, but he didn’t. Rubbing his forehead, he left the subject and sat looking out the window in silence. The rest of us continued to talk about drone racing and our summer festivals.

Belle and Dina were there to greet us when we arrived at the Gray Mansion. Of course, Mason kissed Belle like they’d been separated for months. The French stared when he bent down to kiss her bulging belly as well.

Standing back up, Mason kept a hand on Belle’s stomach as he spoke to Victor and the others. “This right here makes me fucking happy that I’m not French. You will never know the joy of seeing your child grow inside your wife’s belly.”

It was ironic how Celeste, Simon, and Isaac greeted Belle as if they had missed her. Even Victor acted polite and asked about her well-being. With a hand on her bulging belly, Belle smiled and assured them she was fine and happy living in the Northlands.

“Aubri and I will need to stop by our house on Victoria’s Island to get

our things,” I told the French. “But we’re staying here long enough that Aubri can say goodbye to her family.”

Aubri’s little sister Dina, who was tall as Aubri but with blonde hair instead of red, smiled. “Freya informed us you were all coming. We’ve arranged for a light lunch in the garden.”

“Thank you,” Celeste said.

“Follow me.” While Dina led the French to the patio, we said our goodbyes to Thor, Mason, Belle, and Freya.

As I hugged Thor, he muttered, “I’m fucking jealous of you.”

With our hands on each other’s shoulders, I looked into his eyes. “Why?”

“Listening to Aubri and you talk about your work. It sounds fun, and you’re so fucking free out there sleeping under the stars and rappelling down cliffs while I’m shuffling paperwork around and doing interviews.”

“You could come join us if you want to. There’s always room for another Explorer.”

Thor’s shoulders lifted as he inhaled deeply. “I would if I could.”

Magni and Laura were waiting for us inside the mansion. It was touching to see the way Magni held Aubri in his arms and bent down his head to kiss the top of her head. “I don’t want you going back there, honey.”

“Dad, I’ll be fine.” Her words were muffled against his chest.

Laura placed her hand on his shoulder and used a soft tone. “It’s time to let go.”

Magni released Aubri and caressed her hair. “I heard about Khan’s gift to Pearl. I get why he wants to be popular with her and I can see his point that getting loyal people inside Old Europe could benefit us long term, but I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

Aubri tilted her head. “Pressured?”

“Khan told me how he convinced you to train the Explorers here, but it’s not going to be easy. Nmen don’t like being bossed around by women.”

Aubri and I exchanged a look because it was so typical of Khan to take credit for a great idea. “I’m actually happy that he convinced me,” she said with a smile. “I couldn’t join the Huntsmen or the firefighters, but this I can do.”

Laura took Aubri’s hand. “If you need support, all you have to do is ask.”

“Mm-hmm. If you want, I can come by on the first day and set the men straight.”

“Thank you, Dad, but I’d like to gain their respect without your help.”

“What about Mason and Solo? They could stop by. There are no warriors more respected than your brothers.”

“I’m aware, but I would like the people I train to respect me for my expertise and skills rather than who my family is.”

“Hmm.” Magni seemed to think about it. “We’ll talk about it when you two return in December.” Giving Aubri a last hug, he kissed her forehead. “Promise to come back in one piece.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to miss the chance to boss the men around.”

“Good, and you’ll take good care of her,” Magni said as he came toward me.

For someone who had experienced a drone malfunctioning and crashing, Magni had to be well aware that there were things I couldn’t protect his daughter from.

When we shook hands, he looked into my eyes. “If you need anything, you’ll let me know.”

“Thank you, sir. Actually, there’s one thing.”

“Yes?”

“The drone we fly in for our missions is old and I honestly think it would have been scrapped a long time ago in this country. I’ve thought about using my own instead, but it’s built for comfort and speed, not equipment heavy missions.”

“Hmm.” Magni grunted. “You need a Black Ghost, is that it?”

“I understand that it’s a big request, sir, but some months ago, four out of five Explorers from a different team died when their drone crashed. If there’s a way our team could have a Northlander drone, that would mean a great deal.”

Magni’s marred face scrunched up in a grimace. “Satan’s balls, why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“With the feud between you and their prime minister, I didn’t think you would want to give a drone to Old Europe. But now that Khan has agreed to sponsor a massive cleaning effort of Europe, I figured it would be worth asking for an extra drone.”

“You shall have a Black Ghost,” Magni promised. “I’ll send it as soon as I’ve sorted it out with Solo.”

“Thank you, sir.”

We exchanged a firm handshake before Laura and Magni walked us to the patio, where the French were enjoying lunch.

“Do you want to stay here while we get our things, or do you want to come with us to Victoria’s Island?” I asked Victor.

“We’ll come with you.” He nodded to the mansion and spoke to Aubri. “Dina is giving Zola a quick tour. She was curious and your sister offered.”

“It’s fine. I’ll tell Dina to bring Zola to the drone.”

When we took off from the Gray Mansion, we were three people less than when we arrived.

Freya, Mason, and Thor were moving on with their lives while Aubri and I continued our jobs in Old Europe.

Aubri kept looking down at the mansion as the drone lifted into the air.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah, it’s just...” She trailed off and continued with sadness in her tone. “We won’t be there when Mason’s child is born.”

My throat felt a little itchy from emotions, when I took her hand and squeezed it. “He promised to document the first months, and time will pass quickly, you’ll see.”

Aubri leaned her temple against the window and sighed. “I know. I just hate to miss out on anything.”

CHAPTER 31

Boss

Aubri

“Down there is the school we went to as children. My best friend Sparrow lives there. It’s an experimental school with students and teachers from all three countries.” Showing Zola Victoria’s Island made me a bit emotional.

“In a minute, you’ll see one of the oldest houses in the Northlands.” I pointed in the direction of Christina’s and Alexander Boulder’s home.

“It’s where my family lives,” Indiana explained. “Aubri and I have our own house a few minutes from my parents.”

The trees below us opened up and Zola pressed her nose against the window to see the pond with the two houses we had told her about.

“I can’t believe that you have all this space around you with no neighbors. This island is bigger than our country.”

“That’s not true. It might be bigger than the inhabited part of your country, but don’t forget that you live on an entire continent. Once we get Europe cleaned up, you’ll have lots of room to spread out on.”

Zola looked up at Indiana. “I don’t see that happening in my lifetime.”

“Then maybe in your children’s or grandchildren’s.”

The French waited by the pond while Indiana and I quickly packed our things.

I was in our bedroom when Kya and Christina came in.

“Have you heard from Sparrow?”

“No. We were just grabbing our things and coming to say goodbye to you. Is she up by the school?”

Kya closed the door and Christina went to stand by the window. “Sparrow took Banni to Old Europe.”

I would have thought it a joke if not for the fact that the two women sounded serious.

“And who else?”

“No one.”

“You let Sparrow go with a man by herself?” My voice rose a little.

“Oh, stop, Aubri, you sound like Archer.” Kya went to sit on the bed next

to my bag. “Sparrow didn’t ask for permission and he’s freaking out, but why should she? Our daughter is a grown woman who can take care of herself.”

Christina nodded. “Besides, Banni isn’t going to hurt her.”

I leaned my weight on the contents of the bag and sighed. “I wanted to give her a last hug and now I won’t see her until December.”

“We’ll tell her when she gets back, but I think she was pleased to do it. She’s been needing a purpose for a while,” Kya touched her large curly mane before picking up my perfume from the bed and handing it to me. “Things haven’t been easy for Sparrow. Seeing her dream crushed when you two got rejected for the firefighter school broke her spirit a little. And with you being gone, she’s been a bit lost.”

I felt a sting in my heart. My friend had told me some of her struggles, but it was typical of her to put on a brave mask and power through. “I’m sorry to hear that. Sparrow deserves to be happy.”

“She’s been smiling more than usual with Banni. He’s good at making her laugh,” Kya said. “It’s a shame that he doesn’t live here.”

A warning flag waved in my mind. If Banni agreed to come and live here for a while to train the Explorers, I would need to warn Sparrow against falling in love with him. The last thing I wanted was for him to leave my friend with a broken heart.

Placing the last things in my bag, I closed it and dipped my head to signal I was ready.

Christina moved from the window to me and brushed a hand over my hair. “Sparrow won’t be alone in counting the months until we have you and Indiana safely back again.”

“I’m sorry for taking your son away for this long.”

Her smile was nothing but a tiny twitch of her lips. “It’s making me appreciate every minute with my family, and that’s a good thing.”

Indiana and I held hands when we left Victoria’s Island. We couldn’t talk about it with the French being in the drone, but I suspected he was as worried about Banni as I was.

Had Banni managed to get in contact with Val and tell him to pick him up somewhere?

Did their telepathic connection even work across distances that far or would Banni be stuck in the middle of nowhere? Images of wolves came to mind and I didn’t like that he would be without his usual equipment. I should text Sparrow and ask her to stay with him until Val got there.

But what if Freya was right and Banni could be tracked because of his brain implant? Did that mean there was a log on his movements and if so, would the officials know that he'd broken the law by leaving Old Europe?

I worried about the consequences to him and to Indiana and me. Would it destroy what little trust there was between Old Europe and the Northlands?

I sent a quick message to Sparrow.

Envious of Indiana, who managed to nap as we flew, I placed my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. Even though my worries kept me awake it was better than talking with the French delegation. After a full week in their company, I was at my limit.

It had been almost eight months since we arrived in Old Europe and although I still didn't speak French well enough to have fluent conversations, I could understand most of what they were saying.

After talking about all the things that they missed at home and how they wished they could have brought the beach with them, the conversation shifted to the victory of returning with an offer of sixty-seven Explorers from the Northlands. They spoke about strategies to bypass the prime minister and let the parliament accept.

"It would be sad if Moreau's pride squashed this opportunity," Simon said.

With my eyes closed, I couldn't see them, but I knew their voices and had no problem distinguishing one from the other.

Celeste was quick to add, "Victor and Isaac, you two are Moreau's closest advisors, can't you massage his ego and make him love the idea?"

"Isaac is better at that sort of thing. Lately, I lose my patience with Moreau."

"Fine, Victor, but at least offer your support if he asks for your opinion."

"Hmm, I still have a bad feeling about bringing more Northlanders to Old Europe. It's one thing to accept those two breaking the law and entering a relationship, but what will happen when an Nman falls in love with a woman?"

"Victor, lower your voice. Are we even sure they're sleeping?" Celeste warned.

I felt Simon lean closer to me whispering my name.

"Aubri?"

I didn't move a muscle and kept breathing slowly.

"Yeah, they're out," he concluded before changing back to the subject of

Northlander Explorers.

“Worst case, several of them fall in love with the same woman. They could start fighting among themselves.”

“As long as they take the fighting to that dirty bunker.”

My ears burned at Victor’s words. Was he talking about the fight club?

“Wasn’t that thing closed down last year?” Simon asked.

“Yes, but they found a new place down in one of the original bunkers. I’m not sure why anyone would voluntarily go down in an ancient creepy place like that, but these things keep popping up. The police have insiders keeping an eye on it, but as long as they contain the aggression in that bunker, it’s being tolerated for now.”

“But what if someone gets hurt?” Celeste asked.

“People who fight down there do it at their own risk. We can make laws to protect people, but if they want to be reckless and risk their lives, then so be it.” I could almost hear the shrug in Victor’s tone.

“Have any of you ever seen a fight like that?” Zola wanted to know. “Maybe I’m crazy, but I’m curious to see what it’s like.”

“We’ve seen fighting in the Northlands. It’s their national sport.”

“Simon, you’re joking.”

“Okay, maybe it’s not their national sport, but it’s close to it. They teach fighting techniques in school and when we went to our first summit in the Northlands, we visited a bridal festival where there were arenas with bloody fights all day long.”

“It was barbaric,” Isaac said.

“But also thrilling,” Celeste added. “We got to see Mason fight and it was the most stunning sight of male strength and aggression.”

“Hmm, have any of you had sex with one of them?” Zola asked. “I tried with Thor on the first night, but he acted like a scared kid.”

Simon chuckled. “He rejected me too, but that was years ago. I did have a good time with one of the guards at the castle, though.”

“Me too.” Celeste laughed. “We’ve had four summits in the Northlands, and I’ve had at least one guard every time, but never any of the delegation members.”

“And what was your experience like?” Zola asked.

“Oh, it’s fun.” Celeste giggled as she spoke. “The first time we went to the Northlands, I was eighteen and one night, I went to find Mason’s room. I got lost and ended up in a hallway where two guards stopped me. They told

me that it wasn't safe for a woman to be walking around alone at night. It was cute how protective they were. Of course, I couldn't pass up the chance to flirt with them and learn more about their culture. I can't remember their names, but I remember them taking turns fucking me against the wall. They couldn't believe I would let them, but it was delicious to feel the guards' raw, horny desire for me."

"Wow, I can imagine," Zola breathed. "But that also proves that Nmen *can* share a woman. Doesn't that ease your fears, Victor?"

"No. All that proves is that they can share a willing body, but what happens when they fall in love?"

I listened to the French debate what they considered to be our immature relationship with sex some more, but I couldn't delay checking for an answer from Sparrow any longer. My yawning made them quickly change the subject to sports. I pretended not to understand a thing.

Suspecting that the French tapped all our correspondence with the Northlands, I'd kept the message coded and hoped that Sparrow would know what I was asking.

Aubri: I'm sorry we didn't get to hug goodbye. Your mom told me about your babysitting job. Are you on your way back? Did everything go smoothly or was the kid a menace? Did his parents get home before you left?

I kept checking for an answer every two minutes but there was nothing. The closer we got to Old Europe, the more I worried about our friends.

CHAPTER 32

Best Friends

Indiana

“Aubri, you need to calm down.”

It was almost midnight and my wife was pacing the floor like a manic person.

“How can you be so chill about it?”

“Because unlike you I choose to think that no news is good news. You know that this paranoid country is blocking ingoing and outgoing calls. It’s probably a technical issue that makes it impossible for Sparrow to answer your messages.

“But Kya said that she’s not back yet. She should have been back or at least close enough to home that Kya could reach her. What if the drone crashed?”

“Thor’s drone didn’t crash. He would have been alerted. It’s still in Europe somewhere.”

“Then maybe they were attacked by wolves.”

“Stop focusing on the negatives and look at the positives. We’re not talking about two helpless Motlanders here. Banni is hard-core and used to being in the wilderness. Sparrow has training and she’s done survival camps since she was eight years old.”

“How can you not worry about them?”

“I do, but my worry isn’t about them surviving in the middle of nowhere, but rather the insane fact that Sparrow is alone with a man without anyone to protect her.”

Aubri stopped and stared at me. “Are you implying she’s in danger from Banni?”

“There’s always a risk, isn’t there?”

“You think he’s capable of raping her?”

“He’s strong enough to do it and he called her the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. What I don’t understand is why Sparrow would take off with Banni alone. What was she thinking? She could have at least asked Jones or one of her brothers to go with her.” Raking a hand through my hair, I groaned. “And to think we trained him to become a better fighter.”

“Indiana, stop. Now you’re the one spinning out of control. Banni is our friend. He’s not a rapist.”

I groaned. “If he is, he’ll be a dead rapist when I get to him.”

“Sparrow isn’t a fragile flower. If she doesn’t want to have sex with him, she’ll hurt him if he tries.”

“Okay, but what if he seduces her?” I asked.

Aubri went quiet and came to sit on the bed. “That would be awful. Sparrow has no idea what she’s dealing with. She has never known a man like Banni. Even for you and me, who have lived here for a while, it’s hard to wrap our mind around the fact that the French will be charming and seductive toward a person, but as soon as they’ve played with that person three times, they’ll move on as if nothing happened. If Banni turns on his charm, Sparrow could fall head over heels for him and that would be a disaster.”

Aubri was right, but I hated seeing her so worried about our friend and leaned closer to rub her knee. “You will have to trust that she can get over it and forget him.”

Letting her head fall into her hands, Aubri sighed. “Except we’ve told the French that we want Banni to come to the Northlands and help train the Explorers. My idea was always to include Sparrow in the project. She’s obsessed about working to help others. That’s why she wanted to be a firefighter. Taking part in a salvation project for the planet will be the best thing that ever happened to her.” Aubri’s large blue eyes grew moist. “I can’t have Banni ruining it all by seducing her now and breaking her heart. I know he isn’t a bad person, but he’ll never be capable of loving her back the way she deserves.”

Kissing Aubri’s forehead, I muttered, “I could tell him to stay away from her.”

“How? We can’t get a hold of him or her. If the two of them are alone in the wilderness chances are that it will bond them. If she falls in love and he leaves her... argh, it’s such a mess. Sparrow of all people doesn’t need this shit. Do you know what her childhood trauma was?”

“Ehm.” I thought about it. “Was it that time she fell through the ice?”

“Well, yeah, that was probably traumatic as well, but she once told me that what hurt the most as a child was always sharing her parents with a whole school of children.”

I was stroking her leg while Aubri continued talking.

“You and I shared our parents with our siblings, but she had to share Kya

and Archer with both her brothers *and* all the children living at the school. Remember that time Seamus called her selfish when she wanted her parents to herself?" Aubri's hands fell and her voice broke a little. "If Banni steals her heart and then shares himself with other women, it's going to be a fucking repeat of her childhood trauma."

With another deep sigh, I pulled Aubri onto my lap and hugged her. "We're getting ahead of ourselves here. Maybe Banni and Sparrow are arguing and fighting right now. Maybe she dumped his ass in the middle of no-where. Or maybe she's a lesbian and isn't into men at all."

"She is."

"Yeah, but if she's got any common sense she'll be into Nmen and not French men. I mean you were never attracted to Banni, were you?"

"No. He's..." She paused and shook her head as if stopping herself from saying what was on her mind.

"He's what?"

Aubri hid her head in the crook of my neck. "I didn't like the idea of how experienced he was. Even before I realized my true feelings for you, I preferred to experiment with you over any other."

"Because you felt safe with me."

"Mm-hmm, and because I knew you wouldn't think of me as an amateur. We were both new to sex. With you I could be the best you ever had."

I took her hand and played with her fingers. "You certainly are!"

"Same." Aubri lifted her head and smiled at me. "I'm happy that I chose you."

"So am I." My lips kissed hers as my thumb stroked across her cheekbone. I couldn't solve the problem about not knowing where Sparrow and Banni were, but maybe I could distract Aubri from worrying for a little while.

I was just about to kiss Aubri again when there was a knock on the door.

Annoyed, I went to open it and found Victor outside. "I swear your timing stinks," I grumped.

He walked past me and stopped in the living room. "I figured you would like to know that Banni is safe."

My breath stuck in my throat as I gave a quick glance to Aubri, who stood in the doorway of our bedroom wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

"What did you say?" I asked because I needed time to process.

"Banni and Val are in contact and Val is picking him up tomorrow

morning after Banni's little detour."

I stayed quiet, keeping my face straight while trying not to freak out on the inside.

"Did you think we wouldn't find out?" Victor stood calmly, looking at the nails on his right hand as if they were more interesting than this conversation. "We have a tracker connected to his brain implants for safety. I'm surprised that you didn't consider that detail."

Aubri's face looked as closed off as her crossed arms. She didn't tell Victor that Freya had warned us that a tracker in Banni's brain implant was a possibility. "Did Banni know he could be traced?"

"Of course. He probably just didn't think any of us would care to check his location. It's usually used when an Explorer goes missing on a mission. I'm amused that you three Explorers thought you could get away with fooling us A's and breaking this many laws."

In a low mutter, I asked, "How many know about it?"

"So far, no one but me. I called Banni to discuss the prospect of his training Explorers in the Northlands, but he didn't answer my call. That's why I checked the log to see his location and imagine my surprise when I saw his whereabouts these past five weeks." Lowering his hand, Victor looked to Aubri. "It's such a shame. I liked your plan about him training Northlander Explorers, but of course now the only place that Banni will be going to is prison."

"He could volunteer to be an Explorer," Aubri snapped. "You recruit people from prison to be Explorers all the time."

"That's not how it works. Every crime must have consequences."

Stepping closer to Victor, I pushed out my words. "Name your price."

Victor narrowed his eyes.

"Don't pretend you don't understand. You could have reported the crime already but you're here because you want something in return for your silence."

"Hmm." Victor pretended to think about it.

"Stop fucking around. What do you want?"

"Oh, but it's so much fun to fuck around." His eyes went to Aubri and lingered there for a second.

Aubri pushed off from the doorframe and came to stand in front of him. "Stop looking at me like that. I'm not my cousin and I won't even entertain the idea of fucking you. And just for the record, neither would Freya. She

played a mind game that day hoping you would freak out and convince Moreau to let us go home. But I have no problem telling you straight up that the idea of you naked disgusts the both of us.”

Victor didn't blink. “This may surprise you, but sex isn't everything to us French. I rejected your cousin and I would have rejected you too.” His eyes traveled down Aubri's body. “I prefer my women softer in both temperament and body type.”

“Then what do you want?” she sneered.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” With a skeptical glare, she placed her hands on her hips.

“I want nothing today. But if I fix the log and don't report you three, I want a promise.”

“What promise?” I asked.

“If ever there's a time when I need a favor from you, you will comply.”

“One favor. That's your price?”

Victor held up a finger. “One favor from each of you.”

“It can't be sexual,” I pointed out.

He gave me one of his bored glares. “What is it about Northlanders' obsession with sex?”

“You were the one who said it's fun to fuck around.”

“Hmm... do we have a deal or not?”

“No sexual stuff,” I repeated and held out my hand. “And no illegal stuff either.”

“You did something illegal,” Victor reminded me.

“Okay, but nothing majorly illegal.”

Victor nodded and shook my hand. “Deal.”

Turning to Aubri, he held out his hand.

She clearly didn't like it, but she took it. “We're not killing someone for you.”

“I think that would fall under majorly illegal.”

“Right.”

After a firm handshake they broke contact and stepped away from each other.

When Victor left our apartment, we stood for a moment lost for words.

“Why do I feel like we just made a deal with the devil?” Aubri said in a somber tone.

I opened my arms and pulled her in. “It will be fine. Maybe he'll forget

about it.”

“If he wants us to name our firstborn Victor or some shit, I’m refusing.”

I smiled and kissed her. “Let’s not talk about him anymore. Banni is safe and Sparrow is on her way back to the Northlands. That’s all that matters.”

“Yes, you’re right.” She pressed herself against me and I closed my arms around her.

“Whatever happens, we’ll get through it together. We’re strong, Aubri.”

“I know.”

“My mom has a book that she treasures. There’s a quote in it that says that relationships are strongest when you’re best friends first and lovers second.”

For a long moment we stood hugging before we pulled back enough to look into each other’s eyes.

“Then we’ll be the strongest couple in history,” Aubri whispered.

I smiled. “We already are.”

This concludes The Explorer – Men of the North #12

Thank you so much for reading the Aubri’s and Indiana’s story.

While you’re waiting on the next story, if you would be so kind as to leave a review for this book, that would be great. I appreciate the feedback and support. Reviews buoy my spirits and stoke the fires of creativity.

It will also help other readers take a chance on this book. (Please avoid spoilers)

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WHAT'S NEXT?



ELIN PEER

MEN OF THE
NORTH

13

THE OUTCAST

The Outcast

The best part about being an outcast is that rejection stopped bothering me a long time ago.

Everyone in my culture knows emotions are dangerous. In Old Europe we learn how to suppress romantic feelings and follow the rules of no commitment.

Now that I'm working in the Northlands, I'm preparing Nmen for a life in France, teaching them how to flirt, have sex, and move on. The part that bothers me is watching the men practice their flirting skills on my fellow instructor, Sparrow.

Why do I feel like the universe is taunting me by putting Sparrow in my path? Explaining to the Nmen that jealousy is useless and stupid makes me feel like a hypocrite because seeing them come on to her makes me a little crazy myself. Not that I would ever show her or admit it, of course.

Cultures are clashing and emotional control is slipping in *The Outcast*, the thirteenth book in Elin Peer's addictive dystopian romance series, *Men of the North*.

To be among the first to read this book as soon as it goes live on February 20th 2021, [click here](#).

You'll find an overview of my books on the next page.

OVERVIEW OF BOOKS

For the best reading experience and to avoid spoilers, below is the recommended order of the Men of the North books.

Prequel:

Forbidden Letters # 0.5

First Generation

The Protector #1

The Ruler #2

The Mentor #3

The Seducer #4

The Warrior #5

[Box-set #1 contains book 1-5](#)

Second Generation

The Genius #6

The Dancer #7

The Athlete #8

The Fighter #9

The Pacifist #10

[Box-set #2 contains book 6-10](#)

Third Generation

The Artist #11

The Explorer #12

The Outcast #13

The Heir #14

The Champion #15

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Set in the USA and the gorgeous Ireland, these six contemporary romance books take on the question of mind control.

They’re suspenseful, fast-paced, and full of humor.

As always, they carry Elin’s unique style of writing, which readers refer to as ‘self-help that reads like fiction’.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With a background in life coaching, Elin is easy to talk to and her fans rave about her unique writing style that has subtle elements of coaching mixed into fictional love stories with happy endings.

Elin is curious by nature. She likes to explore and can tell you about riding elephants through the Asian jungle, watching the sunset in the Sahara Desert from the back of a camel, sailing down the Nile in Egypt, kayaking in Alaska, river rafting in Indonesia, and flying over Greenland in a helicopter.

After traveling the world and living in different countries, Elin is currently residing outside Seattle in the US with her husband, daughters, and her black Labrador, Lucky, who follows her everywhere.

Want to connect with Elin? Great, she loves to hear from her readers and you can find her here: [Facebook](#), [Goodread](#), [Amazon](#), or simply send an email to: elin@elinpeer.com