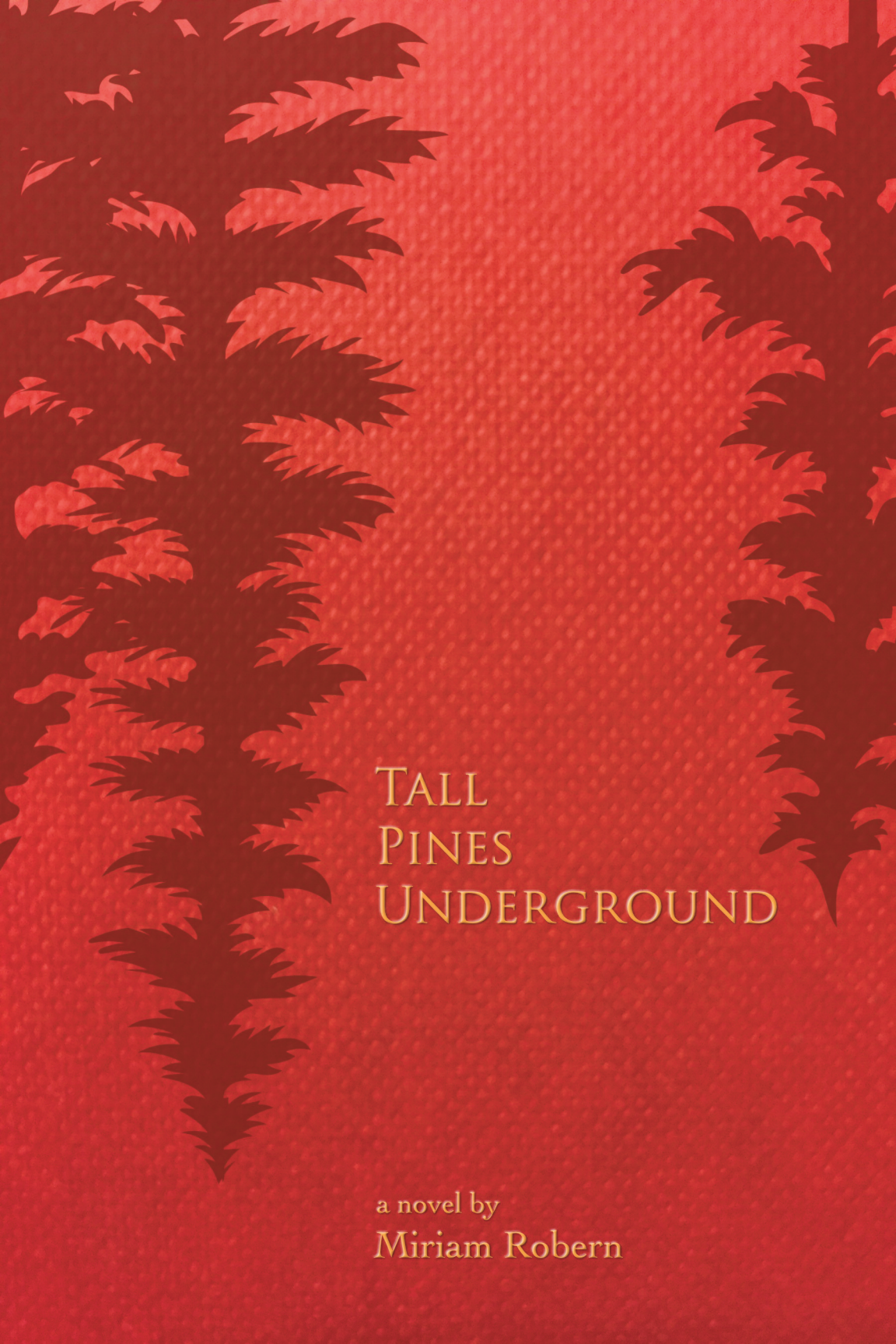
Tall
Pines
Underground
a novel by
Miriam Robern

# TALL PINES UNDERGROUND

Miriam Robern

*Dedicated to*
*everyone who is*
*doing the work.*

Book One

Poolie

## *1. Quarantine*

Dear Susan Soza:

If this email reaches you, I am glad. It will not be mirrored by a physical letter as with most of our prior correspondence; the mail system is no longer reliable. Most of the trappings of the civilized world are no longer reliable. The water supply, the police, and the roads have all turned dangerous. Civilization as we know it is teetering on the brink of collapse.

Which means your long subscription to Tall Pines Security Refuge was a wise investment.

This letter is to inform you that earlier today, Tall Pines Security Refuge entered Full Lockdown. The front gate and all other entrances have been closed and barricaded. Armed subscribers are on patrol along the walls. If you choose to join us at the refuge, please approach the front gate carefully: in PLAIN SIGHT and UNARMED. Do not under any circumstances approach the gate at night.

As a subscriber in good standing, you and your family will be admitted to the refuge upon request. After a brief quarantine period, you can enjoy all the benefits of Tall Pines membership, prime among them the safety of our walls and the bounty of our stockpiles.

Your subscription package provides for no more than four admissions. Please understand that this is an iron-clad restriction. Food, water, beds, and other necessities are meticulously rationed during lockdown. Admitting more Refugees than we have resources puts everyone in the refuge in danger.

We can not and will not admit more than four persons on your request.

If you choose to travel to Tall Pines, please remember that the refuge's existence and location are carefully cultivated secrets. Do not tell anyone you meet where you are going. Do not give anyone directions. Do not accept a ride to the trailhead. This includes law enforcement personnel. These precautions are for the safety of your family and everyone in the refuge. We have no way of knowing exactly how bad it will get or how long it will take for order to be restored. Raiding parties looking to pillage the refuge may seem a ludicrous nightmare, but such extreme behavior is becoming a distinct possibility.

Your passcode is GREEN ELK DANCING. This passcode will be current through the end of the month, and will identify you as a subscribed member eligible for entry. Present it at the front gate when challenged.

We look forward to seeing you safely arrived here. Failing that, we wish you all the luck to be had in this collapsing world.

— Gregory Cole

Director, Tall Pines Security Refuge

The email was still on the screen when I turned my phone back on. I scanned over it until I got to the passcode, which was exactly as I remembered. But best not to chance it.

In front of us was the broad front gate of Tall Pines Security Refuge, looking like nothing less than a wild west fort or a castle made out of tree trunks with the bark still on them. The gate itself was twelve feet tall, and above that loomed the gatehouse. Four rifle barrels poked out of the slit windows, trained on my family.

"Green Elk Dancing!" I shouted up at the gatehouse, as deliberately and clearly as I could. "My name is Susan Soza, and I'm here with my family. We're subscribed members."

"That's last month's passcode," came the response from an anonymous voice above.

I spat out a curse. "It's May?" I asked. "We lost track." I looked down at my phone by reflex. It was still searching for a signal. It would be searching for a long time.

"It's May second," they told me. "Hold on. Stay there. No sudden movement."

I looked back at my two boys and Arthur. Jackson and Caden stood tall under the weight of their backpacks, their thumbs casually looped through the straps. They looked like we'd left the car a hundred meters back, when in fact it was more like twenty kilometers. Arthur was much worse for wear, leaning heavily on Jackson. His backpack sat skewed on his back, half-emptied into our own packs. His right leg was soaked copper with caked blood; the bandage on his thigh was in the process of falling off again.

"Ms. Soza?" came a new voice, weighty with authority, from the gatehouse. "Your passcode is out of date. Is there anyone inside who can vouch for you? Who might recognize you?"

I smoothed my hair back towards the ponytail keeping it under control. "If Mister Abernathy is inside, he'll recognize me. He's our Lodge Host."

There was no immediate response from above; a

moment later came a mutter, and then a muffled sound like a derisive snort. "I've sent a runner to fetch the Host, ma'am," the officious voice finally said. "It may be a little while. Stay there. No sudden movement."

"Suze," Arthur stage-whispered, planting a heavy hand on Jackson's shoulder and leaning forward precipitously. "I don't know if I can stand much longer. Ask if—"

I hissed sharply at him, a short little sound meant to quash conversation before it blossomed. He didn't know these people like I did. At least that was my thought, outside the front gate, when I still thought I knew them.

It took nearly twenty minutes for Abernathy to appear. The shutter over one of the gatehouse windows swung open, and the greying head of our Lodge Host thrust out into the open air.

"Mister Abernathy," I said. The hopeful smile that came unbidden to my lips was entirely genuine. "It's Susan Soza. Apparently our passcode is old."

The man who I had worked side-by-side digging trenches and pouring concrete a dozen times squinted down at me with no look of recognition on his face. "Soza?" he repeated as if saying it for the first time.

"From Ponderosa Lodge," I supplied helpfully. My

smile was starting to crumble.

Abernathy pointed at Arthur. "What happened to your husband?"

"Ex-husband," both I and Arthur said automatically. I continued, "We ran into some trouble down in the valley."

"Looks bad," our Lodge Host observed without emotion.

"It is," Arthur groaned, shifting his feet with the help of Jackson's shoulder. "I don't know how I made it all the way here."

"And I can't imagine he'll make it back out," I added. "Mister Abernathy, surely you recognize me."

"Of course, Miss Soza," he said reluctantly, meeting my eyes for the first time. "I recognize you." He made it sound like an apology.

A few minutes later there was a rattle behind the doors as the lock cycled. The rustic logs swung open, revealing the steel reinforced backing that they concealed. Men and women with automatic rifles slid alongside the opening doors to escort us in.

A broad-shouldered woman stepped outside along with them. Her own dark green camouflage matched theirs exactly. When she spoke, I recognized the voice of authority from before. "I trust you and your family are unarmed, Miss Soza?"

I tipped my head back at the treeline. "Our guns are back there. Piled up on a flat rock."

At a nod from the woman, an underling slung his rifle over his shoulder and strode off in the direction we'd come in. She watched him go, and then rumbled, "Follow me."

They escorted us just inside the gate, where we unslung our packs against the gatehouse wall. The runner with our weapons caught up with us and neatly stacked them next to the packs. "This way," the commander directed, striding away as the door thundered closed behind us.

The inside of the refuge, or at least the portion that we could see from just inside the wall, was strangely both familiar and changed from my last visit mere months ago. The gravel paths were the same, although much worse for wear with furrows worn down their centers. Crates sat on wooden pallets and under tarps festooned with green rags: home-made anti-air camouflage. There were fewer trees. A handful of men and women dressed in what I now recognized as guard uniforms attended to various tasks. There were no other people in sight, although most would be deeper inside the refuge, in the cluster of lodges at the top of the hill.

We were shown into a building new to me, a long,

low affair constructed out of local lumber. On top it sported what we'd called a "green roof" in the city, a spread of soil, scrub, and bushes. The intent here wasn't environmentally friendly; it was yet more camouflage. But the red cross at the door was a welcome sight, and a team of medics poured out to lift Arthur off of our son's shoulder and take him inside.

The interior was a no-frills medical station, complete with a front desk and a row of examination rooms. A young lady stood up from the desk. "Newcomers. Welcome to Quarantine."

We were shown to examination rooms and instructed to strip down. After a week in the same clothes, the white linen hospital gown seemed a luxury. I did not wait long before a medic stepped into my room. I recognized her immediately. "Aubrey. Nice to see a friendly face."

But the face she turned on me was anything but friendly. Her full lips were drawn down to a tight moue. She would not look me in the eye, and kept a few feet away from me as she spoke. "Miss Soza. This is a quarantine situation, so let's try to limit contact as much as possible. Please step outside to the scales."

"Is everything okay?" I asked, suddenly concerned that the quarantine, which I had assumed was a overvigilant precaution, was something more serious.

Did the refuge know about a contagion running rampant outside the walls? Had public health deteriorated that far, that fast? Aubrey waited, stone-faced, for me to step outside and weigh in.

I'd lost about ten pounds in the last twelve days, which I attributed to eating on the run and stress. Aubrey noted aloud, "Overweight," and marked something on her clipboard.

When we returned to the examination room, the pile of my mud- and blood-caked clothing was gone. When asked, Aubrey shrugged it off and explained it had been collected for the laundry. "My phone was in there," I said lamely, "and my keys and… my ID."

"I don't think you'll be needing those for the rest of the day, Ms. Soza," the medic said with a sigh. "Please run this swab along the inside of your mouth. Then you'll need to take off the gown and I'll make a visual examination for cuts, contusions, and infections."

Aubrey was thorough but quick, almost desperately efficient. She wanted out of that room. Out of my presence. When she was through, she dropped a set of rough beige clothes on the examination table and disappeared out the door.

When I stepped into the hallway, Jackson and Caden were seated along the wall, wearing the same beige pants and shirt I'd been given. I put a hand out

onto both their shoulders. "How are you guys holding up?"

"This is weird," Caden said, pursing his lips. "This place used to be vacation, you know?"

I laughed. "Pouring concrete, learning auto repair, and shooting guns up in the mountains is your idea of vacation? I may have failed you, kid."

"Do you have any idea how jealous the kids at school were?" he grinned. A moment later that grin faltered. Who knows what condition his friends from school were in.

"Is dad going to be all right?" Jackson asked suddenly.

"He'll be fine," I answered automatically, then grimaced. "I think he'll be fine. It was a shallow gash and we kept it clean." I waved at the lady behind the desk down the hall. "And I'm sure they'll tell us as soon as they know."

"You sure about that?" he answered, looking up at me frankly. "Something's weird here. Something's wrong."

I looked down at my eldest, very nearly a grown man, and no more fooled than I what was happening. We had been herded along for the past hour, placated and guided, into an alarmingly vulnerable situation. We were unarmed, had no means of communication,

and no way to prove our identities. After a week of scrupulously guarding our safety and liberty, it had taken sixty minutes to put us entirely at their mercy.

"Something's off," I agreed with a slow nod. "Aubrey was… I don't know, acting odd."

Caden gave me a blank look. "Aubrey?"

"Oh, the nurse," I explained, unnecessarily waving a hand. "Well, she's an EMT, technically. But the black lady in scrubs you just met. I met her at the last work day. You guys elected not to go. Track meet and a party. You missed out, it was a great weekend. Campfire and marshmallows and—"

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. "Mom. You're babbling."

"I am?" I asked, and could feel my face growing hot.

"Holy shit," Caden exclaimed, turning in his seat to stare at me. "You're beet red."

Jackson watched me for a long moment, then smirked. "Must have been a fun weekend. You know, Mom, if you wanted me and Caden to skip more often, we could have."

"What?" asked Caden. He looked from me to Jackson and back, uncertain what he had missed.

Jackson settled back in his chair. "Mom had a hookup," he declared.

Caden looked at me, eyes wide. "With her?" He

hooked a thumb at the closed infirmary door. "She's hot. And young."

I snorted. "You don't have to act all surprised."

"No, I mean… nice job," he moderated. "Well done."

"Because that's not weird, my son complimenting me on the quality of my…"

"Hookup," Jackson supplied. "And what Caden means is he's happy for you."

My younger boy brightened. "Yeah, mom. That's cool."

I looked hesitantly from one son to the other. "Really?"

Both of them assured me that was the case, and hugged me. I'm not in the habit of turning down affection from my teenaged boys. The trick is not luxuriating in it as much as I want to, lest they stop. "Sometimes we worry about you," Caden explained. "Dating sucks."

"Certain," Jackson agreed, burrowed again against the wall.

"Miss Soza?" I turned to see the tall, whip-lean form of Director Gregory Cole at the opposite end of the hall. He afforded me a small, tight, and very brief smile of recognition. "May I speak with you in here?"

The room he had indicated was not an examination

room, but a cramped office with an empty desk and a single chair. He settled into the desk, laying out a manilla folder on the blotter. "Miss Soza, you've been a subscriber for nearly fifteen years and I don't think you've missed a single Volunteer Day."

I sat down opposite him. "I managed to convince the boys they were vacations. The seminars on guns and bow hunting probably didn't hurt. They were fond of those."

He paused and looked at me, then abruptly smiled. "Me, too. I've got to say, Miss Soza, we are very glad you made it to us. You're the kind of person we want on this side of the wall. Not afraid to get your hands dirty. Eager to pitch in when it contributes to the collective good. And two sturdy young men instilled with your work ethic, to boot."

"Unfortunately I've also brought my ex-husband," I laughed, hoping my mirth would spread over to his face. It didn't.

Cole shifted a piece of paper on the desk before him. "Yes, I was… a little surprised to hear about that. Of course I remember your face from so many Volunteer Days. I don't recall your husband's."

Ex-husband, I corrected silently, but forced a smile instead. "You wouldn't. He's never been up here. I started the subscription when we were still married.

He thought I was being irrational. After the divorce, I kept the four-person subscription because… I suppose I was hoping there'd be somebody else I wanted to bring along to the end of the world."

"But you got your ex-husband, instead."

I rubbed my nose. "The boys very politely suggested we pick up their father on the way here. It wasn't not something I could say no to."

He paused again and considered me for a long moment. "How was the trip here?"

I nodded my head before answering. "It was hard. Normally it takes a full day of driving to get here, but it took us over a week. The freeway we usually take isn't safe. Gang turf war, apparently. The highways we did take were more circuitous, and took us through some… interesting towns."

"Interesting?" he prompted, then planted a hand, spider-like, across the papers before him. "I should note, this is a debriefing. Your sons and your ex-husband will also be debriefed. We need every shred of information we can get our hands on."

"Of course," I answered, imagining how Jackson and Caden would respond to pointed questions. Jackson would clam up; hopefully they would not press him until he exploded. Caden would talk a blue streak until they gave up listening. Whether they'd

get any actionable information would be another question entirely.

"So," said Cole. "Interesting towns."

I roused myself from my reverie. "Yes. Interesting. No way to know if around the next turn you'll find a protection racket run by the local P.D. or a greasy spoon diner still open for business. Or if they'll take cash for payment, for that matter. Some portions of the highway are now toll roads, by order of various city councils. One town wouldn't let us come down the offramp."

I told him everything, seeing little reason to hold information back. At some point he produced a map, and I outlined the threats and safe havens we'd encountered as we approached the mountains. I told him about the bridge that was out, and the dirt road detour a local woman had directed us to.

"And that's where they ambushed us." I'd sketched the dirt road onto his map, and now drew a circle where it rejoined the highway. "Pretty sure they piled sand on the dirt road. We got no traction, nearly buried the wheels trying to get away. Jackson and Arthur had to get out and push. That's when Arthur got shot."

"Well at least he's brave," Cole nodded meditatively. "Does he have any appreciable skills I

should know about?"

"He's a television producer," I supplied, but at his blank look, I clarified, "Which is to say, no, not really."

"And you're an Economics professor," he said, tugging one paper out from under the rest.

"I was an Economics professor. I don't think anybody's going to be hiring faculty for a while."

He lifted up the piece of paper. I could see my printed picture, reversed through the paper grain, at the top of it. "Hydroponics weekends. Construction seminar. Self-defense. Hunting weekends. Survival challenge. Automotive repair. You seem to have completed every seminar we've ever offered."

"Not all," I demurred. "Like I said, the kids thought they were fun vacations."

"Most of our subscribers just sent us a check," the Director explained. "They didn't come see the place, didn't get to know it. Didn't come to the survival skills seminars that we told them they'd need if it ever came to this."

I put a short, polite smile on my face.

"To them, we were an insurance policy," Cole said, disappointment etched in his voice. "They imagined that if the end of the world came, they'd be whisked away to a secret four-star resort hidden in the mountains, where they could wait out the apocalypse

sipping craft wine and getting facials."

"That's unfortunate."

"So you'll understand that we have had to make some changes to the subscription agreement." Here it was. "Some of our subscribers bring us essential skills. Doctors. Engineers. And we have a number of clear-eyed survivalists like yourself."

I blushed as if receiving a compliment. A year ago, 'clear-eyed survivalist' would have been a description I'd find revolting.

Cole went on. "The vast majority, though…" he raised both hands as if grasping for words adequate to his disdain. "Useless for anything outside of unskilled labor. And even then, some of them are so out of shape, they can hardly put in a full day of work."

I realized I should say something. "I imagine they complain about having to do the work, too," I prompted. Work that their original subscription agreement never mentioned. Work that the original agreements might have explicitly proscribed.

The Director rolled his eyes. "You have no idea how much they can bitch."

I rediscovered my short, polite smile. "I raised two kids. I know."

"Exactly." This seemed to give him pause. His eyes fell onto the files before him again, and he frowned

down at one page, mostly blank. "I hope your ex won't be a problem in this regard?"

"I'll talk to him," I promised. "Make sure he understands. We're here for the duration, we'll do our part."

He nodded slowly. "That's the kind of perspective I wish was more common among our… subscribers. We all need to pitch in. For everyone's sake."

I nodded stupidly, not sure what else to say. How complicit did I want to make myself sound? "I'm surprised they stay," I said without thinking.

Cole slapped three fingers against the edge of the desk. "Nobody leaves," he intoned. "This place is safe because it's secret. We let them loose and they'll go crying to the first local P.D. they can find. One of those police departments which has set itself up as a protection racket. And then it's all over. So nobody leaves."

Nobody leaves. And in the mean time, forced manual labor. What had I delivered my family into?

—

Later that day, another worker at the infirmary–not Aubrey–came to tell us that Arthur was out of surgery and mostly lucid. I let the boys go sit with him and visit for an hour and change before I went in. Something about my demeanor sent them both

skittering out of the room. The divorce was almost a decade past, but they still recognize the look on my face when a storm is brewing.

"The bullet went through-and-through," he explained with a giddy grin on his face. "And then they gave me some very powerful drugs."

His infirmary room, set aside for serious recovery stays, was pleasant enough, if bare. The bed was an old electric adjustable from some hospital thirty years ago. There were two wooden chairs for visitors. A bank of cupboards lined one wall. His sole window looked out on an earthen embankment covered in pine needles.

"How long until you're back on your feet?"

He shook his head. "They didn't say. But they said it shouldn't be long."

I nodded as if he'd given me new information to consider. Then I launched into it. "So things are going to be pretty different here, Arthur."

He smiled blearily at me. "Oh yeah?"

"This is a small community of very serious people. We are all in here–locked in here–to ride out the storm together." I watched him as I spoke, but didn't look like he was getting it. "Everyone has to contribute. Everyone works for the survival of all. And that's going to mean you, too."

He snorted softly. "Is that why we sent them all that money? So we could come work?"

"I sent them money," I stressed, "so we'd have a place to go if things went south. And this place requires everybody to work. Heavy, physical work. We're farmers now, Arthur, and we will be for the foreseeable future."

"We sent them enough to buy a house," he protested, rolling his eyes.

I nodded. "More like a condo, but yes. So we have a place to sleep. But we've got to work to eat. And we're going to work alongside the other people here."

He was quiet. Was he thinking about what I'd said or was he just blissed out on the oxycodone? That was a question I thought I wouldn't have to worry about again.

"Arthur." I drew in a deep breath. "I need you to behave yourself here."

He wrinkled his nose at me. "Suze, you don't—"

I laid my hand on his. "There's only a few hundred people here, Arthur. And your behavior is going to reflect on all of us. Your behavior is going to reflect on the boys. A community this small, it's easy to get sidelined, shunned, ostracized. Which could be the difference between survival and starvation."

He scoffed at that. "They'll get things back on track

out there in six weeks. We'll be out of here by Christmas."

"And if they don't?" I asked, ignoring his math. "There is a not-insignificant chance that we will be in here for a year or more. It may be multiple years before things settle enough to go back down the mountain." I squeezed his hand once, then folded my hands in my lap. "You need to play nice, and work nice, with everyone in here, so that your sons can walk out those gates when it's safe again."

Arthur blinked a few times, squinting down at his toes. "You think it's that bad?"

I sat back in my chair, exhaled. At least I'd impressed the gravity of the situation upon him. "I'm pretty sure, yeah. Two years of failed harvests for rice and corn, the petroleum market eating itself up, and too many brush wars across the planet to count–its not just the stock collapse, Arthur. The bottom's fallen out of the whole system. It's going to take a long time to rebuild the global economy, and–" I could tell I was losing him again. "It's bad, Arthur, and governments are going to topple before it's over. Quite possibly ours, included."

He didn't say anything for a while, and I let him stew. Sometimes that worked. Finally he rubbed his face with his hands. "So tell me what I'll be expected to

do. Plow fields till the cows come home?"

My heart leapt despite his sarcasm. I smiled. "No cows, but we do have goats. And all the fields are enclosed in–well, they're called walipinis, but they're sort of half-sunken greenhouses. That way they survive the winters. We'll probably be putting in our hours there. Think of it as gardening. Lots and lots of gardening."

"I hate gardening."

I took his hand again. "I know. Which is why I came in to steel you against the upcoming shock." I heaved a sigh. "But some dirt underneath your fingernails is a pretty good price for safety and three square meals a day."

"What's our condo like?" he asked next, and it took me a moment to understand what he was asking.

"Oh. There are five lodges, and they all have about ten suites. Nothing elaborate, mind. Two bedrooms, a little sitting room, a bathroom." I paused, and then added, "One of the bedrooms has bunk beds for four. So you and the boys can sleep there."

He looked at me with a goofy grin that I'm sure he thought was saucy. "If you're sure you want to be all alone."

I gave him a flat look. "You're doped up right now, so I'm giving you a pass. You sleep with the boys."

Arthur nodded, eyes half-lidded: his patented "we'll see about that" expression that I'd grown tired of years ago. But he agreed to the arrangement, and to the work requirements, and promised to behave himself, a few times over. The drugs were making him talkative even as he drifted towards sleep.

I squeezed his hand once more and left him to recover.

That night we were served a filling but simple meal: rice balls stuffed with beans, bok choy and other greens, and berry compote. The beds were simple but more comfortable than sleeping in the car was, and the rooms were climate controlled. As much as I wanted to relax into this relative luxury, a voice in the back of my head kept noting details that were off.

We had no visitors, not even through a window. I knew other subscribers from seminar weekends; did they not want to see me? Did they not know I had arrived? Were they even here?

The infirmary staff were distant, and deflected any questions about the refuge. Aubrey didn't show her face a second time that night.

When I asked how long quarantine would last, the only response I got was "not long now." An understatement: it didn't even last 24 hours.

## *2. First Day on the Job*

I woke to two sharp claps. "Morning, sunshines," declared a woman's voice. "Quarantine's nice, but vacation's over, darlings."

The owner of the voice smirked down at me as I pushed myself to sitting and then stood up from the bed. The boys did little but glower from under their sheets. I put my hand forward. "I'm Susan. I don't think we've met."

The woman, sleek black hair pulled back, one artful curl bobbing atop her brow, considered my outstretched hand with a faint air of amusement. "You can call me Bukhari," she allowed, without moving a muscle. She peaked an eyebrow at the slowly shifting piles of bedclothes behind me. "Come on, gents, you're being evicted."

She watched as we shrugged into the plain white canvas shirts and pants we'd been given, her one hand falling onto her holstered pistol and then sliding off

again a moment later, only to repeat the process again. She did not wait patiently, reminding us more than once that daylight was burning and she had better things to do with her time. Finally, she led us out of the infirmary and up the hill into the refuge.

The main path through the complex ran in a meandering loop. It had once been paved, but had since been resurfaced with loose white gravel. Islands of the original asphalt showed through here and there. The rocks crunched under our feet as we climbed the hill up from the gate.

Up ahead I could see the mess hall nestled within the center of the loop. Nothing but a bank of windows looked down the hill at us, and I knew it was topped with a shaggy green roof like the infirmary. I'd planted a good number of the bushes up there.

As we climbed, I spied the edge of the amphitheater on the other side of the mess. The stadium seats were built out of repurposed railroad ties, abandoned here by the prior tenants, who'd had a road to truck things in. We certainly hadn't packed them in. We didn't hike far enough up the path for me to see down into the center of the amphitheater's bowl and its familiar firepit that I had spent so many nights beside, drinking wine out of canteens and laughing. Instead, we turned off and headed towards Ponderosa

Lodge.

The Lodge was a welcome sight: a long, rambling two-story structure with eaves painted forest green. A wide deck ran down the length of the downhill side of the building, propped up by thick oak pillars. Vague shapes covered by green and brown tarpaulins lurked underneath.

"I don't suppose Suite Six is open," I asked Bukhari as we approached. "That was always my favorite."

The woman shook her head. "They don't explain anything to you in Quarantine, do they?" She turned and stood in the middle of the path where it forked, leading up to the lodge. "They leave it to us to crush your hopes."

I frowned, but chose not to give her the satisfaction of asking what she meant.

She pointed down the other path, which wound around the corner of the lodge and down the hill. "We're going this way."

We walked as directed, with Bukhari following, about a hundred yards behind the lodge. The path was fresh but well trodden. Eventually, the trees parted around the broad shape of a low-roofed building, half again the side of the Lodge. "Here we are," Bukhari directed gaily.

"The storage barn," I noted dully. "We helped pour

the concrete for the foundation."

"Then you'll be familiar with your new home," our guide responded, and stepped ahead of us to pull open the wide front door. "The Lodge is full, so you'll be sleeping in here."

"This barn wasn't built for housing—" I started to say, but my protest was choked into silence by the stench that rolled out of the open doors. Close, musky, and salted, the scent of too many unwashed human bodies packed into too little space.

The wide, warehouse-like floor of the barn had been filled with row upon row of bunks, stacked three high. Most of the beds were topped with tousled sheets and blankets, rumpled with use from last night. A handful of older people squinted or held up their hands to block the morning light spilling into the makeshift dormitory. A moment later they turned back to making the beds.

"Ponderosa's at breakfast mess," Bukhari explained, "so let's find you your bunks and get you over there quick as we can."

It took me a long while to stop staring. "I suppose it's futile to point out that this is not what I paid for," I could not help saying.

"This is not what the brochure looked like?" Bukhari suggested with mock sympathy and waved

us inside. "Yeah, well. Some adjustments had to be made."

Bukhari led us into the rows of bunks, asking curt directions of the few bed-makers who answered with quick deference. In short order she had found a cluster of four bunks, the top two each of a pair of beds that stood near the back of the building.

I counted the stacks of beds. Four rows, ten deep, with three bunks each. Enough beds for one hundred and twenty people. "How many of these bunks are taken?" Caden asked, echoing my own unspoken question.

Bukhari shrugged. "Half? I dunno."

He frowned at the beds around him. "So there's sixty people who paid their subscription fees to the refuge for years and years and when they showed up they all got shoved out here?"

Our guide laughed. "Oh, honey. Hardly. This is just the Ponderosa pool. The other four lodges have their own storage sheds converted into barracks, too."

My hands balled into fists despite myself. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Hadn't you heard?" Bukhari leered at me. "It's the end of the world."

It did not take long to claim our bunks, as we had nothing but the white linen clothes on our backs.

Bukhari assured us our things would be along shortly, but in the mean time we flung blankets over a cluster of three bunks and proceeded to the mess hall.

The Mess is a big, broad building with huge bay windows that look down off the mountain to the basin below. I remembered the dining room as airy and open, but we found it packed wall-to-wall with long tables and benches. The tables were covered in trays and plates, the benches filled with people. The room was filled with the noise of getting up and leaving, and even as we stepped inside, streams of people were pushing out through the steel double doors.

The people—at least two hundred of them, maybe more—had the haphazard look of refugees, clothing rumpled and hair tied back for simplicity. The women wore no makeup. The men wore unkempt beards. As they passed, we were hit by the funk of hard-worked and unwashed bodies, floating over the lingering undernote of dirt and sweat permeating clothes. I was reminded of the boy's room during soccer season.

I did note that they wore their own clothing, at least. A dingy rainbow of hi-viz neons contrasted with more somber dark blues and hunter greens. Collars bore the yellow-brown stains of heavy use and light washing. More than one slash exposed fluffy white lining inside, but others were closed up with clumsy

stitches or haphazard patches. We three in our institutional whites stuck out like sore thumbs. We earned looks of curiosity, thin welcome, and outright challenge.

I recognized a handful of faces, but hardly as many as I had expected. Over the years I had met, worked beside, and trained with at least a hundred fellow subscribers, but now I only spied twenty or thirty familiar faces. I flashed smiles and short waves to friends and acquaintances. They waved and smiled in response, but no one stopped.

"Well, looks like you missed breakfast," our guide observed. "Grab some rice balls over there, then we'll get you out to your duty stations for the day."

We did as directed, finding the buffet line across the back wall stocked with depleted trays of rice. The kitchen workers were already removing the trays, releasing billows of steam from the heated water below. What food remained was collected in the last tray, and so we each grabbed a couple balls each.

"Will I get fish or bean curd or sweet rice in the center, I wonder," I mused aloud, shooting the boys a smile. But my pale attempt at levity fell on deaf ears. Jackson jammed a whole rice ball into his mouth and grabbed a third before heading back.

"Don't you want some?" I asked Bukhari, who

laughed.

"I ate at first mess, thank you."

I frowned out at the mass of people outside, who seemed to be forming up into groups and lines, then heading out together. "First mess?" I echoed. "So this was…"

"Third mess," she answered simply. "Come along, now."

"How many people are in the refuge?" I asked, trailing after her, but was ignored.

"Teddy!" she called out, and a big brown man turned at the sound of her voice. His whole body turned, broad shoulders and thick arms bowed around a round stomach. He stood at the head of a group of ten or so, who looked to him with a mix of dread and resignation. "Six more hands for you."

He waved us forward into his group with a paw like a side of ribs. "What, I get to break in new poolies, now? Thanks, Miss Bukhari."

"I leave them in your loving hands," Bukhari answered, and then turned back towards Ponderosa. "I'll check in on you lot before lunch." Whether she meant Teddy or my family, I couldn't tell.

The big man looked us over critically. "Right. Names?"

I put forward a hand. "I'm Susan Soza. These are

my sons, Jackson and Caden."

Instead of taking my hand, he produced a chalkboard tablet and took down our names. "Right. Well we've got quarry work today, so I hope you ate hearty."

Our sorry little work crew trudged up the main loop, past the Grey Wolf and Mountain Lion lodges. Behind the latter I could spy another broad, warehouse-like building, new since I'd last been here. I asked the woman walking ahead of us what it was.

"That's the Lions' poolie barracks," she told me. "Which despite the hymns is exactly as shitty as ours."

I put forward my hand. "I'm Susan."

She took it. She had pale, hard eyes, and fixed them on me. Her mop of fuzzy orange hair was tied back under a kerchief. "Maggie. Welcome to Purgatory."

That brought a wan smile to my lips. "Yeah, this is not what it looked like in the brochure."

"I must admit, they've got a tidy little racket going on here. Sure fooled me." I couldn't quite tell if she was bitter, rueful, or simply sarcastic about our shared situation.

"Can I ask a question? I hazarded. "What's a poolie? I've heard it thrown around a couple times, now."

"A poolie?" she grinned. "You're a poolie. I'm a poolie. All of us," she waved up and down the line of quarry workers, "are poolies. Short for labor pool. Cause we didn't get here early enough to claim a suite in the Big House—er, Lodge." She curled her lips at this, and I concluded that she was both bitter and rueful about all this—with no small measure of sarcasm thrown in, to boot.

"And if we had got into a suite?" I prompted.

"Well, then you'd be a sweetie," she answered with a sour smile. "Big, despotic fish in a small, toxic pond. Poolies work, sweeties… supervise."

"Like Bukhari."

She nodded. "Esther Bukhari, Ponderosa's resident faithless temptress, is a sweetie, yes. You'll need to warn your boys."

I filed that away for later, then nodded up to the head of the line. "And Teddy?"

"Would you believe Teddy is a lowly poolie like us?" Maggie snarled. "He just has… aspirations. He figures, if he sucks up enough, they'll elevate him to Mount Olympus like Hercules."

Quarry work turned out to be digging up the stones that lined the nearby stream bed. When they were too large to be moved, they were hammered apart with picks. Otherwise, ropes and pulleys were

employed to cantilever the stone out of the mud and up the bank. There they were broken down to head-sized rocks or smaller with hammers, chisels, and more picks. The results were loaded onto wheelbarrows and carted back towards the compound.

It was awkward, grueling work, and Teddy did not make it any better. The big man stalked through the work site shouting exhortations and commands. He did not carry a whip, but he might as well, both by his demeanor and the way the poolies jumped to avoid his ire. His only priority was speed, and so it fell to the workers to see to their own safety. More than once Teddy's directives were only followed while he was in sight, after which the workers would revert to a slower, safer method.

"Don't get me wrong," said a man, George, who had guided Caden up onto, and then back off of, one of the larger boulders. Once Teddy had stalked off, we worked from below to split off chunks of stone. "I want these rocks quarried as much as Teddy. I just want to keep all my fingers and toes in the process."

I knew George superficially from a few weekends at the refuge. He was a smiling and affable man leaving his middle years, with a neat greying beard and long stringy hair. He remembered me, and the

boys, and had leapt to show us the ropes—literally.

"What's all this stone for, anyway?" I asked him.

George gestured to the great boulder, the smaller stones, even the rock shards that littered the ground. "This will all become foundation stones. There's another work crew digging out a build site and another one mixing up concrete." He beamed proudly at us until it became obvious we were not following. "The sooner we harvest this stone, the sooner we build more housing," he explained. "The sooner we move out of the barn."

"So we're…" I started, then heaved a head-sized rock into the wheelbarrow. "…expanding the refuge?"

The man bobbed his head happily. "The Hosts can't help it if too many people showed up. What are they gonna do, send 'em away?" He waved his hammer in the general direction of the valley below. "They'd just go tattle to some sheriff who thinks he's a warlord now, and the next thing you know, there's a small army of ex-police laying siege to the place."

I stopped loading for a moment. "Okay, but why are so many people showing up in the first place?"

Teddy chose that moment to reappear and shouted at me. "This ain't break time, Suzy. Let's go. We gotta earn our dinner." He lumbered closer, his height and bulk looming over me. I took a half-step back

instinctively and set to work, scowling. A few moments later, he was gone.

"So imagine you subscribe to the refuge for a few months," George picked up the thread of his conversation once the big man was back out of earshot. "You come out to a workshop or two, put in some time on a work weekend, but eventually, you get to thinking. Maybe I'm just throwing this money away. Surely the world is not going to go up in flames. You were being paranoid. So you cancel your subscription. And then a year later, the world does go up in flames. And your subscription isn't current, but you know a safe place you can take your family…"

A shower of rock shards cascaded down the face of the boulder. Caden and Jackson both crowed as the seam they'd been prying open yawned wider. I reached down to start picking up the little rocks. "It sounds plausible. Cole has been building this place for fifteen years. There's got to be scores of cancelled subscriptions. But do you know anyone who is here on an expired account?"

George grinned wider. "Who would admit to it? They'd be shunned at best, beaten at worst. And of course the Hosts don't say anything, to prevent exactly that from happening."

The man clearly thought the inability to prove or

disprove his theory lent it some kind of credence. Instead of picking at his argument, I changed the subject. "You think the Hosts would cover for… I dunno, cheaters? That seems… unethical."

"Hey," George barked, a little more forcefully than necessary. He looked sheepishly at the rest of the work detail, then put on a show of working. He sidled next to me as he piled rocks in the wheelbarrow. "Mister Abernathy is a good guy," he insisted. "He's making the best of a shitty situation."

I tipped my head side to side, conceding his point. "I am rather fond of the man."

"You just watch," George said with no lack of confidence. "Between Abernathy's guidance and our hard work, we'll have this place ship-shape by Christmas."

The sun was reaching its apogee, sending its rays directly down into the riverbank, when Bukhari appeared again. The poolies were uniformly sweaty and plastered with mud and rock dust. She came over the rise pushing her sunglasses over her immaculate hair. In her hand she carried a clear-sided canteen filled with something orange sloshing around a few red berries.

"Miss Bukhari!" Teddy called out when he saw her, and huffed up the bank to meet her.

She sipped at her drink and surveyed the work site. "How we doing, Teddy?"

"Twelve wheelbarrows to the build site so far," he reported, placing his meaty fists on his hips. "I'm aiming for fourteen more before sunset."

She nodded in apparent satisfaction, her expression hidden behind her dark glasses. "I don't know how you do it, Teddy. The other group has only cleared eight, and their afternoons are never as productive as their mornings."

"Discipline and dedication," he told her proudly, and then scowled down the embankment, directly at me. Without realizing it, I had stopped collecting stones to listen in to their conversation. The big man did his best to communicate with only his eyebrows, so as not to interrupt his report to Bukhari.

"What are you doing," his eyebrows demanded. "Get back to work before she sees you!"

I schooled my face to expressionlessness and obeyed the eyebrows' directive.

Bukhari watched us work for less than fifteen minutes and then disappeared again. In her place, workers from the Mess brought lunch out to the riverbed work site. The quarry workers of the day each collected a cup of rice and a handful of berries and dispersed to sit on the boulders that they had

spent the morning trying to split apart. Both George and Maggie settled down next to the boys and I.

"Alright, everybody," Teddy called as he checked his watch, "We've got twenty minutes to eat and then it's back to work."

"I don't like that guy," Caden declared, and I looked up to see my boy glaring daggers through the foreman's back. His declaration was met with sniggers from Jackson and Maggie both. Caden thrust the palm of his hand across the riverbed at Teddy. "Well he's an asshole," he explained, somewhere between defensive and petulant. "And a bully."

Jackson nodded. "Certain."

I placed my hand on the back of Caden's neck. "We're going to have to learn to work with all kinds of people, honey. We've got to all work together."

My son shot me a look of frustration and disappointment. "This is not like you, mom. Back home you wouldn't have stood for this for a minute."

"Well that was back home," I told him after a beat. "Things are different now. The rules are different. The stakes are higher. And we're working without a net." I looked into the face of my beautiful boy and pursed my lips over what I did not, even after all we had already been through, want to tell him. That he and his brother could be—already were—the best tools to

keep me quiet. That I dared not stand up or speak out because of what might happen to them.

But the boy didn't understand what I did not say. "If he was a police chief, or he ran a hotel, or was building a factory, you'd be picketing his ass and shouting chants all day long. Do I need to get you a placard or something?"

I laughed at that, a sudden and natural impulse that I immediately saw had had the opposite effect in him than I had wanted to project. He looked stung, and looked down at his metal cup full of rice.

"When I joined a picket line, there was no chance that would result in you or your brother starving to death," I told him. "I got to go home after the protest was done, back to our house, with a fridge full of food, a house protected by an alarm system , and a really nice job where I had tenure. No one could even threaten any of that."

"So you ratcheted your cowardice according to your privilege," he grumbled. I nearly dropped my lunch.

"Hey," Jackson barked, and swatted his brother's shoulder. "That's not fair, man."

Caden pushed himself off our boulder, mumbling something about returning his cup. He slouched his way down the riverbank toward the cart from the

Mess.

"He's just upset," Jackson told me, starting to follow. "He didn't mean it."

"He is upset, and he did mean it," I sighed. "And he might also be right." I nodded after the younger boy. "But go make sure he doesn't do something stupid, okay?" Jackson nodded and followed after his brother.

"Tenure, huh?" George spoke up as the boys walked away. "What did you teach?"

"Econ," I supplied. "You?"

"MFA program for a bit," the man answered. "Didn't fit me. Then my wife got transferred, so I had an easy out. Wrote some articles online for a bit, but my heart wasn't in it. Lucky for me, the wife's the one who pays the bills. Specially since that means we ended up here instead of trapped down in some collapsing city."

"What did she do?"

"Once upon a time, she taught third grade," he answered easily, then shrugged. "Then she went into administration, and then government bureaucracy, and then… consulting. I used to keep track, but it's all just spreadsheets and emails."

"You're a kept man?" Maggie smirked from her side of the boulder.

"And happily so," he replied easily. "She's been saving my ass for as long as I can remember."

The other woman scanned the edge of the compound, just visible over the steep riverbank. "Not entirely sure she saved you this time."

He popped the last of his rice into his mouth. "You seem to be in the same situation, Maggie."

"Like I was telling Susan, it was a nice pamphlet."

I shifted around to face her. "So what did you do before things fell apart?"

She shrugged. "Spreadsheets and emails and things. In all honesty, I was going to sell off my subscription here when it appreciated. Fringe real estate was a promising market." She knocked a few stray grains of rice out of the bottom of her cup. "Kind of surprised a university professor with an activist streak invested, though."

I gave her a sour smile. "A few years back I saw some long-term market projections that scared the hell out of me. Grain instabilities and finance over-centralization. Figured a subscription couldn't hurt, and lo and behold, it all came to pass."

"Why didn't you warn anybody?"

I snorted down at the ground. "Anybody who could understand the numbers already knew. But as a species we're staggeringly good at assuming the worst

will magically pass us by."

"So you were literally content to watch the world burn," Maggie concluded with raised eyebrows.

"I did what I could to raise awareness, even affect policy," I protested, although I'm sure it sounded weak. Not because I had not acted, but because I was tired of it. "But the global economy is the biggest ship humanity has ever built, and it turns slowly."

"So picket lines through the week, survivalism subscription on the weekends." She smirked. "You don't find that hypocritical?"

The smile I turned on Maggie had gained the slightest edge of amusement. "Going out on a limb here, Mags, but I'm guessing you don't have kids."

The sharp reply on Maggie's lips died when Teddy started shouting for everyone to get up and back to work.

Caden and Jackson kept their distance once work resumed. Jackson shot me a look that said he was keeping an eye on his little brother. Maggie and George seemed to disappear into the crowd of workers—poolies—as we shuffled back to our jobs. Which left me alone with my thoughts and a wheelbarrow half-full of rocks.

And why was I so eager to fill it up all the way? Caden's estimation of Teddy matched my own, but I

jumped to his orders quickly enough. And if Maggie was to be believed, this was just the tip of the iceberg, with more and greater indignities awaiting us. Why was I cooperating without so much as a complaint?

Part of me insisted that I was just biding my time, waiting for the right moment. Keeping my eyes open, conscious that when the time came, action must be tempered with knowledge. If I wanted to confront the injustices of this place, I would first have to understand how it worked. As with any human institution, it must have its share of vulnerabilities that could be exploited to turn things around or even, if necessary, escape.

But escape to what? We had just trudged through an anarchic mess to get here. We had scrounged for food and even clean water. We had been threatened and chased and shot at. Now here in the refuge, we had to work, and work hard, but we were fed and warm and safe. So why not buckle down and work? Why not play along?

There was a sort of temptation there: to just accept that this was the new normal. To shrink my view of the world down until its edges matched the refuge walls. To take up this role of poolies and sweeties and their silly names, too. Hadn't that been the whole plan, anyway, to hide behind the walls and pretend

the world wasn't falling apart outside? To believe that all the problems were out there and hadn't followed us inside?

If anything put the lie to that daydream, though, it was the poolies and the sweeties, the deference that otherwise intimidating Teddy paid to Bukhari, and his eagerness to earn his promotion to a suite. And the shadow lurking behind all of that—they had taken our guns on entry, confiscated all of our things, in fact, because what other weapons might we be hiding in our packs? But Bukhari wore a sidearm, as had every other sweetie corralling work crews outside the Mess. It was perfectly clear that the divide between poolie and sweetie was enforced with violence, or could be at the drop of a hat.

So was it fear that kept me in line? That yoked me to the millstone on my very first day out of quarantine? If this had been a movie, I would have had that first day of acting up and refusing to accept my changed circumstances before I got beat down into sullen submission. But that didn't happen; I all but put my neck in the yoke myself and asked them to slam home the lock. Was it all to avoid that beat down, to neatly sidestep the intimidation?

I wondered how many other poolies told themselves that this was as good as it got, that they

were lucky to be cared for by the hosts and sweeties, and made themselves believe it just to avoid the realization that not toeing the line might get them shot.

A sudden, giddy thought sprang into my mind, a counter-fantasy where I rejected the refuge's nascent social order, refused to play along, and fought back until they had to shoot me. Then everyone would know. No one could deny that they were being held prisoner, made into slaves.

Almost as quickly as it came, the fantasy drained away again. All it took was remembering that I would leave my boys behind, defenseless. Or that the refuge's masters would be clever enough to shoot them instead of me, to force me to recant and accept all the blame for disturbing their perfect little social order.

No, I could not be a martyr. It wouldn't be fair to my boys.

When the light started to fail, Teddy called for tools to be collected and one last round-up of stones broken small enough to transport. All the hammers, chisels, and picks were stacked up in a rather cleverly-constructed rolling toolbox. Teddy stood and watched, counting. Was his concern that no tool be misplaced, I wondered, or that an improvised weapon

might fall into the wrong hands?

When the lid of the rolling toolbox closed, it was secured with a padlock, which was enough of an answer for me.

Our weary work crew proceeded to the Mess for dinner, which consisted of yet more rice, bolstered by a salad of leafy greens and accented with a small piece of fish. The meal, I knew, was carefully designed to fulfill all of our nutritional needs out of ingredients that stored well (rice) or could be produced in our aquaponics garden (the rest). It was filling but bland—and I could only imagine how bored I would be of this simple meal in just a few days.

The poolies ate in exhausted silence as darkness fell outside the broad windows. The boys sat across the table from me, and I took some comfort from their presence, even without conversation. I tried to make eye contact with Caden a few times, but he was not cooperating. Both the boys plowed through their food with a single-minded determination.

Ponderosa shared the Mess with the poolies from Beaver Lodge. We sat separately, dividing the big room in half. Without any conversation within each lodge or between them, it was impossible to detect any sense of rivalry, friendly or otherwise. Everyone was just tired.

Plates were emptied and then cleared. What little remnants were left we scraped into the composting bins. Kitchen workers collected our plates, cups, and flatware at the dirties counter as we trooped out the door.

When we arrived at our bunks we found our clothes waiting for us, stacked haphazardly in awkward folds. Our backpacks, sleeping bags, flashlights, phones, and other items were absent. They had only returned our clothes.

"Except my fleece," I noted with a scowl. Jackson reported that he was missing a pair of gloves and sunglasses, as well.

"Were they all nice and new?" Maggie asked from a few bunks over.

I nodded. "They were."

The woman smirked. "You'll see them again—on some sweetie walking around the refuge. They keep the best stuff, trade it around. Even give them to each other as gifts. Still think any of them have your best interests at heart?"

"I tend not to assume altruism from those in power," I answered with a lingering frown. I liked that fleece jacket.

"I overheard you talking with George," she went on. "He's a bit… starry-eyed about our prospects. I

wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression about our place here."

I looked up from packing my clothes into the footlocker—actually a repurposed milk crate—next to my bunk. "No, you seem to be pretty invested in my getting a very specific impression about our place here."

Maggie put her hands up in mock innocence. "Sorry if I'm a broken record."

I sighed. "What's your agenda, Maggie? What do you want from me?"

She crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow at me. "There's a paucity of clear-eyed folks in this refuge. I never went in for the activism route myself, but I figure, with your track record of fighting oppression and protesting abuses and all that, you might be sympathetic to a… less cooperative position when it comes to the powers that be in the refuge."

I snorted. "Spreadsheets and emails, huh? You sure you weren't a politician before you came here?"

She waved a hand. "All management is politics. That was a nice dodge, though."

I smiled thinly at her. "Activism inside a functioning democracy is one thing. I suspect your 'less than cooperative' position is likely to get people hurt."

"Somebody's going to get hurt," she declared confidently, climbing into her bunk and pulling up her cheap blanket. "I just want a say in who that somebody will be."

## *3. Dirty Hands*

The next day we woke to the sing-song shouting of a boy who'd already tired of his job, which was to wake everyone up: "Rise and shine, wake up wake up, time for breakfast. Rise and shine…" He walked up and down the rows of bunks, alternating between touching everything he passed or, suddenly remembering, keeping his arms limp at his sides. A woman waited for him at the far wall, thanked him for a job well done, and then told him to put his shoes on.

Dressed, the human contents of the barracks spilled up the loop road to the Mess. Instead of filing inside, though, the crowd pooled outside the doors. Jackson craned his head and bounced up on tip toes to see what the holdup was. "There's a table set up," he reported, "and it looks like the doctor and nurses from the infirmary."

"Vitamin injection day," explained a nearby poolie, without enthusiasm. She slowly rolled up her right

sleeve.

Slowly and single file, the Ponderosa poolies shuffled past the medical table, gave their name, and received a shot in the arm. They then stepped inside the Mess to collect breakfast.

The boys and I waited our turn, and I passed the time explaining in vauge detail the necessity of B12 supplements for our mostly-rice diet. We finally stepped up to the table twenty minutes later. Aubrey turned back from administering a shot. She started when our eyes met. I offered a feeble smile. "I'm Susan S—" I began to tell the other nurse, this one with a chalkboard.

But Aubrey's face hardened immediately, and she cut me off. "Sozas. These three just arrived, they don't need anything." She waved us past.

Caden sputtered with frustration. "Then what did we just stand around waiting for?"

Aubrey gestured theatrically at the door. "Nothing. But the wait's over, so go get your breakfast. You're holding everything up. Come on, move it."

Surfing the tide of poolies behind us, we pressed on through and into the cafeteria line.

"Your girlfriend's a piece of work," Caden observed sullenly. "No offense, mom."

"Not my girlfriend," I corrected needlessly.

Breakfast was rice balls with bean paste centers, rice balls with fish paste centers, or rice balls with a different bean paste center. I picked three at random. "And everyone's on edge. You want to make your life easier, stop expecting people to be on their best behavior."

Jackson snorted. "Certain."

A surge of motherly responsibility rose up within me. "But that does not mean," I added hastily, "that you shouldn't try to treat others nicely yourself."

"Yes, mom," both responded in nonplussed unison, and then high-fived each other for their flawless synchronization. I ignored their grinning at each other in favor of pouring myself some strawberry water.

Our sweetie overseers did not particularly care about the delays getting into the Mess, and so breakfast was short. I carried my last rice ball out onto the loop road to listen for work assignments.

Teddy rattled off a list of first names I recognized from the day before and the three of us started moving towards where the big man was standing. But while he called for Caden and Jackson, he fell silent before calling my name. A moment later I heard "Susan!" called by a young man on the other side of the road.

I clutched my boys' hands. "Looks like I'm not on your work detail today," I managed around the

sudden lump in my throat. I tried to catch their eyes. "Stay safe, alright? Be careful."

"Yeah, don't worry, mom," Caden smirked. "Jackson will take care of me."

I let go of their hands and watched them join Teddy's entourage with all the casual heedlessness of youth. I, on the other hand, felt like my heart was collapsing to pieces inside me. What if something happened to them? I forced myself to breathe, and then shouldered through the milling poolies to join my own work detail.

Mitch Westin was an unassuming man lost somewhere in his thirties, with thinning fair hair over perpetually ruddy skin. He looked like he had just run up a hill, an impression I would discover hung about him at all times. And today, he was our supervision. We were going to harvest berries in the walipinis.

The refuge's gardens were some distance from the circle of lodges around the Mess. We hiked past the kitchens, picking up baskets as we went, and then marched up above the Golden Eagle lodge towards the rising ridge to the east. There had once been a path, but herds of feet tromping up and down its length had scattered the rocks on either side and trampled the pine needles around it. Now there was just one broad smear of packed earth running under

the trees.

I dimly worried what would happen at the first heavy rain this winter. The "path" would turn into a muddy sluice, possibly erode the whole slope. I looked up to say something, but the comment died on my lips. Who would I tell? Westin plainly didn't care, and my fellow poolies could do nothing about it.

Twenty minutes later, we had ascended the rise off the east end of the saddle. On the hillside, the trees thinned and the shade broke into dapples. Ahead of us stretched the walipinis.

They were not much to look at, although this was by design. From the outside, they looked like low, rickety cages, some thirty feet across and fifty long, draped in tattered nets of khaki and green knots. Close up, you could see the panes of polypropylene hiding underneath the camouflage netting. From the air, they looked like nothing but hardscrabble ground. Or at least that was the hope.

Westin split our group into smaller clumps of workers and sent us inside. Rough steps of wood planks holding back earth and gravel led us down to the greenhouse doors at each end. We pulled open the door and stepped inside. The air grew close, moist, and just slightly warmer than the thin blustery breeze playing in the trees outside.

The floor of each walipini was dug into the ground about four feet deep. The clear plastic walls rose three feet above that, giving us more than enough space to stand and walk around the garden inside.

The plants sat in rows of raised beds that ran down the length of the building. They formed stripes of vibrant green, touched by flecks of other living colors: blue berries, red peppers, golden sunflowers. The whole space was filled with the soft murmur of running water. I knew without looking that the wooden planks that formed walkways through the plants could be lifted up, revealing beneath them long troughs of flowing water populated with watercress and fish.

The walipini was alive, a secret cradle hidden in the woods bursting with living things. Not for the first time I thrilled at the feeling of stepping inside this carefully-maintained oasis, of being part of the secret of its tranquil existence. If the refuge made these wonderlands possible, it couldn't possibly be as horrible as I worried.

Baskets in hand, we set to harvesting berries. The walipinis faced south and despite the air camouflage a good deal of sunlight streamed in, warming the green-scented air. We worked our way down the aisles slowly, one on each side of the wide green row of

plant beds, so that each of us faced one other worker. George Madison worked opposite me.

"You know Maggie's talking through some serious biases, right?" he asked with a grin. "This place hasn't been easy on her."

I laughed so hard and so suddenly I dropped a pair of berries into the bed. As I rooted around the find them, I said, "And here I was, about to comment on how nice and companionable this felt." I considered the man across from me. "She was warning me about listening to you last night."

"Bitch," he noted without heat. "Anyway she comes to her axe-grinding honestly. She was just spurned by her sweeite lover."

"I suppose nothing's more companionable than gossip," I allowed. "Go on."

"Not a whole lot to say," George shrugged. "Maggie only spent a couple days in the Ponderosa barracks when she first arrived. Then one night she's not in her bunk when the lights go off. Some folks say they saw her flirting with Jack Estes after dinner. The next day some poolie from Beaver lodge shows up for Maggie's things. And we don't see her again for a week."

"This Jack is a Beaver sweetie?"

George bobbled his head. "He's one of Beaver's

lotharios, yeah. Which we might have warned Maggie about if she hadn't disappeared on us. She wasn't his first toy from labor pool. Anyway, nine days later, she storms back into the Ponderosa barracks, all her clothes balled up under her arm."

"That sounds terrible, poor thing. I imagine she thought she'd found her way out of the labor pool."

"Oh yeah," George chuckled grimly. "An impression that Estes was happy to encourage if it made her more… malleable to his preferences."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maggie hasn't said anything," he admitted, "but I've heard that his prior conquests—a Grey Wolf girl and a Beaver girl—complained loudly about the long list of weird kinks he wanted them to get into for him. And they didn't last half as long as Maggie."

"That does sound like a good recipe for resentment," I agreed, and frowned down at the berries. "Poor Maggie."

"It's a shame what happened," called the woman working another row over. "Absolutely despicable if you ask me."

"I can't argue with that," I agreed, and then shifted my features to a smile. "I don't think we've met. I'm Susan Soza."

The older woman returned my smile. "Delores. You're the new family, right? Has anyone invited you to church services on Sunday yet?"

"No one has," I responded. George, his back to Delores, had drawn his lips back to produce a comical rictus of fear. I suffered no confusion over his opinion of the services. "Has somebody built a little chapel for the refuge?"

"No, we just use the amphitheater," she responded with a laugh. "Mister Jameson—he's the Host over at Mountain Lion—he makes sure nobody has to work on the Lord's Day, so we can all attend."

"We can all attend or we all must attend?" I asked warily, looking from Delores to Geore and back.

"Oh, nobody's required to go," she answered quickly, mildly affronted. She then turned solicitous. "I'm sorry, are you not Christians? I just assumed with a name like Soza—"

"We're Unitarian Universalists," I told her with a fixed grin. George raised an eyebrow at me.

Her face clouded. "I'm not familiar with them. Is that like Methodists?"

George laughed. "Naw, UUs are the hippy-dippy New Age church where you can believe anything you want, right?"

"Between that and the Methodists, we're a lot closer

to the Methodists," I assured the woman, and beamed her as warm a smile as I could. "I'd love to attend services. I may even be able to rouse the boys. Thank you for the invitation."

Delores smiled and went back to work. George muttered just loud enough for me to hear: "You're going to regret that."

Before I could reply, the door from outside opened and Westin poked his head inside. "Susan! Susan. Is Susan in here? Someone out here needs to see you."

Shrugging at George's look of curiousity, I put down my basket and made my way outside. Westin followed me up the steps. "I don't know what this is about, but make it as quick as you can, okay? We need to finish this harvest today." He then waved me forward, to the end of the rough track that led back to the compound.

Aubrey stood there, waiting for me. Already my eye picked up the telltales that told me her status ranked higher than mine. She'd showered this morning. Her clothes were freshly laundered. She wore simple earrings, but jewelry nonetheless. As I approached, I detected the faintest trace of her perfume, and tried to stop myself from remembering it fondly.

"What can I do for you?" I asked warily. Nothing

about her demeanor held a trace of welcome: her shoulders were squared, her hands folded before her, and her eyes were fixed, not on me, but on Westin.

"Washington," she said, and it took me a moment to realize she was supplying me with her last name. Finally she locked eyes with me, her expression so intent that I nearly stopped in my tracks. "Roll up your sleeve."

I opened my mouth to object, but complied instead. She stepped close and wrapped her cool fingers around my upper arm. "Pretend you're getting a shot," she directed, and when I looked to her face her eyes were again on Westin, some fifty feet away. "I need you to do something for me," she said quietly, and pressed a paper envelope into my hand. By the way we were standing, Aubrey holding me close to her, Westin would be unable to see the hand-off.

"What is this?" I asked, even as I slid the envelope into my pocket.

"The less you know, the better," she breathed. "Get these to Teddy Mahone, okay?"

"The big guy?"

She actually rolled her eyes. "How many Hawai'ians named Teddy do you know? It's important, okay, and I know I can trust you."

After everything else that was happening, it was

that statement that made my heart pound. She held me close enough that I could feel the heat off her skin. "Okay," I managed.

"Tell him there is more but I can only move a little at a time," she added, and finally released my arm. "And don't tell him you got it from me." Louder, and for my supervisor's benefit, she said, "That's it. You can get back to work."

Then she turned and walked back down the hill. I returned to the walipini, picked up my basket, and pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

By the end of the day, it had become plain that berry picking was no less back breaking than quarry work. It was also capped by a treacherous hike back down the hill, balancing heavy baskets across our shoulders while we negotiated the roughshod wash that had once been an orderly trail.

We deposited the day's harvest at the back door of the Mess and then circled around to the queue for third Mess. Teddy's team and my boys were nowhere in evidence, although I expected he would wring every minute of work out of the day.

Maggie waved at me from the end of the line, and George and I fell into place behind her. "Pleasant day gardening?" she asked with a sour smile.

George shrugged. "Blueberries for breakfast tomorrow, can't complain about that."

But Maggie snorted. "We'll see if there are any left by the time First and Second Mess are done with the spread."

I couldn't yet tell if Maggie's griping was cynicism or valid complaint. "Surely the kitchen staff could just divide everything into three stages, right?" I asked, looking between them.

"They could," Maggie acknolwedged. "They don't. And why would they, most of them are Eagle poolies, and they eat at Second Mess."

"Ponderosa sends poolies to the kitchen every day," George pointed out. "Our people are in there, too."

"Yeah, but they're always the minority, and they're never on the line. They're washing dishes and shucking soybeans."

George's wife, a much younger woman I only knew in passing as Gini, sidled up to her husband, their two young daughters in tow. He smiled and pecked her on the cheek, but didn't let any of that distract him from the debate. He rolled his eyes. "Listen, if there are no berries for us tomorrow, we can go to Abernathy, and he can—"

"Do what?" Maggie scoffed. "He eats with First Mess like all the other sweeties."

"Not all the time," he protested. "He's eaten with us at Third Mess a bunch."

"Less and less often," was the response. "Half the time he just has a meal delivered to his suite."

The argument was interrupted by the arrival of Teddy's work crew and the boys cutting the line to give me a hug. I wasn't sure which made my heart leap more: seeing that they were safe and whole, or the unprompted display of affection. We exchanged brief check-ins—we had all worked hard, stayed safe, and were now tired and hungry—before they looked uncertainly down the line to where their fellow quarry workers were standing.

The doors to the Mess opened and the line lurched into halting motion. "I don't know if it's okay for you two to cut in to be with family—" I started to say, and a moment later the boys had disappeared, heading down the line.

Maggie watched them go. "It's totally okay," she assured me. "People do it all the time. Gini just did it a moment ago."

I looked back to where they had gone and hooked a thumb after them. "Look again." Sure enough, both boys were already deep in conversation with another young man.

"Aw," crowed George. "They made a friend."

I shot Maggie a sardonic smirk. "The tip-off was the matching hugs. That was a carefully choreographed check-in with Mom, calculated to make me happy enough to see them go."

George chuckled and then looked worriedly at his own, much younger, children. "Oh, the heights of duplicity I have to look forward to."

"We'll be negotiating over which meals I can expect to see them at shortly," I predicted with a rueful smile. "But. Better than their being socially isolated and grumpy all the time. I've weathered that before, don't want to repeat the experience."

I ate with Maggie and the Madisons. Conversation was light and sparse as the day's exhaustion settled over us. The children occupied a good deal of their parents' attention between goading them to eat and listening to a detailed if fragmented report on what had happened in the creche that day. I must admit I enjoyed watching the young ones, and I caught Maggie bestowing a sappy smile on them more than once.

Then motion in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Teddy Mahone had stood from his seat and now his bulky form was pushing down an aisle of benches. The diners on either side of him swayed like cornstalks in a field as the farmer walked down a row.

I excused myself and made my way after the big man.

He did not have a tray in his hand, so as I expected he stepped outside towards the restrooms. By the time I exited the Mess, the door to the men's room was closing after him. This side of the Mess was deserted, so I simply sat down on a convenient rock to wait.

When he emerged, I stood up and said his name as politely as I could. He started, glanced back at the bathroom door, and then to me. "Yeah?" he answered. "This about your boys?"

"No," I said, stepping closer before I withdrew the envelope from my pocket. It was a letter envelope, sealed and then folded in half. That did little to conceal its contents, which were easy enough to feel through the paper: a trio of glass vials and what felt like a syringe. "I have something for you."

Only when I was close beside him did I press the envelope into his hands. He took the package automatically, then lifted it up to examine it quizzically. His thick fingers ran across the bumps in the paper, and his eyes went wide. "Where did you get this?"

I took half a step back, if only so I did not have to crane my neck to look him in the eye. "I can't say."

His features clouded and he made the envelope

disappear. "So I owe you now," he said matter-of-factly, and suddenly it looked like he might cry. "Is that how it is?"

I blanched. "Oh no, no. Not at all."

The big man raised his eyebrows. "Listen, I'm not into any sly double talk. You want to blackmail me with this, that's fine. I can live with that. But I'm not going to call you my friend or something while you've got a collar around my neck. I'm not going to do you little favors and shit. You want me to do something for these, I will. But let's me clear what this relationship really is, up front."

I took another step backwards. "Teddy, I think there's been some misunderstanding." I nodded at his pocket where the envelope had gone. "I didn't… I'm not the one who got those for you. I was given them to give to you."

He scowled, eyes hard. "So the demands will come later, from somebody else."

"No, I mean—" I stopped myself and took a breath. "I don't know anything about that. I'm just the messenger."

He grunted. "Just the pawn," he corrected. "Alright. Then run along, little pawn." Without waiting for me to do so, he turned and plodded through the Men's door again.

I took a few moments to get my heartbeat and breathing back under control. Then I hurried back into the Mess. What had Aubrey gotten me into?

We retired to the poolie barracks a little while later, cocooning ourselves in our bunks against the day we just had and the day we would have when the sun rose. What little activity and few voices disturbed the gathering quiet slowly feel prey to the night. The barracks quieted and stilled.

At night the full brunt of the refuge would fall upon me, overwhelming and suffocating.

By the end of each day, exhaustion clipped all conversation short: minimal phrases and sentence fragments, questions asked with a tilt of the head instead of real words, and brusque replies of a grunt or a nod. Eye contact that said, "I want this blanket." A look away that meant, "I don't care enough to fight over it."

I tried to tell the boys goodnight every night, tell them I loved them even if not in so many words. A little joke, a wry observation, a scrappy little hope that the next day we'd see another pretty sunset or that we'd find someone who'd play cards. Some meager recognition of their humanity, and mine, too, making contact despite our surroundings and not losing track of each other. A promise to be human to each other

tomorrow.

They did not always have the patience or the goodwill to play along.

So we would climb into our bunks, pull the thick, drab blankets over our bodies, and curl up with our backs against the overhead lights. Someone would eventually turn them out, but never before midnight. They'd stay burning, a trickle of current through their LEDs draining hardly anything from the solar-charged batteries tucked against the ceiling up in the corner. And if it cost nothing, the light was a luxury we could afford, and so every night there were poolies who insisted on revelling in its glow.

Staying awake, thinking your own rebellious thoughts, felt good. If you stayed up late plotting out what you'd do differently, and woke up tired and useless the next morning when the sweeties came to put you to work, well that was your own little rebellion. They couldn't touch you in your own world of might-have-beens and hypotheticals.

What if I had arrived early enough to live in a suite? What if I picked the work details, what if I planned the build projects. What if I could invite anyone to come share the bed in my suite, even for just one night? Sharing a bed, sharing your body, sharing an evening with someone… sometimes that

seemed like the greatest luxury imaginable.

And perhaps afterwards, and you lay sweaty and panting on top of each other, you could whisper your secrets to each other. You could share these private thoughts that you mulled over in the still-lit barracks, under a thick blanket and surrounded by a dozen loops of snores and breaths and wheezes.

We were packed all together here, row upon endless row, but the truth was we slept alone. No one heard our thoughts and no one shared our secrets. No one knew the colors that we painted across the insides of our heads.

It made me want to scream.

What was I, if no one knew me? Surely I knew my own thoughts, but if I was the only one, if there were no outside confirmation that yes, I, too, was a human being, then was I? Was I anything more than a poolie, a pair of hands and a back and every once in a while half a brain to decipher where best to dump a load of rocks?

I was a mother, at least. I felt for all those who had come to the refuge alone, with no one who knew them before they were poolies, with no shared memories of a better time when life was more than work and meal and sleep. My boys were my anchor, and I hoped I was theirs.

If I wasn't, if I failed to return the favor, then I was only using them. I would be that worst deformation of a mother, whose whole identity is derived from her children. That greedy identity that would suck her children dry, claw and grab them close to buoy her up, all the while suffocating them.

I remembered the boys as toddlers, as babies, when they were so small and delicate I felt as if I could crush them if I weren't careful. And were they any different now? Both of them were taller than me, but I knew their teenaged selves were still made out of paper and spun sugar. They could still be crushed. I could still crush them without thinking. I worried, every night, if I already had.

What kind of life had I brought them to? Everything that had come before–schools, sports, family stories, and weekend trips–it all paled in significance before the refuge. This place I had brought them to for safety, this place threatened to grind them up, and for what? To make concrete for a hovel huddling beneath the pine trees. This was the future that I'd given them, that I'd delivered them up to.

Was it better than what was happening outside?

How would I know?

Would we ever know?

## *4. Shower Day*

The next day I spent working alongside the boys dredging the fish troughs in the walipinis. Their waste, full of ammonia, would be composted along with kitchen scraps and green cuttings. Sprinkling that mess with nitrogen-fixing bacteria produced fertilizer for the gardens. It was wet, smelly, awkward work, and we were surprised when Westin came to collect us an hour before the sun even touched the horizon.

"No one told you?" he said, surprised. "It's shower day."

Every suite in the lodges had a shower and bath tub, of course, but the storage barn that the poolies had been stuffed into had no such amenities. Instead, the showers next to the empty pool—a relic from before the land had been bought by the refuge—were put to work churning through the poolie population.

Each day, I was informed as we waited in line

outside the poolhouse, a different lodge's poolies tromped through the showers. Water was precious and so there was no lingering. "Wet yourself, wash yourself, rinse, and get out," was the mantra repeated to us all as we waited our turns.

The poolhouse was split into Men's and Women's, and once inside the ladies began loosening and doffing their clothes even as the line snaked towards the bank of showers. No one wanted to waste a moment of their shower time on undressing. We stripped and then flung ourselves into the stalls with all the precision of a finely-tuned shower factory.

The water was ice cold and flowed continuously. Good-natured yelps and giggles echoed through the room as we pushed our bodies into the spray. But once you were in, the clean water splashing around you, it was heaven. I had lost track of the last shower I had enjoyed—it had to have been days before we'd reached the refuge.

I washed off layers of fish shit, soil, and sap, powdered stone, trail dust, and road weariness. The soap was harsh and hard in the chill water, but as I scrubbed I seemed to slough off the weight of the last month. I got down to my bare skin for what felt like the first time in my whole memory.

For a moment I felt raw and real and present under

that water. I felt like I had woken up after a long, feverish sleep.

And then the shower monitor called time, and I stepped out to wrap a thin towel around me and collect my things. Another woman dashed past me to take her turn.

I realized suddenly that I had completely forgotten to wash my hair.

We dressed again and piled our wet towels in a corner. Some other poolie would collect them, maybe wash them, and dry them for the Golden Eagle poolies' use tomorrow. Then we filed out the other side of the building, onto the concrete slab overlooking the dry pool full of pine needles.

"Susan." Bukhari was waiting for me outside, and called me forward with a jerk of her head. Her one sable curl bobbed over her forehead. "Mister Abernathy requests the pleasure of your company tonight for dinner in his suite."

I blinked, glancing around to see if anyone had overheard. "I… I didn't know that sort of thing happened."

She bared her teeth at me in a vicious smile. "I entertain gentlemen in my suite all the time, Susan. I don't see why Abernathy should deny himself just because he's the Host."

"It's not like that," I insisted. "We're friends."

Bukhari did nothing beyond lift an eyebrow. "Ponderosa lodge. His suite upstairs. They'll be expecting you shortly."

I glanced backwards to where my sons were waiting, chatting between each other. "My boys?"

"Just you, Susan. They'll eat with the rest of labor pool."

I thanked her, told the boys to go on to dinner without me, and hurried down the loop to the barracks. I had a feeling that I shouldn't go wearing damp clothes fresh from dredging the walipinis.

Twenty minutes later and wearing a different shirt, it was with strange trepidation that I approached Ponderosa Lodge. After all, I had spent more weekends in its suites than I could easily recall. I had drunk a great deal of wine on its long porch. I had pulled Aubrey into suite six with a dopey grin on our faces and not come out until lunchtime the next day.

I knew its layout like a second home: the long hallways that ran down the length of its two floors, the lounge that sat in the center of the ground floor, the misused kitchen tucked away behind what looked like another suite door. I had slept in most of its suites, and had my favorites (six) and dislikes (three smelled of damp; eight's windows offered a close study of pine

needles). It was familiar and filled with memories.

And I hadn't set foot in it–hadn't been allowed to set foot in it–since we had arrived. Now the Lodge loomed tall and angular above me, the home not of my compatriots but entitled, prideful buffoons… and their leader, a gentle man for whom I had built up an abundance of respect and affection. I hardly knew how to feel as I stepped up onto the porch and opened the door into the lounge.

"David!" I exclaimed almost immediately, for there before me was Abernathy's adult son, evidently waiting for me. He flashed me a warm smile and we embraced like the old friends we were. "I hadn't seen you in the refuge. I'm glad to see you're safe."

"I don't… I don't get out much," he replied. "Not around the refuge, anyway."

I considered him at arm's length. "You don't manage poolies, you mean."

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. "I help Dad with numbers, mostly. Speaking of, though, he's waiting for us upstairs."

He led the way up the stairs that wrapped around the lounge, up to the second floor hallway and then down its length to the Host's suite. Unlike the other suites, this one consisted of just two rooms, the outer one suitable as an office and living space, with a small

bedroom beyond.

I had always thought it distantly unfair that Abernathy, who stayed here year-round, lived so cramped next to the spacious and usually empty subscriber suites. Late one night on a work weekend, and after a good deal of wine, I had said as much to him. He had laughed, saying that this was all the space he wanted, as long as he got to walk under the pine trees every day.

Today the furnishings in his compact living space had been rearranged to fit a table set for four. He rose from his seat opposite the door when we entered. The older gentleman gave me an uncertain smile.

It may have been the smile, or perhaps the past few days finally coming to a boil, or just simple exhaustion, that prompted my next words. Without circling the table to hug him or even returning his smile, I blurted, "What the hell is going on, Joe?!?"

The poor man reared back as if struck.

His son leapt to his defense, raising his hands as if he'd restrain me. "Listen it's not Dad's fault—"

"David, David, stop," Abernathy groaned. "Miss Soza's reaction is the only sane response one could have." He then turned his gaze back to me, and for the first time I looked him over. The man appeared to have aged ten years since the last weekend I had been

here. "Susan, before we eat or talk or anything, I wanted to apologize to you."

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. "No, David's right. I can't imagine that this is all your doing —"

"No, I wanted to apologize for letting you into the refuge," the Host corrected. When I said nothing in response, he explained: "I could have turned you away, told the gatehouse that you were strangers who didn't know what was inside. You could have hiked back out and found some better alternative than life here in the refuge. But your ex-husband didn't look like he'd make it."

"No," I responded numbly. "I don't think he would have." I pulled out my chair and sank into it.

The woman standing at the fourth table placement made a slight noise in the back of her throat, prompting me to notice her for the first time. Brushing aside my surprise, she gave me a warm smile. "You must be as new as David said, sitting down before the Host does." I opened my mouth to apologize, but she reached out to put her hand over mine. "I'm not criticizing. One of the more disturbing facets of this place is how quickly people embrace the roles they've been assigned."

"Susan, this is Melissa," David explained. "My

fiancée."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said automatically, and then realized I was grinning. To David I said, "I didn't know you were engaged. Congratulations."

He sat. "It's a new development. Just a few weeks." This led us into polite conversation, the kind of surface niceties which I had not experienced in more than a month. As Abernathy and son served up rice and fish and greens, I let myself fall back into the easy familiarity of dinner party banter. We compared schools, childhood homes, and joked about movies we had seen in the past year. For one short hour, I forgot where we were and what had happened around us.

Abernathy spoke less and less, letting us "young" people dominate the conversation. When the dessert of berries and cream had been properly demolished, he fixed me with a frank stare. "This has been nice, Susan. But I expect you have some questions for me."

The other two fell silent at the Host's invitation, and I suddenly found a lump on my throat. I washed it down with a swallow of water, reflecting on how Melissa was right: it was so easy to fall into a deferential position. I set my glass down. "I do have questions," I murmured, and then so many rose to the surface of my mind they threatened to overwhelm me. I opened with, "Where did all these people come

from?"

Abernathy nodded like the pleased professor he had once been, as if I had asked the right question. "Cole overbooked the refuge," he said simply.

"What, like an airplane?"

"Exactly so," he nodded, "but instead of selling a handful of extra tickets, he sold subscriptions for… at least two and a half times our capacity. I still haven't seen numbers."

I couldn't find a place to put my hands. "That makes it sound like you didn't know what he was doing."

Abernathy shook his head. "Every event weekend there'd be new faces, and I just assumed they were new subscribers to replace old ones who abandoned their subscriptions. Understand, Susan, that most subscribers did not have your attendance record. It was a rare thing to see someone return more than… twice."

"But they kept paying in," I said, with no small amount of wonder at the disposable incomes that implied.

"And a good number never came at all until the markets started crashing," the Host added. "Sometimes I think those ones complain the least getting tossed into the labor pool; they don't have any

conflicting expectations."

"About that," I said, lifting one finger. "Labor pool? Poolies and sweeties? This whole caste system that you've installed. Tell me about that."

He heaved a sigh. "Less nefarious than you might assume, not that that makes it any better. We had more subscribers than we had suites, so we converted the space we had. We got to work building more housing, which the poolies–pardon me–the subscribers in temporary housing, they were the most eager to break ground. We split them into teams and I had the subscribers in the lodge show them the ropes, and the next thing I knew they were calling each other poolies and sweeties."

"You're saying it developed organically?" I asked, making no effort to keep my skepticism hidden.

Abernathy nodded, but his son spoke up. "The first day we split Mess–because we'd run out of space–some of the sweeties started throwing 'poolie' around. At first as a joke, supposedly, but sometimes I wonder. Since then–and it's only been a few weeks–the sweeties have closed ranks, and hard, to protect their status."

"At Beaver and Lion," Melissa cut in, "poolies aren't even allowed into the Lodge."

I lifted one eyebrow. "That's funny, because I was

told the same rule applied here at Ponderosa." At their looks of surprise and disgust, I added, "I wish I could remember who told me I couldn't come up here. But the Ponderosa poolies definitely think the Lodge is out-of-bounds."

"That is troubling," the elder Abernathy muttered into his hand. He then proceeded to scrub his face, sending his spectacles askew. After he had replaced them, he concluded, "And that is how I inadvertently became some kind of feudal lord, complete with serfs."

"But why haven't you said something?" I pressed. "I don't know Cole and Jameson well, but they seem the sort to… accidentally back into being slavemasters without realizing it. But surely you and Martin saw what was happening–" Suddenly all three of them looked down at the table, lips screwed shut. "Oh lord, what did I say now?"

Melissa carefully cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Susan. I think we… glossed over a little detail for my benefit earlier. You see, my full name is Melissa Hall."

"Is… Martin Hall your father?" I asked uncertainly. Martin Hall, the Host of Grey Wolf Lodge and Abernathy's colleague, whose ready smile and love of rambling stories made him one of my favorite people here.

She shook her head and took a steadying breath. "Martin Hall was my father. He died. About a month back."

David reached across the little table to clasp his fiancée's hands. "He was murdered," he added with restrained heat in his voice.

"Murdered?" I echoed, eyes wide. Then I put two and two together. "A month ago was when the Lodges started overflowing. He… said something?"

Melissa nodded. "He called out the Director. Said he had been reckless and greedy, and… and two days later, he was dead."

I put my hand on her shoulder, which she barely seemed to register. "I'm so sorry, Melissa. I didn't know your father well, but what I did know about him, I liked. He was a good man."

"He was an impulsive man," she corrected me, the rough edge of her voice betraying the tears she was holding back. "And wore his heart on his sleeve. And he got killed for it."

I looked from the young woman to Abernathy. "And if Cole is willing to resort to such violence, you fear speaking out."

But the Host made a pained face. "We don't know that it was Cole. Their confrontation was very public, and anybody might have decided he needed to be

silenced. Any of the other Hosts, even the sweeties."

"And we can't speak with the other Hosts privately, because any of them might be the killer," Daniel put in. “Or even the sweeties. Even our own sweeties."

"I certainly don't know any of them well enough to guess their loyalties," Abernathy admitted, his voice miserable and hollow. "When families started showing up, I assumed they were new subscribers. I welcomed them in, gave them suites. And now I worry that I put the wrong people in the suites." He looked across the table to me at that, his face apologetic.

"You can't just kick them out for your favorites," I allowed with a rueful smile.

"Clark did," Daniel put in, although by the sour look on his face he did not approve. "Beaver Lodge has thrown half its sweeties down into labor pool in order to promote Mavis Clark's cabal into their places."

"Ms. Clark is more ruthless in the management of her lodge than I'm capable," Abernathy admitted with a sigh. He met my eye and confided, "We are the least productive lodge in the refuge."

"Because you don't wring labor out of your subscribers," Daniel insisted. I refrained from bringing up Teddy to argue the point, given Abernathy's crestfallen demeanor.

I looked to each of their faces. "So this might be an indelicate question, but… what are you doing to fix it?"

The host of Ponderosa lodge seemed to collapse under the weight of the question. "At this point, Susan, I'm just hoping things outside get better and we can all go home sooner rather than later. There's little else I can do."

"Not what you were expecting?" Daniel asked later, on the porch. His fiancee was upstairs, clearing out the suite so his father could sleep.

"Not what I was hoping for," I answered wearily. I rested my forearms on the porch rail and looked out into the dark forest. The distant glimmer of city lights out in the basin occasionally winked through the pine needles. There were far fewer lights than I remembered from prior visits to the refuge. "A little piece of me hoped Abernathy would have a plan to fix everything."

Daniel produced a pipe and a bag of tobacco, and quietly filled one with the other. "You've got to understand, Dad is just… when the overbooking problem became apparent, Dad felt betrayed more than anything. Cole asked him up here to design eco-friendly, sustainable housing, and it was like Dad's ideal retirement plan."

I smiled and didn't say anything. He plainly wanted to explain his father, defend him.

Daniel lit his pipe and puffed a few times, still talking. "I don't think… he ever expected… the refuge to… really be… necessary. He thought of it as an outreach, a testbed for ideas. He loved those weekends where the rich and influential would come up for a weekend and he could show them how to build a house that didn't suck up water and power and used local materials and… all of that stuff." He smiled into the darkness.

"So when more people showed up than there was space…" I prompted.

"Yeah, he realized that his fabulous retirement had been funded via fraud," the son explained with a sigh. "It wrecked him. All his life he tried to… work out how to live without hurting everyone around you, you know? Ecology is more than man and nature, he'd tell me. It's balancing the needs of every man, woman, and child against each other so that everybody is happy. And then he found out that he had been living his dream here by stealing from hundreds of people, however indirectly."

"I always admired your father's idealism," I said quietly. "I'm sorry to hear it's come to haunt him."

"Well it's not the fault of his ideals, that's for sure,"

Daniel griped. His pipe glowed red, and a moment later a billow of smoke spilled out in front of him.

"You blame Cole?"

"Damn straight I blame Cole," he glowered. "Posturing ass wrapped us all up in a ball of stupid hopes and violent paranoia. And now we've got mercenaries holding us prisoner."

"At the gate?" I asked. "I thought those were our fellow subscribers dressed up as soldiers."

"Some of them are," he allowed. "But at least half of them are Wolfpack." At my look of incomprehension, he explained, "Grey Wolf lodge is full of a private security outfit. They rolled in just before we went into lockdown."

"And I take it they're not subscribers," I suggested mildly.

He scoffed. "No they are not. Tzavaras—she's the commander, you probably met her at the gate—knows Cole from way back. And they just happened to show up right before the gates locked up." He paused. "Two days later Martin was dead, and the mercs moved into Grey Wolf lodge."

"I take it Tzavaras is the new host over there?" I hazarded. "It didn't even occur to me to ask who was in charge now."

"The way Dad tells it, the other hosts were bending

over backwards to get her to stay," he sighed. "With the murder inside the walls, and everything falling apart outside the walls, they were all terrified."

We both fell silent for a while, mulling over our own thoughts. Wondering what thoughts were percolating in Daniel's head, I suggested, "You think Martin Hall was killed to make way for the mercenaries?"

"I think Cole wanted his own little army, and Martin was in the way, yeah," Daniel spat. "If it weren't for the Wolfpack, I'm sure we would have had people jump ship by now. And Cole can't have that happen."

The door behind us clattered open and Melissa stepped out onto the porch. Daniel turned and held out an arm; she melted against him with a contented smile. "He fell asleep in his chair," she told him. "I almost felt bad waking him to move him to the bed once the table was out of the way."

He kissed her forehead and murmured thanks into her hair. "He gets tired," he told me needlessly. Abernathy had to be in his late sixties, if not seventies.

"So do I," I replied, tapped the rail of the porch, and stood to go. "And I'm sure I'll be digging something up tomorrow." The both of them looked apologetic about that, and I tried to wave their concerns away. "I

came here intending to work, there's no surprises there. I just was expecting a shower and a quiet bed at the end of the day."

"Hopefully you'll be in a cabin soon," Melissa offered hopefully.

I bobbed my head and exchanged hugs with them both. I paused before heading down the stairs to the barracks path. "I shouldn't ask," I said, "but who's in Suite Six? That was always my favorite."

"Six?" Daniel echoed. "Um. Esther Bukhari."

A harsh guffaw bubbled out of me before I could restrain it. "Of course she is. Well. Good night. See you around."

—

Somewhere in the barracks, someone was fucking. The lights had been turned out hours ago, and nearly all the poolies slumbered peacefully in their bunks and cots and hammocks. But over the murmur of breaths and snores came a rhythmic crescendo of sighs. Whoever it was, they were doing their best to keep quiet, but as their pitch rose and rhythm escalated, their discretion was failing. I smiled into the darkness. Good for them.

It was difficult to impossible to find privacy in the refuge, at least for poolies. We lived side-by-side twenty-four hours a day. We woke together, ate

together, worked together, bathed together once a week, and slept just an arm's reach from each other. All our hours were accounted for, and sneaking away just wasn't permitted. Who knows what we might be getting up to, after all.

The lovers going at it in the dark barracks, though, were up to their own pleasure. Muffled sighs gave way to stifled gasps. With only a twinge of guilt, I quietly shifted my head against the rough pillow of my folded-up jeans and aimed my ear in their direction. I couldn't make out words, just barely-voices making sounds urging and welcoming and appreciative. They were taking their time. Enjoying themselves. Not rushing.

A sympathetic pang blossomed in my belly. It had been a long while, even before we left home, since someone took their time with me.

I slipped my hand under the waistband of my pajamas, slowly slid my knees apart, and tried not to think about my boys sleeping in the bunks above me.

One of the lovers squeaked and the other hushed them, giggling. For a little while there was silence again, punctuated by a breathy chuckle. I was not fooled; they had not stopped. Sure enough, another low sigh floated across the barracks, saturated with the gratitude that comes from thorough fulfillment.

Someone out there was doing a good job.

Oh how I wanted that. I wanted someone to touch and someone to touch me, to share our bodies and our confidences. I wanted to learn together how to play both our bodies like musical instruments. I wanted someone to take that time to learn me and my body. Investing the time to say that I and my body were important to them.

Since arriving, my body had been useful, but not valued. Exploited but not celebrated. But this was not what I wanted to be thinking about. I stroked the flat of my hand along the inside of my thigh. A distant smile settled onto my lips. I could celebrate my body. It wasn't quite the same, but I could imagine, at least.

I imagined my lover's touch against my most sensitive skin. Fingertips. Lips. Hot breath making little hairs stand on end. Caressing, soothing, teasing, stroking. I shuddered as my imaginary lover slipped inside of me (along with my fingers). I stretched out my back as my nerves danced in response.

I wanted to build up each other's pleasure in the confines of our bed. I wanted to promise to each other that our connection would overflow the bed, too. That we would build up our world outside the bed.

I longed for a partner. An intimate team mate. But with privacy so scarse, my prospects were slim. I

could make friends all day long, but finding the place and time for a lingering touch, nevermind a kiss… it seemed like an impossible shore across an endless sea.

My more immediate and baser satisfaction also receded across an endless sea as my mind wandered off into defeatism. I quieted my breath, hoping to catch some whisper of the anonymous lovers again. For a moment I thought I had missed their finale, but then came a very pleased groan.

I smiled up into the darkness as my fingers quickened. They had a head start, but were enjoying a languorous fuck. I just wanted to get off. Could I beat them to the finish line? I gave it my best effort, blanking my chattering mind and focusing on touch and rhythm and heat and flesh.

Their climax sounded off with a sudden shudder of bed springs and creak of a bunk headboard. My body crashed into orgasm along with them, flushing and curling and twitching. Across the barracks came a gasp of pent-up breath and a final, contented sigh.

My spent body melted into the thin mattress. I looked out through the darkness, half wishing that I could thank whoever it was, acknowledge that I had hitched a ride on their lovemaking. But there would be no connection for me, at least not tonight. Nor in the morning, for that matter.

I thrust the morose thoughts out of my head and settled into my cooling body, trying to recall the thrills it had just delivered moments ago. I can't remember if I found them again; sleep's dark curtain claimed me shortly thereafter.

## *5. Resolution*

When Sunday morning came, the usual wake-up call was delivered with all the insistence of a gentle request. I got the distinct impression that Milo, our roving morning alarm clock, was mostly bored and hoping someone would wake up and play with him. I regretted having other plans. I rose and poked the clumps of bedding on my sons' bunks, garnering as much of a reaction as I had expected. I dressed in something clean and made my way to the amphitheater. Time to go to church.

My mood leapt all over the place as I climbed the hill. Hope battled with cynicism–and they both struggled to overcome my strong desire to turn around and crawl back into bed.

But there was a chance, a part of me insisted, that this church, hidden away on a mountaintop, might provide that sense of community that I had been missing. As much as gossiping with George and

Maggie amused, it hardly grounded me. Perhaps in time they would. But I knew I was hungry for community, hungry for a place in a group that might welcome me. Today I might find common cause with other people who believed in something, and who believed we could make the world a better place.

And another part of me merely rolled her eyes at the naive idealism festering away in my brain. It had taken me decades to find a church that didn't tell me my primary value was as a wife and a mother, that Arthur was the rightful head of my household because of his anatomy, that justice on earth was subordinate to an eternal justice that sounded very nice but could not actually be demonstrated to exist. No doubt this church would be like so many others, not like our church back home.

With a groan and another push of will to keep my legs climbing, I chided myself for assuming the worst of strangers. At the very least, these were people who wanted to come together, to build something greater than themselves. It took spirit to lift your head up from the grueling day-to-day, to dream bigger, to actually get up in the morning on your one day off of work detail. I could respect that, I told myself, and that could be the foundation for building a greater respect, perhaps even building that sense of

community that was otherwise absent from the refuge.

The trickle of church goers I had joined at Ponderosa had swelled to a flow of people. When we finally gained the lip of the amphitheater, I was surprised at the appreciable crowd that filled its bowl. Three or four hundred people thronged the old railroad tie bleachers. I found a seat among some smiling congregants and made polite introductions. My nearest neighbors were a pair of young women from the Gray Wolf labor pool. I remarked with surprise on the turnout and they assured me that this was the usual crowd.

"Of course, all of Jameson's Lodge is here," the shorter, blonde woman smiled as if sharing a joke. Her friend mirrored the smile. "They've got to show up."

"They're not all true believers?" I asked with mock innocence, and this seemed to go over well.

The brunette shook her head. "And there's a lot of folk who come to earn points with Jameson. There's some sweeties from other lodges who treat church attendance like politics. And some hopeful poolies trying to catch the eye of Mountain Lion sweeties."

Seeing that I was not quite following, her friend explained: "No Lotharios in the Lions of God. They're all the marrying kind in that lodge. Jameson makes

sure of that. Mind, I wouldn't complain if a couple of those Lion men paid attention to me," the blonde added with a smile, again mirrored by her friend.

"Well good luck with your quest," I grinned, much to their blushing amusement. The ambient buzz of conversation around us faded and died, and we all looked down to the stage below us.

And then the show began.

A train of figures filed down onto the concrete slab that served as the amphitheater's stage. At the lead strode Jameson, the lodge host for Mountain Lion. I had met him briefly a handful of times, and had been simultaneously amused and put off by his seemingly never-ending bluster of can-do attitude, which usually entailed more work for everyone at the weekend seminar. Behind him came three young women, who I took to be his daughters whom I had never met. The four of them immediately turned and took their seats on a row of chairs brought down from the Mess and set up along the side of the stage.

The latter half of the procession began with an older gentleman in a neon orange vest and a priest's tab collar. He bee-lined to the podium placed in the center of the stage. Next came a portly, middle-aged man grasping a crimson-gilt, leatherbound bible, who took up a position behind the priest. Following him

came a woman of similar years, and the moment I saw her, a chill of instant disappointment washed over me. The woman was wearing my fleece.

But the priest at the podium raised his hands and the assembled congregation rose to its feet. He led us into singing a lurching rendition of We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder, no doubt compromised by the lack of music or hymnals. Still, the lyrics that he called out at the top of each verse were simple enough, and we dutifully plodded through the melody until he lowered his arms again. Four hundred people sitting down on seats topped with gravel sounded like an avalanche.

"Sometimes when I hear this church sing that song," the man with the bible began, his voice strong and clear despite his nearly shouting, "I think it might be about the hike we all had to make just to get to here." A wash of good-natured chuckles swept the auditorium. I smiled despite the memory; safely in the past, it was ripe for the rueful humor bestowed by hindsight.

"It wasn't an easy climb for a lot of us," he went on, immediately recognizing and banishing the sharper corners of the memory. "I know I'm not as hale and hearty as I used to be. And for some of us, it was downright dangerous. Some of us had to make that

climb without food. Some of us had to get past men with guns. It wasn't easy getting up here. But it wasn't supposed to be easy."

"If it were easy, it wouldn't be safe. We'd be down there in all the chaos. We'd be down there surrounded by those unscrupulous men with guns. We'd be just another part of the mess. Waiting to be picked off. Vulnerable. Alone. At the mercy of this damned world." He closed his hands over his bible and shook his head softly at the ground.

He gave it a moment, and then he raised the book, which fell open at his finger. "Enter through the narrow gate," he read, "for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and few find it." He let the book fall closed again and nodded quietly.

He then looked up at the assembled throng. "You have entered through that narrow gate," he declared, voice rising proudly against the sigh of mountain wind. "You have suffered through the barbs and thorns of the great defiler and you pushed through. You made it!"

He lifted the bible over his head and said, "The good book tells us that, at the end of days, the church will suffer through the Great Tribulation, where the

whole world will turn against us, try to drag us down. They will tempt us. They will assault us. They will starve us. Or at least–they will try." And here the preacher paused and grinned out onto his flock, who answered with hesitant, derisive laughter. "They'll try, oh, they'll try," he repeated, egging them on. "But will they succeed?"

A few voices shouted out, "No! No! No!"

"This Refuge," he began, and then as the shouting choked off, he began again, "This Refuge is like God's time capsule. By His grace we have been sealed up behind these walls, safe from the fallen world that He must now punish for its many misdeeds and perversions. And that's going to take some time, because this world has been very, very bad. But when He is done, at the end of the Great Tribulation, when Christ rises up to establish His kingdom, God will come and He will crack open this time capsule and He will welcome us forward into the Kingdom of God."

Now he paused and rubbed one finger over his lower lip as if considering the plan that he had just outlined. "And so the thing that we've got to think about, the thing that you've got to think about, is when the Lord God comes knocking at our gate, when He comes to reclaim His people, when He comes to open this time capsule… what is He going to find

here?"

"Now I'll tell you what I hope He'll find here," the preacher offered his flock. "I hope that when the rapture comes, this Refuge will have clung to the teachings of the Lord. I hope that we will be revealed as faithful. As having resisted the temptations of the world outside. As pure."

"Because after you struggled to get through that narrow gate, after you squeezed your camel through the eye of a needle and you got here, are you going to just throw it all away?" He paused again for a few calls and shouts, and then he dug in for more. "You risked your lives to set yourselves apart from that wicked world down the mountain. Are you going to fall back into that filth, that refuse, that pit of sin that you left behind?"

A whole chorus of shouts loudly answered in the negative.

"You know, I said that we were safe here," he was suddenly. "We've got strong walls and camouflage netting over the gardens and I mean, we've got bushes growing on top of our roofs. Which just looks crazy to me, it still looks crazy, right? But all that, that's to protect us from a world that's about to get a richly-deserved whupping. That's to keep the violence and the greed and the disease of the world at bay. But it

can't keep out everything. And Satan, he's a crafty one. If he can't get at us with guns and bombs and whips and chains… well, he'll find another way. He'll send something else."

"Because as much as we left that world behind in our hearts, the reality is… we brought little bits of that world in along with us. Like the dirt clinging onto our boots," and here he dramatically kicked his boots together, as if knocking off clods of mud the size of baseballs. "We remember what it's like down there. We remember what we were like down there. We remember what we did. We remember how we used to act. And we brought all those memories into this safe haven. We brought in those bits of the world outside… just like Satan wanted us to. Like I said: if he can't get at us with foot soldiers and guns, he'll find another way."

"In this Refuge, we have an opportunity," he told us, "to rebuild our lives the way God wants them to be. We can live godly lives here. Things are so much simpler here, because the shape that God wants for your life? It's simple. We grow food, we feed our families, we pray to bring ourselves closer to God. That's it. That's all you need."

The preacher gestured dramatically at the ground around his feet, where his imaginary dirt clods had

rolled off his boots. "You don't need this greed here. This impulse to grab at everything you can, to clutch riches to your breast. In this Refuge, we have everything we need. Satan wants us to bring in all that greed from our lives before, because we made a habit, at his beckoning, of worrying more about our bank accounts than our relationship with God. But we don't need to worry about that any more."

"You don't need this… this pride, here, that I kicked off my boots. A great many of us had big fancy titles and big fancy offices and we drove big fancy cars. Let me tell you, the church I pastored, if we had two thousand people on a Sunday, that was a slow week. But all that? That was nothing. It all went up in smoke overnight because there was no substance to it. Boy, we spent a lot of time on it, right? Angling to get that promotion, make that deal, buy that even fancier car. All that was just Satan, playing with us, making us focus on the unimportant details so that we'd miss out on God."

"And this," he sneered down at the empty ground. "This perversion from the outside world. This pornography, this sodomy, this non-stop torrent of sex sex sex everywhere you look. All this ever was–it was just a turning away from God's plan, a plan where men and women are joined together to bring glory to

God, not themselves, not their own pleasure, not the… orientations that they invented for themselves. We don't need that here, either. Here in this Refuge, we can raise up our families as God intended. Safe from the perversions out there, pure and holy in the grace of God."

"The greedy, the prideful, the perverts," cried the preacher, looking up at the hundreds of faces ranked before him, "they will come for us. They will come for you. They will come for you within these very walls. They will tempt you and beguile you and whisper to you that–you can make your own way. You can decide what's right and what's wrong. But it's your job–I'm giving you this job right now–not just to tell them, 'Get behind me, Satan!' Because you've got to stand tall against what they'll want you to do. But you've also got to bring them here. You've got to tell them: we can't make up our own rules. We don't decide what's right and what's wrong. We are called to a better way, a higher way. We've got to stay true to God's way."

The preacher strode forward, away from his imaginary pile of dirt, and towards the ranks of churchgoers. "We have been given a gift. We may have squeezed ourselves through that narrow gate, but not without God's help. And now we're here, in God's very own time capsule, and it's up to us. Do we soil

this perfect canvas, do we track in all the dirt and the grime and the filth from outside? Or do we keep this place pristine, beautiful, and pure?" He paused, looking out over his flock, his raised face beautific. "It's up to us, friends. It's up to us. Won't you join with me in making a promise to the Lord God, to ensure that we remain loyal, and steadfast, and true to His word?"

He held the crowd for a few moments longer, and then faded back towards Jameson and family. The priest stepped up to the podium and bid everyone join him in singing Onward Christian Soldiers. The first verse was almost passable, but the second simply drowned in the crowd's ignorance of the lyrics. The priest did not even attempt the third verse, but instead charged us to go with God.

I went, with or without God, as quickly as my legs would carry me.

I got as far as the Mess when an honest-to-God jet fighter screamed overhead, the wake of its flight rattling windows and sending a few pedestrians to their knees, hands clasped over their ears. The jet streaked past us, following the slope of the mountain down towards the basin below.

I ran along with others to the deck outside the Mess, which afforded the best view of the quickly

receding aircraft.

"Did they see us? Did they spot us?" someone was asking. It wasn't clear if they feared or hoped for it to be true.

But the consensus was no. "They're going too fast." "Gotta be mach two or three!" "That low and fast, this whole mountain's just a blur to the pilot."

"Are they chasing something or running from something?" someone else wanted to know. This only triggered another round of bloviating about the jet's speed and altitude and flight plan.

The plane gave us the definitive answer to that question. As it cleared the ridge beneath us and flew into the basin proper, it spawned another smoketrail from under its wing. The missile arced away from the jet at terrific speed and then drove itself into some target on the ground invisible to our eyes.

A curling explosion blossomed before us, looking like a miniature special effect from our vantage. Everyone on the deck gasped all the same.

"Isn't that… isn't there a city down there?" someone asked, to general agreement. I had never been able to distinguish the different grey splotches on the horizon enough to tell them apart, but they had all been populous urban centers—and now they were being blown up by military hardware.

The oily black cloud of the explosion dissipated only to be replaced by the burgeoning trails of smoke rising from the winking lights along the ground. The city—whichever one it was—was on fire.

I pushed my way through the crowd to the stairs off the end of the deck. I had no stomach for participating in the next round of speculation already starting up—why would the military fire on a civilian population, what could that city have done to provoke such a response, are we even sure if that jet was our military and not somebody else's, or hijacked or gone rogue and what would that mean?

What it meant, whatever the answer, was that the outside world was still falling apart. This was confirmation that it was now more dangerous than ever out there. It meant we were not going anywhere.

It meant we were stuck in here.

There would be no escape, and there would be no rescue from outside. Hope could not be invested in the world beyond the walls, not any more. We were on our own.

I walked down the path towards the Ponderosa barracks. A swarm of poolies were clustering out on the concrete slab outside the barn doors, trying to see down the mountain at the most recent commotion. Jackson and Caden stood among the spectators, their

blankets still wrapped around their shoulders.

Stuck in here with our families and stuck in here with dangerous men spewing hate. And stuck in here with a few hundred people whose loyalties and priorities were an open question. Who among this crowd would turn on my boys if it meant their own families would get ahead? Who of my fellow poolies would identify me as one of the preacher's dangerous outside influences, here to upset their God's precious time capsule?

Too much speculation. I gently pressed my way through to my sons and wrapped my arms around them. They thought I was cold and held me close inside their still bed-warm blankets. For now, for at least this moment, all three of us were warm and fed and safe.

Tomorrow I'd see about keeping it that way.

—

"Okay," I told Maggie.

She turned from where she was pulling up weeds from a bed of soybeans and cocked an eyebrow at me. "Okay what?"

"You want me to help you organize the poolies." We were alone in the walipini, our sweetie overseer gone off to the comfort of the lodge and the other

worker in our group fetching nitrates. "So let's get started."

The woman dropped her handful of weed sprouts into her collection bucket. "Just like that? All set to start a revolution?"

"First thing we need to be clear about. We are not going to start a revolution. That sort of talk will get someone killed." I cut off her protest with a hiss. "This is not negotiable. I am not going to help you organize an insurrection."

Maggie was quiet for a long moment and then nodded. "Okay. So how do we recruit people to join a not-a-revolution?"

"We don't recruit," I told her firmly. "We get to know people. We network. We organize."

She put a hand on her hip. "What, are we unionizing?"

"You're thinking institutionally," I explained, stepping forward. "We don't need to build a rival institution to fight the sweeties. We need to organize the people who are already here. And to do that we need to get to know them first."

She looked skeptical. I pressed on: "When I first got here, you gave me the hard sell. Oppressors, class conflict, injustice. I'm guessing I'm not the only one you tried to recruit that way. How'd it go?"

She tipped her head in reluctant acknowledgement. "Not well. I think I scared most of them away."

"I don't doubt it, especially the men, right?" At her expression I knew I'd hit my mark. "Too much brass and you'll scare the poor menfolk, lady."

"So we have heart-to-hearts instead?" she asked with a roll of her eyes. "That's how you find not-revolutionaries?"

"For what we'll be doing–standing up to people with power and literal weapons on their hips–you don't need to find the people who are angry enough to take action. You need to find the people you can trust to stand by you… and not do something stupid." I stressed carefully. "And to find that out, yeah, you need to talk with them."

She gave me a look that said my proposition was not entirely ludicrous. "So what's our first step?"

The door to the walipini opened and the third poolie on our team started spraying nitrates on the soybeans. I bent over the plants in front of me. "You and I get to know each other." Maggie looked dubious, but bent over the plants opposite me. "Where'd you grow up?"

"All over," she replied diffidently. "United Emirates. Hong Kong. London. Washington. Brasilia. My mother was in diplomatic service."

"Well that had to be interesting at least."

She shrugged, an expression of discomfort. "Moved around constantly, never knew the language until I was leaving, all my peers were sixth-generation politico snobs."

"I'm sorry," I sympathized. "That sounds like it was hard."

She chuckled humorlessly at the greenery at her fingertips. "I didn't know it at the time, so it couldn't have been that bad, right? In college when everybody told stories about their friends back home, I realized I had neither friends nor home."

I moved down the aisle in search of more weeds. "Where was college?"

"Harvard, then Harvard Business," she answered dispassionately. "Which sounds prestigious, but… it's hardly the magic bullet for success."

"As a former university professor, I sympathize with that sentiment. I taught a seminar once where we studied how society oversold the benefits of higher education." I smirked across the bed to Maggie. "The administration politely asked me to pick a different topic the next year."

She snorted. "That sounds about right. I even remember my sister trying to tell me how much college didn't matter–at least the grades and the

classes parts–but I ignored her."

"Sister, huh? Older or younger?"

"Older," she answered. "By about eight years. She grew up in a townhouse and went to the same schools as her friends up until thirteen, fourteen. She never really understood that we may have had the same parents, but we had very different childhoods."

"You said your mom was the diplomat. What did your other parent do?"

She smiled, perhaps the first time I had seen such genuine emotion from her. "Dad was a musician. Cellist. Wherever we went, he joined the local symphony. Later in life I always wondered if he got those jobs because of Mom's connections or if he really was that good. I didn't inherit his ear, so I couldn't tell you if he was a virtuoso or not."

"Did your sister inherit the ear?"

"She did," Maggie replied, and her mood faltered. "That and the cancer. We lost Dad a long while ago, while I was still in my MBA program. Janice passed three years ago."

I stopped what I was doing. "I'm sorry to hear that," I said as earnestly as possible. I waited to see if I could catch her eye, but she busied herself with the plants.

"Yeah, well, it means she doesn't have to live

through this," she sighed. "Mom's the one who told me to start a refuge subscription. I assume she did the same and now she's in a place much like this. Hopefully a little better managed than here."

The tension in her voice had returned the moment she mentioned her mother. "Are you and your mom close?" I asked.

She laughed at the very suggestion. "When she told me to start a subscription, that was the first time we'd talked since… since Janice's funeral." Her trowel speared deep into the bed, threatening to uproot an entire soy plant. "Haven't spoken since."

"May I ask why?"

She looked up now, brow furrowed. "Since we're getting to know each other and all, I suppose so. It's not really something I talk about."

I dipped my head in acknowledgement. "Please don't feel pressured. We can talk about other things. I'd love to hear how you put your MBA to use."

She snorted. "No you wouldn't. I did twelve years in Logistics, which is an entire industry centered around packing things into boxes as efficiently as possible." She fell quiet, and I was about to ask her to elaborate, when she blurted out, "Mom remarried. And Dad's replacement was… not someone I approved of. It's embarrassingly stereotypical, but

there you have it."

I smiled softly. "I can understand that. It sounds like you and your father were close, and you and your mother… weren't."

"True," she sighed. "Fuck, now I'm all maudlin." She heaved another sigh and stuck her trowel into the soil. "You've got to understand, Dad always put me and Janice and Mom ahead of himself. He was… a very kind man, always."

I nodded in understanding. "Losing him right before you struck out into the working world must have been…bleak."

"Bleak's a good word for it," Maggie nodded. "The soulless machine of corporate logistics and finance gobbled me up right after, and it was… years before I could get my head above water long enough to even wonder where that… world of kindness that he created had gone. How he even made it happen, in the midst of all the madness and demands that get thrown at you day by day."

"So is logistics as cut-throat as you make it sound?"

She shook her head ruefully. "You shave a half-penny off of a packing protocol, right? And you multiply that by literally forty million packages a year, and that's a savings of two hundred grand. Which you'd think would be a straightforward win, except

your boss negotiated the original contract for the packing material, and the veep who wants to subsume your entire department for not cutting enough costs sees the change as a threat to his plans, and our competitors are strategically buying up the new packing material that is needed for the new protocol… and so on and so forth. It was exhausting."

"What were you shipping?" I wanted to know.

But she shrugged. "I'm not even sure. Probably kitchen gadgets that nobody actually needed."

I chuckled at that. "You sound like my girlfriend the hobby chef. She swore she could make anything with a bowl, a fork, and a knife. You cook?"

"No, but I really liked watching cooking shows while eating take-out." The woman rooted elbow-deep in greenery to pull out a particularly pernicious weed. "Never had time to cook, anyway. Or much of anyone to cook for."

"No special someone?"

She twisted her lips into a sad smile. "Never for long. Didn't have time for them, either." She fell silent again, but this time I knew to wait. "Tried fixing that after Janice died. Her wife was just devastated at the funeral, and as much as I felt for her, I was jealous of my sister. If I up and died, there wouldn't be anybody half as emotional at my funeral."

I noted the phrase “her wife” without comment. “So you went hunting for romance?" I asked with a conspiratorial smile.

She responded with a sour smirk. "A concerted campaign of online dating, and a less-than-successful attempt to cut back my overtime hours."

"How'd that work out?"

"I did not meet my soulmate in the first six months. Or the first year. Or the first two." She rolled her shoulders against the fatigue of gardening, and then turned it into a shrug. "Met some nice guys, and a lot of less than nice guys. There was a certain… distasteful desperation to the whole affair. Although I'm told that putting my real age on my profile was an egregious error."

I made a face. "If they balked at your age, you didn't want them, anyway. Besides, what are you, mid-thirties?"

She nodded. "I was advised that anything over thirty-three is akin to a death knell."

We worked on for a short while. When nothing more seemed to be coming, I asked, "May I ask what made your mother's new husband objectionable?"

Maggie tipped her head back and forth. "He's like all the worst of Mom's habits bundled together. Dad balanced her out. Harold is a workaholic high-stakes

hard-sell political operative, and he drags Mom along into his no-holds-barred 24/7 dealmaking. Not to mention, he's dragged Mom hard to the right. She was always conservative, just now… hideously more so."

"Hm," I murmured. "So your sister and her wife…?"

"He did not approve, and so neither did Mom," she grimaced. "Which she decided to share with my sister two years after they got married."

"Well that sounds terrible," I agreed. "Where did you fall on the issue?"

Maggie shrugged. "Janice came out to me when I was twelve. At the time, she was my hero who could do no wrong, so. Being bi was normal for me from a young age. And Dad was all for whatever made her happy. Mom held her tongue, or didn't actually have a problem with it, until Harold."

"Would you describe yourself as liberal in other ways?" I asked, then chuckled at the very question. "If such a thing mattered any more."

She scoffed. "I worked in business. You're required to be fiscally conservative in that world. Your bonuses rely on it. So it always depended on who was asking. I liked to think of myself as a moderate, but I suspect I was fooling myself. If you could print up my lifetime voting record, I suspect I'd be disappointed."

"And given your hard sell to me last week," I said, "I'm guessing you didn't volunteer for a lot of campaigns or anything."

"Who ever had the time?" she said with a shake of her head. "Or the inclination, to be honest. Politics was what Mom did."

I bobbed my head. "And church?"

"Yeah, that's her thing, too," Maggie groused. "When I was young, we went to whichever church gave Mom the best connections. Now she and Harold… well, they had a church of choice, but it's probably a looted wreck by now. Ugly fucking building."

"Let's hope all the looting and arson is restricted to the ugly buildings," I agreed with a pale smile. "We can go reclaim cities full of greenspace and fabulous architecture."

"If we ever get out of the refuge," the woman sighed, and then speared me with a sharp look. "So do we know each other yet?"

I tried for a modest smile. "I'd like to think I know you a little better. You want to do me?"

She gave me an odd look. "In a minute. First you tell me what you know about me now. As if you were going to recruit me. Or not-recruit me."

It took me a moment to compose a response, and

she chuckled. "That bad?"

"With the understanding that this is a bit of a tutorial," I began, "I'll be frank. You're educated, intelligent, and self-aware enough to doubt the many things you've been taught as true. You doubt yourself, too, which is good right up until it becomes a hindrance. But I doubt you let that happen often, given your years in business. I'm sure your mother's example serves you well there, as well." I put on a look of mock apology. "You're more like your mom than you like to admit."

Maggie raised one eyebrow, and then tipped her head to the side. "Yeah, probably true."

"More than anything, though," I said a little hesitantly, "you've got a long history of feeling like you've got the short end of the stick. Despite living a life of considerable privilege, you feel cheated. And that's something that I'd need to be careful around. Easy to tap into that energy, but once unleashed, it can be hard to throttle it down into responsible action."

Maggie crossed her arms. "You still think I'm dangerous."

"I think you, like anybody else, have the capacity to do great good and great harm," I moderated, "and your sense of personal injustice may trigger you into dangerous action."

"So I'm not safe enough–demure enough–to organize with you?"

“I wouldn’t say that,” I assured her with a smile. "I just won't involve you when that sense of umbrage might turn ugly." Before she could take any more offense, I urged her, "Now do me."

She took me through it all: childhood home, university dreams, hasty wedding, childbirth and domestic turmoil, the divorce, finding my way again, and ending up trapped inside a fortified corporate retreat in the mountains. We finished one long row of soya and worked halfway up the next before her questions petered out.

"And now," I asked when we were done, "do you know me better?"

Maggie nodded slowly. "You know, I think so. You are… careful, observant, precise. Loyal to a fault, though I suspect that's been successfully beaten out of you by now. Principled… and very methodical about bringing your principles to bear."

I smirked. "Now now. I was frank with you. Don't pull punches."

She frowned at me thoughtfully. "You're slow to act. A perfectionist. You'll let a problem burn down the world while you figure the most elegant way to deal with it."

"And does that mean that you can't work with me?" I asked without any trace of humor.

One of her eyebrows peaked. "Not at all. I just won't involve you when that perfectionism of yours means you can’t do the ugly, necessary work.”

I nodded with satisfaction. "Then we understand each other."

## *6. Punishments*

Hank Walton was having a hard time adjusting to life as a poolie. Born to considerable family wealth, want was an alien phenomenon and leisure an assumed right. Having to work, hard, every day, and for little gain outside of three simple meals and a spare bunk did not suit him.

"Which makes me sound terrible," he groaned with a wan smile. "I know, in my head, that most people in the world, throughout history even, have lived like this. Worse than this. I tried to help them, in fact."

Hank had headed up half a dozen charities and civic improvement foundations. He'd been handed his first charity foundation by his grandfather. It was a healthcare clearinghouse that helped working-class families deal with catastrophic medical bills. The goal, as far as his grandfather was concerned, was to improve the family's reputation after a damaging exposé revealed exactly how little their employees

were being paid.

But Hank took to the work with enthusiasm, discovering great joy in swooping in with his family's money bags and helping souls in need. He also discovered a facility in himself for sharing that enthusiasm with his fellow one percenters, for telling stories of lives broken by tragedy and the salvific miracle of huge infusions of cash. This allowed him to secure donors outside his family, and the foundation's endowment and reach grew.

After a few years of rescuing the unfortunate from medical bills, Hank began to see a troubling pattern. Medical emergencies would get handled and then they'd go home to apartments without running water or homes without heat. Medical issues reoccured or acquired complications. So Hank launched a second charity to handle housing emergencies.

And then came the Walton Education Initiative. And a foundation to address homelessness. Then the mass transit lobbying group. Hank was running or on the board of twelve different charities when he realized he was running around putting out fires without even asking what was setting them alight.

"That was not an easy question to ask," he told me with a sigh. "I'd leave one of my fundraisers where everyone was wearing a small fortune in wardrobe

and jewelry, get driven home in a company car with a company chauffeur, ride the elevator up to my penthouse which I had neither bought nor paid any taxes on–the family trust took care of that–and fell asleep on silk sheets wondering if I was the cause. No matter how much money I funneled into doing good, I knew that a hundred times that–a thousand times that–was pouring into my family's bank accounts. Were we the problem?"

Hank's crisis of faith put strain on his relationships with his parents and aunts and uncles who owned and now ran the family conglomerate in the wake of his grandfather's death. He did not improve matters by suggesting they increase wages or allow union reps to speak on company property. They refused, vehemently, citing Hank himself as the reason they did not need to change their ways. "The only reason you exist," his uncle told him, "is so we don't need to deal with the whiners."

While that was hardly proof that his family's lifestyle was causing the miseries that he was frantically addressing, it did leave a bad taste in Hank's mouth. He started thinking of his family's charitable contributions as hush money (and tax credits). Not long after that, he wondered if the same characterization properly applied to his other

sponsors.

And then the whole enterprise turned sour for him: he didn't help the unfortunate, he exploited the guilt of the powerful. And to what end? He told them that they need do no more than give a small fraction of their massively disproportionate share of the wealth. So small, in fact, that it wouldn't be missed, would have no impact on their day-to-day lives.

To fix the situation, Hank did what he knew how to do: he started another non-profit. Unlike its predecessors, however, the Economic Justice Project eschewed direct action in favor of lobbying local government. Almost immediately it branched out to providing logistical support for organizing fledgling unions. He launched himself (and his legion of lawyers) directly at his networks of supporters and benefactors.

Only later, sitting in the back of a stolen pickup truck trundling up the mountain, did he realize that he had been testing them, and harshly. If they opposed the foundation, if they complained to him in some back room at a society gala, if they suddenly pulled their funding for his older charities, then he knew. They only wanted to feel good about themselves, they had no interest in changing things. They didn't want to fix anything.

"Which was really just ludicrously judgemental," he admitted with a sigh. "Damn them for not having the same exact epiphany I did. Damn them for not wanting to help strangers at the cost of their own well-being. What kind of asshole expects that of people as some kind of barometer of morality? Especially when I failed that test myself."

Because his family came after him. Their employees had unionized, and the union had released a video secretly recording contract negotiations. His uncle had explained in excruciating racist language exactly what he thought of the union representatives. Public reaction was horrified; stock prices fell into a tailspin. And then the family discovered that the union had been organized by Hank's Economic Justice Project.

His mother delivered the family's ultimatum from the hospital bed in the penthouse suite she hadn't left in three years. Shutter the EJP or the family would pull their support for all the other charities, and ask their friends and business partners to do the same. The family could, if unanimous, remove him from the family trust and leave him penniless. Hank didn't own his penthouse apartment, didn't own the cars he drove, didn't even own, technically, the clothes on his back. And they would take all of it away unless he

shut down the only thing he had that stood a chance of changing things.

He caved.

The Economic Justice Project closed its doors a week later and Hank went back to putting out brushfires.

It didn't last: the world started falling apart a few months later. Hank and his father waited for his mother to succumb to the Parkinsons that had been eating her alive for a decade. The city collapsed around them but they knew they wouldn't wait long. They held a funeral which no one else attended; police sirens wailed futilely in the distance as they put her in the ground.

He and his father left directly from the cemetery, but only Hank made it to safety. A local sherrif's department had commandeered the Waltons' SUV, backing up their request with a few well-placed warning shots. Hank didn't find out his father had been hit until they rolled up to the trailhead and the elder Walton stopped the truck they'd stolen to get there. He'd stained the driver's seat scarlet and couldn't stand on his own feet.

After Hank came through the gates, he demanded medical help return to the trailhead to see to his father. Cole shook his head and insisted the man was no

doubt already dead. Hank knew that the Director was right, but that didn't make it any better.

Hank found labor pool and all the refuge's adjusted accommodations entirely unsurprising. He had never thought much of the place when his father dragged him up the mountain for "manly bonding time." Now not sleeping in the Lodge, and reliving those memories suddenly turned painful, was a blessing. Hank threw himself into the work, no matter how grueling, as nothing worse that what many others had put up with before. Many others for whom the EJP had been founded, and who Hank had betrayed.

It took a couple months of this self-imposed purgatory before Hank's grief cleared. The refuge's many abuses turned mundane, even banal, and he realized that it would continue like this forever, slowly dwindling away its residents' spirits, unless someone did something. Just what was to be done, though, Hank didn't know. It wasn't like he could launch a non-profit to address the problem.

"I've got some ideas on that front," I told him as we handed out towels for some other Lodge's shower day. "But for the moment, we just need to find each other."

"Who's we?"

"Those of us who'll risk our own well-being for the benefit of everybody," I said with a tight smile.

"Strangers, family, friends, even enemies, if we've got any. But it's not getting any better for any of us unless we stick our necks out and fix things."

—

Caden and I were gathering up used wet towels outside the bath house when Bukhari found us. "Susan," she called imperiously, and waved an impatient hand at the towel I held. "Put that down. I need you to run an errand for me."

I finished the fold and placed the greying towel on the stack before me. "What do you need me to do?"

Bukhari sipped at her ever-present orange drink. "Your husband's getting discharged," she explained. "I need you to go down to the infirmary, pick him up, and show him around."

Before I could answer, Caden piped up. "Can I go, too? I haven't seen my dad in a week."

The pinched look of distaste that the sweetie directed at my boy actually inspired a little hope in me. Apparently I wouldn't need to worry about Bukhari around Caden, as I'd been warned. Still suffering the last vestiges of gawky teenagerhood, Caden must register as 'just a boy' to the woman. His older brother might be another story, though.

Bukhari waved her cocktail again. "Like I care. Sure. Go see daddy."

"Thank you, Bukhari," I said pleasantly enough. "I assume Arthur will be bunking in the Ponderosa barracks?"

She lifted a brow and smiled at me. "I don't know, how cute is your husband? I'm between paramours at the moment."

"My ex-husband," I corrected mildly. "You want him, he's yours. But he does snore."

"Best take him to the barracks, then," she nodded. "And be sure to show him the Mess. He'll be working there till he's off crutches."

"Is he okay?" Caden blurted, brow furrowed.

"Normal healing process," she answered blithely. "But in the mean time, he's slow and awkward so I sure as hell am not going to wait on his ass as he huffs and puffs up the hill." She bestowed on us both a patently false smile. "Then I remembered you were working here today. And voila, instant family reunion. Anyway. Best run along, so you can get his gimpy ass back up here by dinner time."

The walk down to the infirmary was pleasant enough—the weather was warm and clear, the wind sighed through the trees, and the gravel road was stable under our feet. Caden was vibrating with happy energy at the prospect of getting his dad back, and I tried to siphon off some of his enthusiasm.

It didn't work. I knew I'd have to deliver some bad news to Arthur, and I could not imagine a positive response.

It had been hard enough selling him on the idea of physical labor as equals; informing him that he was now a member of the underclass would only inspire fireworks.

Aubrey looked up from the receiving desk as we came through the door. Her face registered surprise, closely followed by suspicion. Her eyes swept over us, finding no sign of injury. Loose poolies were not a common sight.

"We're here to pick up Arthur," I explained. "For Bukhari."

She lifted one shapely plucked eyebrow and picked out a clipboard from a stack on the desk. "You're her little errand girl, huh?"

I shrugged, helpless before her inexplicable ire. "That's me."

"Follow me," she directed, and strutted down the length of the little building. I kept my gaze level despite the bouncing show her behind was putting on; I dimly wondered if she was sashaying any more than usual just to taunt me. She stopped and turned at the dispensary door, but waved at the next door down the hall. "Your daddy's in there, hon," she told Caden.

The boy went in and I could hear their excited greetings, but Aubrey speared me in place with a look. "Got a package for you, errand girl," she said, and produced a white envelope from the dispensary closet. She leaned close as she handed it to me. She was wearing her perfume—light and floral and familiar.

I took the envelope. "Who's this for?"

"Mahone," she told me, and then looked me in the eye. "Thank you, Susan."

I thought my knees might buckle. I swallowed. "I'd… I'd feel better about this if I knew what this was."

But she was already pulling away. "Safer if you don't," she said, and headed back up the hallway. "Go fetch your husband."

"Ex," I muttered to no one and pushed through the door.

Arthur was already on his feet, two in boots and one rubber-capped at the end of a crutch. Behind him, Caden slung a pile of clothes wrapped up in a towel over his shoulder. "Suze!" his father beamed. "So good to see you. I was starting to worry you'd abandoned me here."

"No such luck," I answered tartly, and held the door open. At a dark look from Caden, I made an effort to be civil. "Things have been… busy. And it's

not like they've got visiting hours here."

Arthur hobbled out the door and into the hall, awkward on the crutch and wincing when he moved in a way his healing leg didn't like. As I followed, I wondered once more how much of a show was being put on for my benefit.

"Caden tells me you're taking me to the barracks?" Arthur finally managed once we were outside. "Are we soldiers, now?"

I decided to leap right into it. "Things here in the refuge are not… exactly as promised. There is some significant crowding, and our accommodations are… compromised."

He paused to say something with a sneer, then thought better of it and pushed himself forward again. Momentum was precious, especially up a hill. "Well that sounds promising," he grunted. "What's that mean?"

"We're not in a suite," Caden told him. "We're in the labor pool, everybody's crammed into this big garage–"

Arthur didn't look to Caden as he spoke, but to me. A look of betrayal dawned on his face.

"It's pretty bad," I admitted with a short nod. I had to get out in front of the torrent of bad news coming out of Caden's mouth. "The suites went first-come,

first-serve and the rest of us are in temporary housing. But we're building new cabins as quick as we can."

"But in the mean time I'm going to recover from a gunshot wound in a garage," he spat. "Are there even beds?"

"Bunks, cots, hammocks," I explained, knowing full well that the last proper bed had been claimed the day before. Desperately, I offered, "I thought you could take my bunk. It's right next to the boys."

"Wait, but where will you be?" he asked incredulously, craning his neck over the shoulder hunched atop the crutch. "I thought we'd be together."

"Oh, I'll find a hammock or something," I said quickly, before his words sunk in. Together. A cold lump formed in my gut.

An incredulous voice in my head bleated: does he really think the apocalypse comes and we're magically a happy family again?

It was answered the weary voice of experience: of course he does, this is Arthur. That makes perfect sense to him.

"Oh my god, Arthur, I do not have time for this," my mouth said before I could stop it. "We are not back together. We're not getting back together."

He looked guilty and hurt at the same time. "I just thought—"

"I know what you thought," I spat, and one small, still corner of my mind thought: oh look, there goes my temper. "I didn't come get you because I'm still in love with you, I came to get you because the boys asked me to. I brought you here so you could be safe —"

"Well look how well that turned out!" he shouted. "Safe in a barn. I'm so glad I got shot and hiked up a damn mountain on my bleeding leg so that I could sleep—safe—in a garage!"

"You did not have to come!" I shouted back.

He sputtered. "Come with me if you want to live, that's what you told me, standing on my front porch —"

"That was a movie quote, you idiot, I was trying to alleviate the stressful situation—"

"Guys, guys," Caden interjected, finally shouting, "Mom! Dad!"

And suddenly I realized our shouts had shot through the thin mountain air, bouncing off the few trees and buildings around us. A stupid argument about a stupid misunderstanding had filled the space of the refuge. In our ensuing silence came no other sound—no birds, no work crews, no idle chatter carrying from the lodge porches.

How many had quieted to listen in to our drama?

We had made ourselves cheap entertainment: the only kind available in the refuge.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then pointed at the path to Ponderosa Lodge and the barracks beyond. "That's the way to where we sleep. But we're not going there just yet. The Mess is up ahead and it's nearly time for dinner."

Arthur gritted his teeth and pushed himself further up the hill. "What do they feed us, gruel?"

I counted to five before answering. "A whole lot of rice, some greens, and a little fish. Probably exactly the same as you've been getting in the infirmary. It's monotonous, but it keeps us going."

Caden eyed the two of us. "If you guys are done fighting, I'm going to go drop off Dad's stuff on Mom's bunk… or Dad's bunk, now. If I hustle, I can catch back up with you before you get to the Mess."

We both nodded wearily and watched him go. When he was out of earshot, Arthur said, "It's cute how he thinks we're done fighting. Sad, but cute."

I rolled my eyes and turned back up the road. "I'm done fighting."

He snorted. "You are blithely continuing the fight by shutting down, glowering at me, and pretending that everything is fine."

"Nothing is fine, Arthur," I groaned. "And only you

would think I'm continuing to fight by not fighting."

"You're a talented woman," he said, turning to flash me a vicious sneer. But his eyes skipped past mine to some distance behind me. "Who's Caden talking to?"

I looked back to see Caden stopped on the path to the barracks, talking with a quartet of young sweeties I didn't recognize. I said as much.

"Sweeties?"

"Oh, ahm—the folks who got a suite," I said as I watched one of the young women in the group laugh at something Caden said. He slung his hips in intentional nonchalance. "As opposed to poolies, in the labor pool."

"So there's even has a caste system," he exclaimed with mock enthusiasm. "This place has got everything!"

I ignored him, watching the scene unfold around Caden. The girl laughed again and reached forward to brush a lock of hair from his forehead. "Shit," I muttered.

"What?" asked Arthur, oblivious.

"The sweetie's hitting on Caden."

Arthur frowned through the trees. "How is that a bad thing? She's cute. Go Caden."

"And looks to be college aged," I pointed out, "not to mention she's a sweetie."

"Are we not allowed to socialize with them?" he asked incredulously, then gasped. "Or is the worker's revolution already upon us, and you're worried about him sleeping with the enemy?"

I looked sidelong at Arthur. "I don't think he's sleeping with anybody—unless he's told you something he hasn't told me."

"What, Caden?" he snorted. "I'm still trying to figure out if he's straight or thinks he's gay."

I made a noncommittal sound. I knew as much as Arthur. "Still. This goes nowhere good."

"You sure?" Arthur asked dubiously. "Maybe some well-placed romance with the upper class would earn the family some good will from on high."

I took a deep breath and counted to three. "I'm going to give you a moment to consider how many steps it is from what you just said to whoring out our children for social position."

Arthur snorted again. "If it's as bad as you say… oops, show's over."

Caden was loping down the path towards the barracks; the four sweeties strolled up the road towards us, chatting amongst themselves. Arthur got back to work climbing the hill, but at his pace the kids passed us moments later. They took no effort to obscure their conversation as they passed us. We were

just two old poolies, after all. They were talking about some movie, as best I could tell. One of the young men made some remark, vying for the attention of the girl who'd flirted with Caden. He said her name: "Hey, Zoe!"

"Shit," I said again, once they were out of earshot.

Arthur didn't stop. Momentum. "What now?"

"That's not just any sweeties," I told him. "That's Director Cole's daughter."

"He's the architect of this… glorious abomination of a place you brought us to?" Arthur mused. "Yeah, that sounds like upgrading from 'playing with fire' to 'playing with dynamite.' Still. Gotta give Caden credit for ballsiness."

"And speak of the devil," I muttered, nodding up the slope. Gregory Cole himself came down the gravel road, shoving a bedraggled man before him. The Director was flanked by a handful of men and women in tactical vests and toting guns. Wolfpack. Their commander, the amazon Tzavaras, brought up the rear.

By now it was the end of the day's work shift. First Mess poolies bled out of the dining commons even as Second Mess poolies converged on it from all directions. Cole and his entourage cut through them all easily. Confused and plainly scared poolies

scattered to either side. The Director caught the sorry-looking man by the shoulder and redirected him onto the deck of the Mess with another shove.

"Gather round, people," he shouted, waving his hand in a circle above his head. He looked and sounded like an angry football coach–one backed by half a dozen guns. "Gather round!"

The crowd obliged, muttering and grumbling, asking each other futile questions. No one knew what was happening.

I looked over to Arthur, struggling up the hill on his crutch. I couldn't leave him behind to see what was about to happen. If the crowd turned ugly, if there was any pushing and shoving, let alone real violence, Arthur would be helpless. I put my shoulder under his arm, opposite his crutch, and helped him along.

"You don't know what this is?" he asked me, brow furrowed.

"It's doesn't seem like anybody else does, either," I told him. "The refuge is full of fun new developments. Let's get you somewhere safe. Up on the deck, or better yet, inside."

He grunted assent and redoubled his pace.

Meanwhile, Cole addressed the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen. Subscribers. Members. Compatriots.

All you hard workers," he shouted from somewhere in the throng. The crowd stilled, listening. "I want you to meet James Isaacs. He's from the Gray Wolf Lodge, and up until recently he worked side-by-side with you good people. He put in his effort, he did his part, just like all of you."

With the onlookers pressing their way onto the deck, Arthur and I were able to slip into the Mess proper. The building was half-full, but every body was pressed up against the bay windows looking onto the deck. Trays of today's dinner steamed on the cafeteria line, forgotten.

Cole's voice came through the open windows. "He contributed to this refuge faithfully–right up until he decided that wasn't good enough for him. James here decided he was special, and more important than his fellow man. He decided that working together with you, for our shared future, and getting his fair share of that collective labor–that wasn't good enough for him. He wanted his share, and he wanted yours, too."

I deposited Arthur on a bench. He leaned forward onto the table with a grateful groan. His crutch clattered to the ground, and I quickly propped it back up against the end of the table. Once he was situated, though, I hurried over to the press of people at the windows.

"James Isaacs is a thief," Cole thundered. "In the dark of night, he crept out of bed and into the kitchens, into the walipinis, and he stole food. Food that was destined to feed all of us. Food that he had no right to. Food that was supposed to feed your families and your children."

I couldn't see what was happening. The other spectators in the Mess had plastered themselves against the windows, forming an impenetrable wall. Frustrated, I clambered up onto one of the tables to peek over their heads. What I saw chilled the blood in my veins.

Outside on the deck, the mass of poolies had formed a rough semi circle around the spectacle of the Director's show. Cole paced back and forth like a caged tiger, thrusting an accusing finger at Isaacs, who stood cowering center stage. Behind these two were arrayed half a dozen Wolfpack soldiers, all in their matching battle dress. All that alone would be a fearsome enough scene to command the crowd's attention, but all eyes were fixed on the last element in the tableau.

Behind Isaacs stood a rough-hewn wooden platform, rough pine bark still flaking off some of its edges. Two poles rose up from the base to support a pair of planks that clapped together along their long

edges. Three holes, the middle one larger than the others, had been cut out along the seam between the planks. Cole had built a pillory.

"So James is going to spend some time out on the deck," Cole declared, rounding on the quivering man and shoving him towards the platform. "For the next two days, he'll be right here."

Tzavaras and one of her soldiers grabbed Isaacs by the shoulders, then forced his head and hands into the pillory. The top plank came down with a resounding crack; the whole crowd flinched. As the soldiers snapped the padlock shut, Cole turned to his audience.

"I invite any and all of you to pay James a visit while he's here," the Director told the crowd. "This is your chance to tell him exactly what you think about his thievery. Share with him your opinion on taking food out of your children's mouths. Encourage him, perhaps, to join your honest work once he's done here."

Cole surveyed the crowd before him. From my vantage behind him, I considered the same tableau. Many, if not most, of the faces were aghast with uncertainty and fear. A handful watched Isaacs with pity etched across their features. But the remainder scowled, sneered, and taunted, their shoulders

bunched tense and their hands clutching into fists.

It was to these last poolies that Cole spoke. "I am sure, with your help, we can reform James here so that he never steals from you again."

And then the Director and the soldiers turned and marched off of their makeshift stage. The crowd closed after them, bodies rushing up to the pillory. I caught the first woman spitting into Isaac's face and another raising a hand to strike. I turned away before I saw any more.

## *7. Hit and Miss*

Steven Jensen had, at 22, launched a tech start-up which later sold for a few million dollars. Undeterred by his initial success, he launched three more concerns in as many years. Two failed almost out of the gate, leaving him with "a solid 50-50 success rate, which is actually pretty good, as these things go." He'd then parlayed his half-right reputation into a technology investment firm. For the next two decades, he funnelled other people's money into still other people's start-ups, taking a tidy profit off both ends. He proudly maintained his 50-50 success rate the whole time.

He bought a subscription to Tall Pines Refuge from Gregory Cole himself in a good year, and for whatever reasons kept it up during whatever bad years followed.

After his investment firm was established, Steven had the leisure time to find himself in something

besides ceaseless innovation. It started with yoga for his twisted-by-desk-chairs back, then broadened into an exploration of eastern philosophy, meditation, and altered states of consciousness. This was where he met Samantha, who was enjoying her own voyage of discovery.

The two became inseparable and in a few scant months were in love, pregnant, and engaged—although Steven was never quite sure which order those came in. They married in a yurt on the Mongolian steppes before she was showing, then came home and bought a big house in which to raise their family.

And then Samantha miscarried.

Even as he was telling me the story more than a decade later, tears welled in his eyes. Neither of them could understand why this had happened to them–they searched their past for some error, some crime, that deserved such a punishment. Their gurus failed them, saying that their suffering came from their expectations and desires, but the Jensens wanted a reason that this had happened.

Samantha found it in her mother's church, and came home from her visit newly baptized. She insisted Steven come along the next Sunday. He would do anything for her, and so he went and

learned that the wages of sin are death, and sin is inescapable in this fallen world. Finally, a reason.

Steven was baptized, too, and then they were pregnant again. Samantha delivered with no complications, and before their son Paul was walking they were pregnant with Faith. After Faith came James and Grace. Their big house was filled with children, the blessings of the Lord God, who had made it all possible.

Steven had grown up an only child, and so the raucous chaos of four children was more than a little daunting to him. But Samantha became a model stay-at-home mom, running them all between school and church and baseball and ballet. Steve, maintaining his .500 business batting average, was happy to bankroll the surprisingly tall bills for keeping small humans fed, clothed, entertained, and productively stimulated. His business trips might take him away for up to a week at a time, but he always came home in time for Sunday services with the family. Church was the cornerstone, their foundation, their bedrock.

Looking back with perfect hindsight, Steven could see how shallow their fervent faith had been. They attended services. They took the kids to Vacation Bible School. They paid their tithe and more (an expansion of the church building was named in honor

of Samantha's late mother). And they did it all because they knew, deep down inside, that they were terrible and worthless people and the only reason they had anything at all was because God had given them a break. That was why they never missed a Sunday. That was why their kids were signed up for every program. That was why they gave and gave and gave. Not doing so seemed like stiffing a bill.

Which is why, when Steven discovered that Samantha had been sleeping with their pastor, everything fell apart.

It was his own fault, really, Steven assured me. He was never at home. He had abandoned her to a maelstrom of childrearing and homemaking as he flew off to Tokyo or San Fransisco or London. They used to have long, deep talks together, out under the stars at Angkor Wat or the Sonoma desert. But then they'd stopped talking, because Samantha always seemed so tired, and besides they already knew all the answers, anyway. Just trust in God. He'd take care of everything.

Steven found that he could barely look at her.

The business trips grew longer. He didn't always make it back by Sunday. Even when he did, he'd claim exhaustion and bundle the kids into the car and bite down the impulse to tell Samantha to say hi to her

lover. He quietly found and furnished a small apartment, and sometimes he'd come home from a business trip to the apartment instead of their house. He'd leave for the next trip from there.

They never divorced; they never even legally separated. Steven didn't know how to tell the kids. Their children had become an insoluble problem. He could not simply abandon them, but he did not know the first thing about caring for them, either. He realized he hardly knew them.

He remembered telling her, when she was pregnant, that he would be the most active, most involved, most plugged-in father any child had ever had. But that had been the first pregnancy. The miscarriage. He'd never made any promises over the later pregnancies. Such optimism seemed… dangerous.

He got in touch with his old gurus. He found a new church near his apartment. One day he sat down in the executive lounge of an airport and resolved to piece his life back together, somehow. He started making lists and a plan of action, but was interrupted by a commotion across the lounge.

The business news was always on the giant screen near reception. A small knot of people had clustered around it, loudly bemoaning whatever was being

reported. The rice harvest had come in, and the mercury had tested too high again. There was a run on other grain futures (except, of course, corn), and the international food markets were in disarray. And then the broadcast cut out in the middle of the reporter's sentence. Not even a technical difficulties placard took his place.

The intercom announced that his flight would be delayed again. He didn't wait. He was three hundred miles from the house and the kids and Samantha; a rental car could get him home. He composed packing lists in his head as he drove, and when he got home, he and Paul packed the minivan. The next day, they left for the refuge.

Steven was not happy with the state of affairs inside the walls, and admitted that things could be considerably better. But he was getting to know his eldest son as they dug or hammered or harvested side-by-side. The rest of his children were young enough that they were in day care instead of put to work.

And perhaps the refuge would give him and Samantha a second chance. He had screwed it up the first time. Maybe his 50-50 average would be his salvation.

As I explained to Maggie after our impromptu interview ended, even though he wasn't about to

upset the status quo, Steven was hardly a lost cause. As much as he valued the silver lining he'd found around the dark cloud of Tall Pines, he recognized the place's flaws. He wouldn't volunteer to be a front-line revolutionary, especially with his three youngest children turned over to the refuge's care every day. I probably wouldn't ask him to stand up and be counted publicly–his dissatisfaction did not eclipse his vulnerabilities.

But we needed more than angry voices and willful bodies. Steven could pass messages. He (and perhaps his wife) could mind the children of more strident voices taking more direct action. He might hear something and pass it along to us.

And if things got very bad, his dissatisfaction might overtake his vulnerabilities after all.

—

The chill mountain wind hissed through the copse of trees around us, pulling the heat from exposed skin and leaving only the scent of distant granite and pine sap. The sun was making good time towards the horizon, and the western sky glowed yellow shading to orange. The faint tick and scrape of digging carried down from the slope above us.

I looked down at the fresh envelope of vials in my hand. Aubrey had called me out of my work detail,

again. She'd thrust a packet of no-doubt contraband into my possession, again. I slowly shook my head. "Aubrey, I can't do this. I need you to tell me what these envelopes are. I need to know what I'm trafficking, here."

The nurse pursed her full lips in frustration. "Don't you trust me, Susan?" she asked, glanced left and right, and then stepped up close. I could feel the heat coming off her skin; I could feel her breath flutter across my collarbone. "I need you to do this for me."

I looked up into her dark brown eyes. I wanted nothing more than to trust her. I almost threw off my misgivings then and there and made myself trust. It would be so much easier. But too much could go wrong.

I opened my mouth to say as much when her hands fell onto my hips and she drew me closer still. Her lips pressed against mine, teased them, swallowed them. The whole world around us went silent. My hands were on her hips. Her fingers slid up the back of my neck and dug through my hair.

And then the kiss broke, leaving me gasping and heart hammering. I held on to her for support as much as the feel of her sides under my palms. My head was swimming, but the rest of my body sang in a chorus alternating Yes! and More! I had known I

wanted this, but not how much.

Aubrey pulled back a little so she could smile down into my face. One finger stroked my cheek. She caught my eye, held it. "Just trust me, yeah?"

I could feel my head nodding along agreeably, and she had already taken a step back before I realized my pounding heart and not my spinning head had decided to trust her.

My brows bunched up; I groaned, and not happily. "No, wait, wait," I begged her.

Aubrey paused, the victorious smile on her lips starting to fade.

"Look, that was— that was… fabulous, Aubrey, and god damn I want more, but—" I took a deep breath to steady myself. "I can't run drugs for you on the strength of a really nice kiss."

My body screamed at me that yes, I bloody well could do just that and more for kisses like that. I tried to ignore it.

"Run drugs?" she asked, her features settling into a disappointed frown. "You think I'm running drugs? And using you to do it?"

I reached out to her, but she stepped away. "Please, Aubrey, I don't know what to think. This place… it makes everybody do crazy things."

"This is medicine," she insisted, and knelt down to

pick up the envelope where it had fallen.

"If it were legitimate meds, you could just give it to Teddy yourself," I pled with her. "But you need me, and so… I mean, what else is this supposed to look like?"

Aubrey stepped forward again, but this time without any tenderness to her. More than anything, she looked hurt, which was more intimidating than any menace. She grabbed my hand and slapped the envelope into it. "This is medicine that Mister Mahone needs, and I need you to deliver it."

I wanted nothing more than to melt back against her, something her body language clearly declared was not going to happen. My hand closed around the envelope, trying to grab her fingers, but she slipped away. "Aubrey, I–" I started, but realized I didn't know what to say.

She ignored me. "You will deliver this as instructed, Susan," she hissed, "because you are a poolie and I am a sweetie. And that's how things work here."

She stepped back and scowled at me for a moment, as if the entire situation had been my fault, that I had turned an exciting tryst into this naked status game. My heart hammered in my chest; I could do nothing in response.

"I think you've got a work detail to get back to," Aubrey spat, turned on a heel, and stalked back downhill.

I watched her go, then quietly crumpled onto the ground. What had just happened? A distant voice in the back of my head shouted that she was using me, tried to manipulate me into doing what she wanted with that kiss. And when that didn't happen, she pulled rank, and what did that say about how she saw our… relationship, if it even meritted that word? But that sensible voice, which I knew would come to the forefront eventually, was drowned under a wave of emotion.

The thrill of that kiss replayed in my mind's eye over and over, ending each time with the crushing disappointment on her face. Her walking away. I'd made her angry. I'd spoiled the kiss. I'd made it so that nothing like that would happen again. I'd ruined everything because I couldn't just shut my mouth.

Fleetingly I considered chasing after her, promising her I would trust her, promising her I'd do whatever she needed me to do, anything to repair that bond. Anything so she'd touch me like that again. But she was long gone, and I could hear my name being called from uphill. Back to work.

I scrubbed my face and brought my breathing

under control, shoved the envelope into my back pocket, and forced my feet to turn back to the walipinis.

—

The next day was berry-picking, which was one of the cheerier jobs a poolie might be assigned. Not only did a few berries inevitably get "lost" to "quality testing" while our overseers weren't looking, but the knowledge that something sweet was coming out of the Mess soon did wonders for one's mood.

Maggie and I found ourselves picking alongside Delores and another gentleman of little opinion and less willingness to share it. Conversation was sparse and remained light. Sometimes that's a blessing.

As the day waned, Maggie and I finished off the last of a row and turned to collect the buckets we'd filled with the day's harvest. Weston gave us a nod of acknowledgement and permission, and we began the awkward hike down the hill to the Mess.

When we arrived, the usual bustle that naturally developed around the preparation and serving of dinner was ratcheted up a few notches. We could hear the shouting from a distance, and just before we reached the building, a young girl was shoved out the door and took off for the infirmary at a run.

Sobbing and placating voices floated about as we

reached the threshold. Poolies from Beaver Lodge looked up at us, looking shell-shocked more than anything. A knot of bodies were huddled over a twitching body laid out on one of the prep tables. This young man was plainly the source of the sobs.

A giant pile of wet rice sat on the ground nearby, steaming angrily in a pool of white, starchy water. An empty industrial stockpot, easily twenty gallons, lay on its side nearby.

"The pot got knocked off the stove and spilled all down his legs," one of the kitchen poolies finally told us, voice hollow. "He tried to jump away, he slipped, he hit his head… he fell right back into the spill…"

Maggie cursed under her breath and I silently agreed. I spied the sweetie tasked with running the kitchens, a broad-shouldered man everybody just called Chef. He was at the injured man's side, directing others: "bring the ice here," "be gentle with his shin!" and "mind the puddle, don't slip." Needless to say, he was not receiving deliveries of produce at the moment.

"Should we…" I began to ask the kitchen worker nearest me, "…leave these outside? Chef seems occupied, and I don't want to interrupt."

She looked at me, plainly confused for a moment, and then wrenched herself out of the lurid scene

before her. "No, no, not outside in the sun," she stammered, and then pointed. "There."

Maggie and I hoisted our load of berries and slipped as quietly as possible along the back aisle of the kitchen and through the swinging double doors at the back corner of the room. The pantry was dimly lit and cool, a long row of concrete walls that formed the core of the Mess.

Tall industrial refrigerators lined either side, alternating with wire mesh shelves. For a moment I was taken aback at how much food was set out in apparently rude display. Bins of beans, shelled and unshelled, propped up stacks of carrots. A hundred dead eyes of chilled fish stared out of frosted refrigerator doors. Orange and yellow pyramids of fat squashes loomed from the top shelves. Soy greens were jammed everywhere else, leafy sprawls plastered into corners and up against refrigerator walls. Near the end of the pantry sat four fifty-gallon drums, their sides spray-stenciled "RICE."

We ate so sparsely when the refuge had all this? But then the calculator in my head caught up with the direct line between my eyes and my stomach. All this food on display amounted to tonight's supper and tomorrow's breakfast and little more. Eight hundred refugees could eat their way through this room–and

did, on a daily basis.

We found a bin of berries in one of the glass-fronted refrigerators, half-full with berries. The tight confines of the pantry required no small amount of shifting and grunting as we emptied our buckets into the bin. Just before we were done, Delores appeared with her load, and we firelined them into storage.

"Where's that lead to?" Maggie asked as she slapped the refrigerator door shut. She nodded down the length of the room to the stairs that sunk into the ground at the end of the aisle.

"Pantry," Arthur grunted from the kitchen door.

She frowned at him. "I thought we were in the pantry."

"This is the Day Pantry," he clarified. "Down there's the Storage Pantry. Chef doesn't like it when we call it the root cellar."

I shared my calculation on the shelf life of the Day Pantry, and Maggie whistled. "We're a ravenous bunch, aren't we?"

"You've no idea," Arthur agreed with a roll of his eyes.

I held up the empty berry buckets to Arthur. "Where do these go?"

"Round over here," Arthur answered with a dip of his head and lead the way. His crutches clicked along

the floor as he went. "I'd be chivalrous and offer to take care of them for you, but carrying things and walking at the same time is a bit beyond me."

We had to go back through the kitchen on the way. Two medics had arrived from the infirmary, and were already administering a shot and a topical cream. Neither medic was Aubrey, a fact which I found both disappointing and a relief. I filed the disconcerting sensation away for later.

Arthur swung his way out the door and along the back wall of the building. Dusty equipment cabinets were built into the structure here. He pointed at this with his crutch. "Baskets go somewhere in here, I think."

Maggie snorted. "Almost helpful, Soza."

"Gimme a break, I've only been working here for a couple weeks," he retorted. "And it's not like I get around easy."

"Gee, have you been hurt or something?" she fired back, eyes wide in mock surprise. "I hardly noticed without you drawing attention to it every sixty seconds." I fought hard not to smirk.

The first cabinet was filled with coiled hoses, the next stacked high–and full–of folding chairs. Opening the third cabinet, I hit paydirt: it was full to bursting with collection baskets. The mass of them was so

haphazardly stacked, in fact, that my wrenching the door open sent them toppling out of the cabinet.

Arthur immediately guffawed. "I think you found the place."

I shot him a look, although half-heartedly. I'm sure I looked ridiculous with a tide of baskets around my ankles. I bent over to start restacking them. More stacks of baskets immediately tumbled out onto my head.

"I'd offer to help," Arthur managed to choke out through his laughter, "but bending over and I parted ways recently. If I hadn't already mentioned."

At least Maggie and Delores bent over to help bail me out of the flood of buckets.

I pulled a few more baskets out of the bottom of the cabinet, thinking that they must be the reason for the stacks' instability, and quickly sorted them by size. But the next one I removed revealed an odd, open-sided box behind the now-dismantled wall of baskets.

"What's this?" I asked no one in particular, pushing aside baskets to get a clearer view. It was perhaps a foot tall and wide and two feet long. The walls of the box were punctured by large, square windows, and a two-inch lip jutted out around the bottom edge. Inside I could see a handful of little figures, most of them carved wood save two ceramic dolls no more

than a few inches tall. "Did somebody hide a… home-made dollhouse back here?"

"I know what that is," Maggie said beside me. "That's a spirit house."

"A what now?" Arthur asked, hobbling up behind us.

"A spirit house," she repeated. "They're all over Bangkok. It's a little shrine."

Delores put her hand to her collarbone, but I leaned forward. Now I could see the little pools of white wax in the corners, with blackened nubs of wicks poking up from their centers. Candles.

"So if we disturb it do we get haunted by evil spirits?" my ex chuckled, leaning forward and reaching for one of the figures.

I slapped his hand with a sigh. "We will do no such thing. This is somebody's shrine and it's important to them. Hands off."

Together with Maggie and Delores, we restacked the baskets into a wall obscuring the spirit house. When we were done, there was no sign that the cabinet held anything more than an overabundance of baskets.

"I wonder whose it is," Delores said to the baskets.

"At a guess, they're Southeast Asian," Maggie said with a wan smile. "That should narrow things down

around here."

"Yeah but–" Arthur began and cast a worried look at me. I immediately recognized it as the face he made when he didn't know how to say something without risking horrific offense.

"Spit it out, Arthur," I said with a weary wave of my hand.

"I mean, are there even any… South Asians in the refuge?"

"Southeast," I corrected him mildly and patted his arm. At least he didn't ask about "the orientals." I looked to Maggie and shrugged. "There's no Southeast Asians in Ponderosa labor pool, but that's not even a fifth of the refuge. They could be in any of the other lodges."

"Or maybe," Delores suggested, "somebody left it here before. You know, on a weekend of something."

Maggie shrugged elaborately. "Possible. Looked a little dusty to me. Instead of chattering about hypothetical Cambodians or whatever, though, I suggest we go get in line for dinner."

## *8. Building Culture*

"I just don't think we should call it breakfast any more," George was saying as we tromped along with our work detail. The Mess dwindled away behind us as the train of poolies wound its way into the woods.

"Just because it's rice?" Caden responded incredulously. "Lots of people eat rice for breakfast."

George waved his hands. "Not because it's rice, but because it's always rice around here. We eat rice in the morning. We eat rice at noon. We eat rice at sundown. Why call these meals breakfast and lunch and dinner when they're always the same? We should call them rice and rice and rice."

"Well the kitchen tries to change things up," my son moderated. “Rice balls, loose rice, rice pilaf. And they put different stuff in the rice balls: bean paste, that garlicky stuff, sometimes fish or even goat–“

George caught my eye and grinned. "You catch that? He's sticking up for his old man, hard at work in

the kitchens." He clapped Caden on the shoulder. "It warms the heart to see such a display of filial loyalty and devotion."

"He's his father's boy," I answered with a smile. "I tried to mitigate it as much as possible, but–"

"Hey Caden!" came a shout, and then bounding up after it came Zoe Cole, freshly showered and wearing bright colors undimmed by lived-in grime. She leapt up alongside the line of drab poolies, her bright smile focused on my son.

He turned, awkward and uncertain. "Um. Hey, Zoe. What's up?"

The Director's daughter came to a stop, feet balanced on two hefty rocks defining one side of the trail, and set her fists on her hips. "Not much. What're you doing, pouring concrete?"

Caden stepped out of the line to answer. "Yeah, for the… cabins, I think?"

I continued on for a few yards, then stepped out of line to the other side. The poolies passing between my son and I gave both of us looks ranging from the curious to the annoyed to the plainly jealous. I tried to ignore the looks as I looked past the lookers, watching the exchange as surreptitiously as I could.

George watched me with warning in his eyes but kept moving.

The two kids kept chatting, mostly about nothing: which work detail was Caden's favorite and had he hiked up to the far end of the walipinis and how disappointing breakfast had been. With a faint smile, Caden suggested all the meals should be renamed "rice." She laughed far too loudly at the joke.

"What's the hold up, Susan?" asked Teddy as he lumbered down the line to stand behind me.

I gestured lamely at my son. "Flirting teenagers."

The big man snorted. "Zoe's no teenager. She's twenty-one."

I winced. "Sometimes, Teddy, I hate being right all the time."

Before he could ask what I meant, the end of the poolie line tromped past us and Zoe spied him. "Hey, Teddy," she grinned and laid a hand of Caden's forearm. "I'm going to borrow Caden for a bit, okay? I'm sure you can do without him, right?"

The Hawai'ian waved, half in greeting and half in agreement. "Yeah sure, Miss Cole. Whatever you say. We'll be fine."

Zoe grinned at my son and spun him around, facing back down the hill. Before I knew it, they were speeding away, chatting amicably. Caden never looked back.

"C'mon, Susan," Teddy grunted as he turned.

"We've still got work to do."

I said something vaguely agreeable and took the smallest steps backwards. My heart was trying to climb out my throat. My eyes were riveted on my son's back. I could hear the dwindling sound of their conversation and laughter for another minute or so.

She took him so fast I hardly saw it happen. I had meant to say something to Caden, to warn him, to be careful, to guard himself and his all too vulnerable heart (because he was his father's child). Why hadn't I? The daily exhaustion? The lack of any private moment to talk? The ever-complicated and complicating relationship between parent and teen? Regardless, it was too late, now.

"Susan!" Teddy called from up the path. "Let's go. This foundation is not going to pour itself."

—

Mixing concrete is a very complicated, labor-intensive, and tedious affair. First there is the sorting of rocks: limestones in one pile, igneous glass in another, and filler in the last. This sorting was performed inexpertly by poolies arguing over whether a given rock had the parallel lines of sedimentary limestone, the sparking specks of volcanic glass, or could safely be discarded into the filler pile. As looking at rocks was light work, the sorting crew's

arguments always grew fierce, everyone there was desperate to be right, and thereby keep their comfortable place at the sorting table.

The limestone was carted off to the kiln, which sounds more elaborate than the iron cage supporting a soot-black cauldron that it was. The limestone was broken down with hammers and picks—the less desirable counterpoint to the rock-sorting—and placed in the cauldron. Wood was stacked all around the frame and set alight. The result, a few hours later, was quicklime. This was mixed with water to make a slurry.

Meanwhile, the flaky and prone-to-shatter igneous rocks were delivered to a broad granite outcropping. In the center of this huge stone a small depression was forming, aided by the sledgehammers pulverizing the volcanic glass within it. Those stones which would not crumble or splinter were discarded as "not igneous after all" and diverted to the filler pile. But the volcanic rocks were smashed, shattered, and finally ground down with rounded granite pounders. The last of these were actually a poolie innovation, making use of the stones scattered around the great boulder's base. The constant use and abuse had already rounded the bottoms of the stones down to match the rounded depressions in the stone "floor."

There was much debate among panting poolies whether breaking hard limestone into chunks or grinding the more-brittle igneous rocks was the more grueling task. But as no one besides Teddy chose their assignment, the entire argument was more a means of passing time and venting well-deserved gripes than coming to any real conclusion.

The lime slurry, the ground volcanic glass, and a good deal of water were then mixed together in deep wheelbarrows using three wooden paddles and an array of deadwood branches found nearby. The result was cement–rough, lumpy, discolored, and thick. As soon as each batch was finished, it was dumped out onto a bed dug out of the ground, sided with wooden planks, and filled with the filler rocks. The haste was necessary: the cement hardened quickly. No one wanted to chisel out a wheelbarrow full of a day's hard work gone to waste. Not a second time, at least.

The end result of all this industry–aside from a nearly-level cabin foundation growing section by section–was a good number of poolies standing around. Either the kiln was still too hot to decant or the ground glass crew was finding too many "not igneous after all" rocks, or yet another argument arose over which pile a given stone should be sorted into. Teddy was nearing apoplexy, but no amount of

exhortation or intimidation could make the process go faster.

"I think he's going to burst," Jackson observed from his perch. George, Jackson, and I had carefully arranged filler rocks in the next bed so that the next deluge could easily seep between all the gaps. That deluge was waiting on quicklime slurry, which couldn't be made until the cauldron cooled down from the 800 degrees required to burn rock.

"Don't be unkind," I chided heartlessly, and was about to elaborate when an entirely uncharitable snort escaped me. "Oh my. I think Teddy's day is about to get even worse."

Up the path behind the big Hawaii'ian came none other than Director Cole.

"Should we look busy?" George asked diffidently.

Jackson bent down to tidy up the fill pile behind us. "Can't hurt."

I caught Teddy's eye and nodded behind him, then bent to help George and Jackson with their useless labor. As I herded stones back into a neat hump, I wondered why I had warned the would-be foreman. I certainly didn't owe him any favors or even friendship. If I had been thinking strategically I might have tipped him off just to earn some of his good graces—but the thought hadn't really crossed my

mind.

I had just warned my fellow poolie about an incoming threat–automatically, instinctively. I had closed ranks, because my gut said that, no matter what complaint I might harbor against the man, he was one of "us" and Cole was one of "them."

I scowled at the rocks before me. Us-versus-them was not how I wanted to see the world, but there it was.

"…as you can see, we're just about ready for the next pour," Teddy was saying as he guided the Director our way.

"Waiting on quicklime or powder?" Cole asked with no small measure of amusement. "Oh, hello, Miss Soza."

I straightened and gave the man a nod. "Good morning, Director."

"All settled in?" he asked conversationally, folding his hands behind his back. Beside him, Teddy looked unsure if he should answer Cole's hanging question about the work holdup.

"Yes," I answered, bit back a harsh rejoinder, and then moderated, "as well as one can settle into a garage full of bunkbeds and hammocks."

Teddy's eyes looked like they might pop from their sockets and his face went red.

But the Director merely nodded. "It's unfortunate we have such a shortage of housing. But I'm glad to see you and so many subscribers hard at work fixing that problem." He looked back and forth, surveying the work site. "Although–it does seem like you've got too many hands and not enough tasks, Teddy."

"There are–this is a very difficult workflow," the big man stammered. "You've caught us at a slow moment."

Cole nodded again, slow and unhurried. "I know how it can be, Mister Mahone. You don't need to make any excuses." He nodded to the next bed over, which featured a deep pit dug into the ground. "Looks like you're about ready to sink the loop?"

Teddy glanced over and nodded. "Um, yeah, soon as this bed is filled—"

"And it's not yet noon," the Director went on, looking up at the bright blue sky. He clapped a hand on the Hawai'ian's shoulder. "Listen. You don't need a whole crew to sink the loop. It's a two, maybe three man job. Everybody else is just going to be sitting on their hands."

"We've split our attention across two beds," Teddy started to say, but Cole just shook his head, slow and steady.

"No, why don't you take your crew up to the

walipinis," the Director suggested, "after this bed is filled. Pitch in on digging out the next one on the east end. I've got a couple sweeties up there leading crews already. They'll welcome your help."

"Um," Teddy answered, flustered. "I was—we were—assigned to this task…"

"And you've done a great job, Mahone," Cole assured him. "I doubt they expected you to get all the way to the loop before lunch. I guess what I've been hearing about you is true. You run a good crew."

"Thank you, sir." The big man looked left and right. "I'll go round everyone up."

"You do that," Cole nodded. "Leave Miss Soza here, though. She's done this before so she knows what she's doing. Right, Soza?"

"Um. Right," I stammered uncertainly at being roped back into the conversation. "I watched the installation for Beaver Lodge and helped out when we retrofitted the Mess."

"There we go," smiled Cole, and turned to Teddy. "Did you know you had such an experienced hand on your crew, Mahone?"

"I… did not," the big man confessed for lack of anything better to say. "She's a hard worker, though, I know that." He gave me an unreadable smile. Genuine? Pained? Panicked? No telling, and then he

was gone, calling for poolies to return tools.

No one was happy about leaving a job where half their time was spent sitting and waiting, but Cole's presence kept the griping to a minimum. Soon Jackson and I were left alone at the work site with Director Cole.

Sinking the Loop is a straightforward, if finicky, process of lowering a loop of copper pipe into a twenty-foot-deep, four-foot-wide pit in a building's foundation. Fill stones are then piled in after it, carefully placed and positioned to keep the loop upright. The biggest rocks can not be dropped for fear of damaging the loop, so one worker crawls down the pit and places them one by one. The other worker passes the fill stones down by rope while holding the top of the loop steady.

Once the entire shaft is filled, it is topped off with a cement plug and seamlessly incorporated into the rest of the foundation. Only two copper pipes rising from the floor betray the loop's presence. Later, those leads are coupled with the upper loop of pipes, which run through the walls of the cabin.

The pipes are filled with water and hooked up to a solar-powered pump to keep the contents flowing down into the ground, up through the walls, and back again. No matter the time of year, the water comes up

from the loop below at a consistent 65 degrees. In the summer, this cool water running through the walls brings down the temperature in the building. In the winter, the reverse occurs, and 65 degree water warms the rooms they circulate through.

"I'm surprised we're even bothering with air conditioning," I told Cole as he climbed down the shaft. "Doesn't this increase the build time for each cabin?"

"A couple days," he answered up the shaft, holding up his hands for the loop. Jackson and I carefully lowered it down into his grip. "But I've always said, if you're going to do something, might as well do it right the first time."

I passed a pair of two-by-fours between the two pipes now rising up from the pit, securing them in place. "You never struck me as a perfectionist," I told him, "more a pragmatist."

"Well," he grunted. The tops of the pipes shifted, one pipe popping up as the other dipped down, as Cole adjusted the bottom of the loop in the cool soil at the bottom. "Put it this way: why try to make subscribers happy by building them housing that they'll complain about being too cold a couple months later?"

I made an agreeable sound and began lowering a

basket of stones down the pit. I chose my next words carefully. "You know we'll just find something else to complain about instead."

The Director laughed at that. "Inevitably. You wouldn't, but others will. Nature of the Beast. Can't make everybody happy. So I figure I'll just focus on making everybody safe and warm, instead."

There was not much to say to that, but I wanted to keep the man talking. I went with a compliment, the universal lubricant to men's pride. "Well we're lucky to have you at the helm, sir."

"Oh, call me Greg," he said quickly. He was bent over at the bottom of a deep hole so I could not see his face, but by his voice I could tell he was smiling. Direct hit. "It hasn't been easy, but I like to think that we've done pretty well, given the circumstances."

"Those circumstances being the apocalypse?" I led on. I reeled the empty basket back up. Suddenly it occured to me that I could find the heaviest stone in the pile and drop it on the head of this recklessly oblivious man. No one would question if it had been an accident. With a shudder of revulsion, I thrust the thought from my head.

He grinned up at me, and apparently my murderous thoughts did not show on my face. "See, you get it," he told me. "Most people, especially rich

folks who were born to money, which is… a whole lot of the subscribers here. They don't know–they can't comprehend–just how bad things can get out there. Or how much work it takes to create and maintain and protect a safe place like this. A sanctuary."

An angry retort leapt to my lips, commenting on the "safety" I had found in Cole's sanctuary. I bit it back. Instead, I said, "It must be a… difficult management problem. When your workers don't understand how herculean the project is."

"We're getting there," he replied confidently. "Mavis–Miss Clark, in Beaver Lodge–calls it building our local culture."

I paused in pulling the basket back up. "That's… a lot more intentional than I would have expected," I said truthfully.

"Well to my mind, it's just a fancy way of saying, 'team-building,'" he laughed, but then he coughed, his voice suddenly sobering. "But it is necessary. We're not going to make it through this unless we work together, and some of the folks here… they're not so good at that. Yet."

I bobbed my head and then realized he couldn't see the gesture. "Yeah, I've… encountered the phenomenon around the refuge."

"Sure you have," he agreed, quickly and with

enough force behind it that he clearly meant more than he had said. With a chuckle calculated to disarm and invite, I asked him what his tone of voice meant. "Well you're in Ponderosa," he elaborated. "Your lodge is sort of the black sheep of the Tall Pines family."

"Mister Abernathy mentioned something about us being the least productive lodge," I offered, hoping it would spur him to more talking.

The comment made him laugh. "Oh, Joe," he sighed. "I guess I'm glad he's finally doing something about his members, but making that kind of announcement to the whole lodge is… not the best way to go about it. You run the risk of your group starting to identify as the under performer. There's a certain kind of person who'll take that up as a badge of honor, and once they're proud of a shitty work record, there's not much you can do to fix that."

I refrained from telling Cole that Abernathy had confided in me over dinner, not made some sort of public address to the whole lodge. I wanted to keep him talking. "What would you do differently?"

He made a sound in the back of his throat that was somewhere between thoughtful consideration and heaving a large rock into place. "Well, your friend Teddy, for instance."

"The big guy?" I asked needlessly to cover my sudden panic. Friend? Had Cole seen me make a hand off to the Hawai'ian?

He took no notice of my anxiety. "I use the term loosely, of course. I'm sure he's not very well-liked in Ponderosa's pool. But he's a talented leader. He should be in a suite."

"Even though he's not very well-liked?" I asked, amused. Of course Cole would promote the bully.

"That's because he's a poolie." The Director squinted up the shaft at me, and took a moment to put his answer into words. "People react poorly to a man overstepping his authority. He smells like a fraud and they pray he'll get his deserved comeuppance. But Mahone isn't a fraud. He's misplaced. Were he a sweetie, he'd be respected for the same reasons he's disliked now. And he'd be way more effective than anyone on Abernathy's current crew."

"Speaking of whom," I said, passing another load of stones down, "who gets booted from the lodge to make room for Teddy?"

He laughed at my challenge. "That's the real question, isn't it? And this is why I'm not about to micromanage Joe's lodge. He'd know better than I would who's not pulling their weight. Or at least he should." He paused again and looked up at me. "And

that's the thing. I don't get any sense that Abernathy keeps track of his sweeties at all, or fosters any sense of responsibility within his lodge. No faster route to corruption than lack of accountability."

I couldn't actually argue with that. "Well I keep hearing them talk about numbers," I offered weakly. "But they don't share that sort of thing with poolies."

"Maybe he should," Cole shrugged. The top of his head was now just an arm's length from the lip of the shaft, our handiwork already filling it up halfway. "Or not. I don't know. Damned frustrating. I don't want to step in, because once I do, any authority he had becomes reliant on my good graces, which would only cripple him further."

"You've thought this over a great deal."

He sighed, his shoulders deflating to his sides. "It feels like all I do is think this through. Joe's a friend. But he just–" He clapped his hands to his sides and shook his head helplessly. I let him stew, waiting for him to complete his thought. "If I could just see any sign that he's… instilling in his people the sense of responsibility that we need to… make this work."

"Building culture," I provided, and he threw one rhetorical hand up at me.

"Yes. That. Exactly. But he just seems to be… coasting." He ran a hand through his hair. "And

meanwhile, his people–all our people–are suffering from the lack of his example."

I frowned at that, and then with sudden inspiration suggested, "And then they steal from you."

The Director leveraged a stone into position, jammed between the loop and the shaft wall, instead of answering. "Isaacs," he sighed when done. "I didn't like having to do that."

I tried to hide my surprise at this sudden admission of regret. Was there some moral core hidden in this proud and brutish man that could be appealed to? Very carefully, I broached the subject as I lowered the next basket. "In retrospect, do you think you were… too harsh?"

He guided the heavy load down to rest at his feet. "Harsh? No, I–" and here he paused, and looked up at me with a curious appraisal in his eye. "Is there anybody else up there?"

I shook my head. "No, Jackson's fetching another wheelbarrow of fill. Why?"

"Isaacs didn't steal food," Cole said flatly. "Or rather, that's not all he stole. He'd also squirreled away a drum of ammonium nitrate."

"From the walipinis?" I frowned. "What could he possibly want with fertilizer?"

"The Golden Eagle Lodge's library is also missing a

book," he went on, "which details how to make explosives."

"What?" I gasped, gobsmacked.

"Isaacs wasn't a thief," Cole said flatly, "he was a saboteur. He's lucky I didn't just disappear his ass."

I frowned. "Then why punish him like a thief?"

"First off, to avoid a panic among the subscribers," he said, turning back to his work. He placed a few more stones and then gingerly stepped up on top of them, testing their stability. "More importantly, though, we don't think he's working alone. We still haven't found that book."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"So Susan," Cole was saying, and I managed to focus my attention back to him. "If you see something, or you hear something suspicious, bring it to our attention, huh? The last thing anybody in here needs is a home-made bomb."

I nodded mutely. He was right, of course. Bomb-happy would-be freedom fighters would be a menace to everyone. But I also couldn't stop thinking along the opposite line. Somewhere in the refuge, there were more people organizing against the Hosts and Sweeties. They might be dangerous, but we were not alone.

—

Work detail ended after dinner. Poolies were free to amuse ourselves however we liked once the day's work–and the day's light–was done. After a long day of grueling labor, though, most of our amusements lay behind closed eyes in our bunks and hammocks. There were occasional exceptions, though, and so it was that after a day spent sorting rocks, I had enough energy to linger in the Mess with the boys.

They had found a board game hiding in a back cupboard–hexagonal tiles and cards for lumber, bricks, and sheep. The game required at least three players, and while they did not say so explicitly, I suspect they wanted to try it out with me before sharing it with their friends. Knowing Caden, he planned to figure the game out and then crush all comers with his superior strategy.

Arthur, plainly exhausted, bowed out of the invitation, and none of us argued. He'd be asleep before his head hit the rolled-up jacket that served as his pillow.

Third Mess drained out of the place as the view outside the bay windows darkened to pitch. The stars twinkled in the clear night sky, and the deck outside was bathed in the silvery light of a full moon. Kitchen staff turned off three of the four banks of lights above us and then busied themselves in the kitchen proper,

cleaning up dinner and prepping breakfast.

As the boys and I built imaginary roads and swapped cards, the clatter of pots and spray of water faded away and eventually ceased. The kitchen light snapped off.

"Time to lock up," Chef called to us from behind the buffet line.

Caden looked up from his hand. "We have to clear out?"

"You don't have to go home," Chef recited wearily, "but you can't stay here. Food stores need to be secured."

I put down my cards and muttered to the boys, "And we dirty poolies might be thieves."

Jackson smirked. "Certain."

But Caden waved his cards at the double doors leading out to the moonlit deck. "Can we move this table outside so we can finish the game, Chef? I promise, we'll come back in the morning to move it back inside."

Chef shrugged. "Sure, why not."

It took more time to figure out how to disengage the table from its mates than to wheel it outside. Chef locked the door behind us to our, frankly, excessive thanks. The game resumed; Caden lost his lead when Jackson made a few savvy moves to prevent his win,

and the moon rose high in the sky.

I was only one point away from winning when a crash sounded through the quet night.

"Whuzzat?"

Jackson rose with a curse. "Raccoons, getting into the supply cabinets out back." He put his cards down. "C'mon, they'll fuck everything up looking for food that isn't there. Again." He stalked off around the Mess.

We trooped along after my eldest, intent on shooing away pests, when the sound of voices came around the next corner of the building. Two, maybe three men, arguing with each other. We stopped in our tracks.

"Thieves?" Caden whispered to us. "What should we do?"

"Confront them," Caden answered with the moral determination of a young man unconcerned with consequences. "If we show our faces, they'll probably take off."

"It's in one of these," one of the voices insisted. "Keep looking."

"They're not after food," I whispered. What were they looking for? Material? Tools? Might these be the bomb-makers, the rest of poor Isaiah's conspirators? Did I want to interfere? Did I want to introduce

myself?

"What if they're sweeties?" Jackson demanded of his brother.

Caden crept towards the corner of the building. "You afriad of getting into trouble?"

"I'm afraid of their fucking guns," he snapped back.

I reached forward to put a hand on Caden's shoulder, exerting all of my material authority to hold him back. "Let me," I whispered. "I look like less of a threat." And there was no way I was letting my boys step into the line of fire.

Caden gave me a short nod, and I took a deep breath before stepping past him. The back of the Mess was dimly lit by an emergency light slowly draining its solar battery. Half the long line of storage cabinets yawned open; supplies littered the ground.

Three men stood in the midst of the mess they'd made. Two of their heads were buried inside cabinets, rummaging through the contents. The third looked up from scowling at his compatriots to my sudden appearance. Guilty surprise was written across his face.

No guns at their hips. Unshowered. Sweat-grimed clothes. Poolies.

I squared my shoulders. "Can I help you gentlemen?"

The other two looked up from their cabinets. The third man sneered. "What are you, some kind of sales clerk? Can you help us? Sure. Turn around and go home. This doesn't concern you."

I took a step forward. "I don't know, you're making quite a mess. The way things work around here, I might have to clean it up tomorrow."

"I said fuck off!" he answered, voice rising.

The boys came barreling around the corner. Jackson shouted, "Don't talk to my mom like that!" I tried to grab their shirts as they passed, but they were determined to defend my honor despite my preferences.

The men immediately closed ranks, standing tall and puffing out their chests. Their hands balled into fists. "Calm down, kid. Both of you. We're here by order of Jameson–"

One of the other men hissed at that, and the three of them fell into a conversation of looks and stares. Finally the first one continued, his voice straining to sound moderate. "We're looking for a box. It… doesn't belong here. Jameson wants it–"

"Does Jameson want you cursing at my mom?" Jackson demanded, trembling just slightly with the adrenaline. His brother stood at his side, wavering left and right as he shifted weight from foot to foot.

Jackson goaded again, "You've got a dirty mouth for a Lion of God."

They had entered the most tedious part of a fight, the uncertain dance of intimidation and provocation. I watched the brewing confrontation fearfully.

One of the others leaned forward to put in his barb, calling Jackson "boy" and stressing "we" to underscore that there where three of them against just two (discounting my presence entirely, of course). Judging they would be distracted, I eased open the last cabinet.

If Jameson wanted a box and he was sending poolies to fetch it in the middle of the night, I could only assume the box wasn't his. Given their search, they didn't quite know where to find it, either. And Delores, bless her fervent little heart, had been with us when we found the spirit house.

There was no way I could excavate the boxy shrine without being noticed, so I hooked my foot under the pile of baskets stacked in front of it. Then I used my mom voice. "Jackson! Caden!"

The show of posturing stalled. One of the men smirked in superiority. "Momma's calling." But the third man looked my way and I could see his eyes widen as he realized I'd opened a cabinet.

I shouted: "Boys! Run!"

I heaved, toppling the haphazard tower of baskets

out onto the floor, and dove down to scoop up the spirit house. I heard curses and scuffling behind me, and then the solid smack of a body hitting the concrete. Cradling the shrine, I spared a look back at the men. One was on the ground, on his back. The other two were staggering, grabbing for my boys, with as much luck as I had in restraining them in the first place. Jackson and Caden pelted into the night. I gave the men my best cab-hailing whistle, made sure they saw the spirit house in my arms, and ran back around the corner of the Mess.

Behind me I could hear the men redouble their cursing, then kicking their way through the fallen stacks of baskets and buckets. I dashed back around the Mess, hugging the wall, and then pelted across the deck. A few cards from our abandoned boardgame fluttered to the ground in my wake. I hoped my footfalls on the wooden deck wouldn't give me away.

But the lights in the eaves above the deck gave out just beyond the far railing, and I plunged into darkness without looking back.

I fled through the night, downhill and off trail, exactly as I had been taught at a Combat Survival seminar at this very refuge. It was not long before my pursuers' voices dwindled into the distance. From their shouts, it was clear they had no idea which

direction I had gone. Moments later, more shouts joined theirs; no doubt they had awoken sweeties in Grey Wolf and Golden Eagle lodges. I was safe.

I stashed the spirit house in an equipment locker inside the water reclamation building and plodded back uphill towards the Ponderosa barracks. Caden and Jackson were waiting for me on the porch. They rushed forward and we embraced.

After I assured them that I was fine and double-checked that they were, too, I sat them down. "You are both nearly grown men," I began, "so I feel comfortable telling you two contradictory things."

Caden smiled at being called grown; Jackson knew enough to grimace at what was coming.

"So first, thank you for stepping up and defending me." Jackson nodded in acknowledgement; Caden rather suddenly realized that there was a "but" coming.

"Secondly, don't you ever do that again." I speared them both with as furious a look as I could muster. "It is not, never was, and never will be your job to defend my honor. That's my job. And if you throw yourselves into danger again on my account, you will find you are in ten times more trouble with me afterwards. Do I make myself clear?"

They mumbled acknowledgement.

"Okay, inside and into bed. You've got to be up early in the morning."

Caden looked back at me with a quirked eyebrow. "Why do we have to be up early?"

"You promised Chef you'd put that table back before First Mess."

## *9. Bombshells*

Without fail, when the work detail required digging, our supervising sweeties would appoint a poolie overseer and disappear. So it was Teddy standing over my boys and I was we dug out the foundation of another cabin. George had slipped across from where he was supposed to be digging to join our little band, mostly for conversation.

"It was weird," Caden said, using a sturdy branch to knock loose a buried rock. After at least an hour of cajoling, Jackson, George, and I had got Caden talking about his afternoon with Zoe Cole. "But also… kinda nice."

"Yeah, but what did she have you do?" Jackson pressed. "Did she need somebody to do her laundry or something?"

"No," Caden answered, and fidgetted uncertainly with his tree branch. "It wasn't… work, it was… I mean. Zoe called it a date."

Both Jackson and George shouted in good-natured surprise and congratulations. I gave my boy an indulgent smile. I might not be happy about the turn of events, but they were hardly Caden's fault.

"So what did you do with all that alone time, Caden?" George smirked.

"Oh, no, it was more than just me and her," my son hastened to explain. "I hung out with the whole—" Here he stumbled to a stop and looked warily at me. "With everybody in her suite."

"Wait, what was that?" Jackson grinned from his place, hip-deep in a new loop shaft. His brother feigned ignorance, but Jackson pressed on, undeterred. "You were about to say one thing and then you wimped out."

"I know what you were going to say," George put in devilishly. "And trust me, your mother's going to hear what they call their suite sooner or later, so she might as well hear it from you."

My youngest son went red to his ears and focused his attention on the ground.

I reached over to squeeze his arm. "Honey, don't worry about it. I'm sure it's just some silly adolescent humor."

But he steeled himself and blurted out, "Zoe calls it her man-harem."

George watched me for a reaction as Jackson actually guffawed. I tried to catch my breath. When Caden finally looked me in the eye, I stammered, "Is that so?"

He gestured limply. "Well I mean, it's Zoe and CeeCee—she's the daughter of Ms. Clark, the Beaver Host? They room together, and have since the beginning, I guess. And so they—" and here he managed a slight smile with a tinge of pride. "As Zoe says, they collect pretty boys."

I stilled my shovel. "Collect them for what?" I asked warningly.

"Exactly what you think, Susan," George answered airily. "Zoe and CeeCee are quite the junior lotharios."

I skewered Caden with an arch look, and he quickly waved his hands. "Nothing happened. It wasn't like that at all. Mostly we just played video games."

Jackson's ears perked up at that. "What do they got?"

Caden shrugged. "Playstation, XBox, a really old Game Cube. Bunch of games."

"Okay, so, before I wasn't jealous, little bro, but…" Jackson shouldered his shovel and mimed holding a controller in his hands. "It's been a while."

"Air conditioning, too," Caden added, to his

brother's flabbergasted admiration.

"Sounds nice," I agreed as mildly as I could manage. "What else did you do?"

"Well first she wanted to take me to lunch—there's a sweeties lunch at the Mess, for everybody who's not out with a work crew," he answered, and glanced over his shoulder. Teddy was orbiting closer to our corner of the work site, so Caden started worrying his buried stone as he talked. "But before we went there, she let me use their shower."

As Jackson redoubled his protestations of envy, I settled my motherly suspicions. I had not failed to notice that Caden had come back freshly showered, but apparently that had happened at the top of the afternoon, to make him presentable. Not at the end, to clean up after a sweaty assignation.

Caden was describing Sweeties Lunch: "It's all the same food that they bring out to the work crews. Nothing special. Although I'm pretty sure one of the other tables had some… homemade wine or something."

"It would astound me if there wasn't someone somewhere in the refuge making hooch," George chuckled.

"But it was, um, real quiet," Caden went on. "Like not even half the tables were full, and some of the

sweeties were just sitting by themselves reading books, you know? It was real… sedate."

The boy's description paused as he and Jackson traded shovel for tree branch, as Caden's rock was nearly dislodged and his brother had just found one. Caden shoveled and talked at a steady pace. "And Zoe and I, we just talked, you know? For like an hour. Where we grew up, schools, movies we liked—"

"That sounds really nice," I said, trying desperately to find some benefit of the doubt to apply to the situation.

He bobbed his head. "It was. And after that, we went back to the suite and met everybody else, and then video games happened, and a movie afterwards. By then it was time for dinner."

"Which you joined us for," I said with no small surprise. "Why not with them?"

"Well they eat at First Mess," Caden answered with a shrug, "and I wasn't really hungry yet, and… I dunno. As nice as it was, it was also weird. Like I said. Too many eyes on me. Like… going to a new school, I guess? Where everybody else already has their friends and stuff and they're trying to figure out where you'll fit in."

"That does make sense," I told him. "Do you think you'll… see her again?" I asked, trying hard to make

the question seem as normal and insignificant as it would have been if we were at home, digging in our own back yard.

He shrugged. "I dunno. I think it's up to her way more than me, you know?"

"Certain," Jackson answered from his hole. Further conversation quieted as Teddy halted his patrol just a few feet away. His back was turned to us and the rest of the work site, though, and it was a few moments before the cause appeared.

The priest from Sunday service came huffing up the hill, dressed in jeans and a hunter green jacket. His dog collar peeked out at the top of his zipper. Close up, he was younger than I had thought he was: forties instead of fifties. He had a florid face, made blotchy by the exertion of hiking up the hill, and sweat beaded on his brow. Light touches of not-quite-grey threaded through the dark hair his temples.

Teddy watched his approach with his shoulders set in tention. What interruption, he must be wondering, was about to befall his work site? And yet as the priest came to a stop before him, the big man was all solicitousness. "Can I help you, father?"

"Yes, excuse me," the priest began after he had caught his breath. "I need to speak with Susan Soza."

My head snapped up on hearing my name, but one

thunderous look from Teddy and I bent back to work. My shoveling might have been a little quieter, though, to eavesdrop.

"We're pretty busy, Father," Teddy told him.

The priest drew in a deep breath. "It's church business."

The big man was quiet for a moment. "All right. Susan. You're needed. Make it quick."

I climbed out of the hole and handed my shovel to Teddy. We were short tools, and I was sure he could find someone to use it. The priest dipped his head to me and gestured away from the work site. "Walk with me?"

The small, tight smile I gave him might have been interpreted as compliance, but all I could think about was how I was once again being pulled away from my family. I wondered what trouble they had attached to me. Had I left his church service with too much haste? Had I not sung their terrible, lopsided hymns loud enough? Whatever it was, it was bound to be immaterial nonsense. I could be making progress building a place for my family to sleep, but first I'd have to deal with whatever insecurities they'd scapegoated on me.

Once we were out of earshot I glanced back at Teddy, who had dropped down into the ground and

put the shovel to use himself. "Claim 'church business' and you can steal poolies away from work, huh? I didn't know you could do that."

"Neither did I," he admitted with a pale smile, although this disappeared quickly. "Customs and manners are still plastic here, despite how it may seem at times."

We walked on through the trees, away from the ranks of walipinis. "Still," I persisted. "Not a bad gig. No digging for you, just chatting with whoever you like all day."

His features grew grim. "Not for lack of trying. I put myself in the work rotation, but Jameson took me back off. Told me that physical labor undermined my role in the community."

I snorted. "Except I'd have a lot more respect for you if you worked alongside us. I doubt I'm alone in that."

"You're not," he responded easily. "I'd have a lot more respect for me, too."

We reached a promontory that allowed us to look down on the compound and across the valley behind it. Ridge upon ridge of evergreen extended to the horizon. The empty blue sky yawned above it all. The tableau brought a smile to my lips. I closed my eyes to listen to the wind comb through the trees.

"I've been led to believe that you've been telling people that you and your family are Unitarian Universalists," he said solemnly.

My stomach dropped out of me. When I looked to him, he had folded his hands before himself and his face was unreadable. "Church business," I observed, and he inclined his head minutely. "Delores."

At this his lips twisted in distaste—not for the woman, but for the position he was in. "Gossip is not going to help anyone right now, Mrs Soza."

"Miss Soza," I corrected without thinking.

"You see? Gossip told me you were married," the priest sighed. "In any case, who exactly is talking is immaterial." He looked about to say something else, and then sealed his lips into a frustrated scowl.

I waited for a long moment, but when no further comment seemed forthcoming, I sighed. "Yes. My sons and I attended a UU church."

He nodded slowly. "It pains me to suggest it, Miss Soza," he said, and by the way he dragged each word out of his mouth, it was plain that they came with difficulty. "But you might want to keep that information to yourself."

I considered the priest, fire rising up into my gut. "Excuse me?" I spat. "Keep it to myself? Am I interfering with your Christian paradise, here? Are

you concerned that we'll—how did you put it—defile God's little time capsule?"

The priest put up his hands, expression suddenly panicked. "No, Miss Soza, no. You misunderstand." When I lifted my eyebrows for clarification, he continued. "I'm not asking for me, or even for the church. My concern is entirely for your own safety."

Suddenly the mountain wind, which had seemed so pleasant a moment ago, cut through me like a knife. The fire in my gut sputtered against the chill. "My safety."

The priest nodded gravely. "Right now, Miss Soza, this gossip is contained. I have… counseled those who spoke with me, and convinced them that it's not worth circulating."

Curiosity got the better of me. "How did you do that?"

He looked up at the sky and heaved a sky. "I may have told them that Unitarian Universalism is just another denomination of Christianity. Which is, technically speaking, true."

"We're the combination of two heresies that together dismantle most of your orthodox beliefs, but sure, a hundred years ago, we called ourselves Christians," I smirked, but my amusement was short-lived. "And you did this for our safety?"

The priest turned to look out over the tableau. "Please understand, Miss Soza, under Jameson' dictates, I am the Associate Minister of the church here. Pastor Walter Park is the Senior Minister, and it's he who controls the message. I just lead the singing and counsel our more… high church congregants. I am an Episcopal priest, so the traditionalists are more comfortable with me."

I let him ramble until he came to a stop. "And you think Park's message could be dangerous to us?"

Father Donovan frowned out at the mountains. "There is little I can say explicitly. But I fear that some congregants may… they may be primed to find a target to assuage their discontent." He looked at me with pleading eyes.

I nodded once. "I think I take your message. You're working for a dangerous ideogogue who's whipping up his followers to tear apart anyone he identifies as an outsider. Don't feel obliged to nod, Father."

The priest did his best to hide a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. Instead, he tipped his head side to side. "Minister Park's theology is a little more… confrontational than mine."

"And apocalyptic?" I suggested.

"Oh that count, I can't really blame him," Donovan

sighed, and gestured at our surroundings. "It does seem to be the end of the world, after all."

"Seems that way," I murmured in agreement. "Which makes it a poor time for abandoning our principles. I don't think I can lie about being UU, father."

He slowly shook his head. "I wouldn't ask you to. Just… advise you not to advertise."

I crossed my arms. If nothing else, I had to appreciate the priest's motive, and I could sympathize with his difficult position. Suddenly it occurred to me that he might be putting himself in danger speaking to me like this. "I'll take it under consideration, father. Discretion is not beyond my abilities."

"I won't ask you to return to Sunday service," he said, turning his steps back towards the work site. "I'm sure that would be a bridge too far."

I shook my head ruefully. "That service is not for me, which was made abundantly clear the last time I attended." I fell into step beside him.

"It's a pity," he sighed. "I have a feeling I would like to have you in my congregation."

I gave him a short smile. "You seem like my kind of minister, too," I told him. "Struggling under stifling constraints and all." We shared a companionable chuckle. "If I may ask, though, I wouldn't imagine

Episcopalian priests made the kind of salary required for a refuge subscription."

He shook his head. "Family money. Actually a family subscription, too. My uncle passed and bequeathed it to me, and the automatic payments were already set up, so why change anything?" A few steps later, he confessed, "I could have cancelled it, but things were already looking dire."

"I totally understand. Coming here can feel like turning your back on the world. But let me assure you, Father, the world is beset by problems so large that individuals can do nothing about it. If you were out there, you'd just be another hungry mouth."

He grumbled without agreeing or disagreeing. "Instead I'm playing second fiddle to a minister whose net worth totalled more than my diocese's budget. Prosperity gospel my eye," he scoffed, then looked sidelong to me. "Ahem. Pardon me."

"I'll be discreet, Father," I grinned. We walked on, and I realized I had a rare opportunity to gain insight into another lodge. "What about Jameson?" I asked, with a sly enough smile to signal that I knew I was asking more than a mere poolie ought. "What's it like working for him? I got the impression the church services were his idea."

"He plucked Walter and I out of the labor pool and

put us in the lodge so that we could perform the services," Donovan said uncomfortably. "I tried to suggest we could share a suite, since they have two bedrooms, but Walter wouldn't hear of it."

"Are you sure it was Jameson who didn't want you working?" I mused. "Maybe Park didn't like the precedent set."

He exhaled through his nose. "The thought had occured to me. But it could have been Jameson just as easily."

"What's he like?"

Donovan scowled ahead, where the build site was coming into view. "I'll say this much. His wife didn't make it up the mountain. Too much exposure, caught something, ate something gone bad, I'm not sure. She died in quarantine, before I arrived. A month later, though, he told Walter and I that he was ready to marry again. And he'd picked out three lucky girls from labor pool to be his new wives. Because, as he pointed out, Solomon had many wives, so why shouldn't he?"

I stumbled to a stop. "The three girls he sat with during service? I thought they were his daughters."

"His daughters refuse to have anything to do with him or his church," the priest shrugged. "Can't say I blame them."

"Were the girls… forced?" I asked dreadfully, and put my feet into motion.

"Forced, no; coerced, yes," Donovan sighed. "It was their ticket out of labor pool. For themselves and their families. Their parents were put into suites. Although Jameson decided that splitting a suite into two bedrooms was reasonable for his in-laws."

We were within earshot of the build site. Teddy was already climbing out, my shovel still in his broad hand. I stopped a few yards away and extended my hand to the priest. "It was surprisingly nice to speak with you, Father."

He shook my hand with a smile. "Likewise, Miss Soza. But now I think you'd best get back to work."

Once the priest was gone, Teddy slapped the shovel into my hand. "You've got work to make up, Susan. Let's not make this incident worth reporting."

—

In her prior life before the refuge, Meliena Jones had been a trophy wife, and proud of it. Born the sixth child to struggling immigrants, Meliena knew the score from an early age: it didn't matter how hard you worked, it didn't matter how smart you were. If you had money, you got more money. And money bought everything else. No one worked harder than her father, who never had fewer than two jobs. Her

mother was brilliant–too brilliant for the corrupt kleptocracy that was her home country, from which she was a political refugee. She'd been so brilliant–and outspoken–that they would kill her if she returned.

Her parents implored her to apply herself to her studies, to get into a good college, to find a good career. Meliena had other plans. She knew she did not have her mother's genius. As much as she admired her father's endless work ethic, it intimidated and disgusted her, too. But she was pretty, she knew that much, and pretty girls had their own avenues to success. She got to work.

Meliena took three buses after school to get to the modeling agency and later the studios where their photo shoots took place. She shared part of her modeling income with her parents to help make ends meet, but she never told them how much she really made, either. She sequestered the rest away. When she graduated high school (barely) she did go to college – but only because the on-campus dorms were cheaper than anything else downtown.

She vacillated for a few years between two plans: find a well-connected frat boy with a silver spoon in his mouth and ride him into a life of leisure, or seek out an older gentleman, already established and

stable, who was in the market for a new, young wife. She played both angles while she treaded water at school and slowly made a name for herself as a model.

Some weekends she would go from a raucous basement rave on Friday night to an elegant mixer filled with politicians and lobbyists on Saturday. The first she had a standing invite to up and down fraternity row; the latter she was actually paid to attend, just to add her pretty face to someone's attempt to win the support of someone else.

It was at one of these well-heeled events where she met Jeremy Jones, and her lifelong plan came into focus. He was in manufacturing and finance, increasingly the latter over the former, and the politicians and magnates alike flocked to him in droves. He had three houses, a lemon yellow sports car, a yacht, and a small jet. He was recently divorced.

He was twice her age. She would be his third wife. None of that mattered. He was her ticket.

Meliena always imagined that she would string her quarry along for a while, drive him crazy by fanning and denying his desires, until he would confess he had to have her. Things moved faster than that, and not only because she had to outrun and outmaneuver a number of other ambitious young women with the same plan as her.

She flirted with Jeremy at two functions and finagled an invite to a third event he'd told her he'd be attending. He laughingly told her that they "had to stop meeting like this" and, to stop the streak, asked if she'd be his plus one at a wedding the next week. She laughed at his stale joke and accepted.

The wedding turned out to be in Fiji, and while he nobly reserved two hotel rooms, they only made use of one. She told him before they left for the airport that she had had an incredible time with him and hoped he wasn't about to dispose of her. She made him promise that he'd see her again when they got home. Two weeks later, he took her home after a night on the town. Two weeks after that she took up semi-permanent residence in his house.

She kept up her modeling and her classes for appearance's sake, worried that dropping them and making Jeremy her full-time occupation would scare him off. She did, however, direct her agent to aim for more chaste, classy, and refined jobs. Meliena had nailed 'fun and exciting;' now she had to shift into 'respectable marrying material.'

To keep up with Jeremy's occasional shop talk, she registered for Business Essentials and Introduction to Mandarin the next semester. When he spotted her carefully placed textbook, he asked if she would like

to join him on his next trip to Beijing, just as she planned. But he went further than that–he practiced pronunciation with her over dinner. He made her flash cards. He found her other textbook–not by her design–and offered to help her prepare for her midterm.

Meliena was taken aback by his recurring thoughtfulness. She knew he was a kind man–she had made sure of that long before flirting with him–but somehow she had never considered that his kindness would be applied to her. It had only ever entered into her calculations as a decreased chance that he would become demanding or violent (which he never did). It was with some shock that she realized that he respected her, not just wanted her, and that he wanted to support her in the choices she was making.

And so when Jeremy asked her over breakfast what she intended to do with herself once she completed her degree, she froze. Her planned answer–"I thought I'd look into charity work"–which would position her as both noble and in need of lifetime financial support, suddenly felt insufficient. It felt like a lie. And now Meliena realized that she respected Jeremy in return.

"You'll laugh," she warned him, and when he promised he wouldn't, she jumped in with both feet. "I want to be the wife of a powerful man. I want to

make him look good when I'm on his arm. I want to entertain his guests and charm his business partners, and every night I want to fuck him into the floor."

He proposed on the spot.

The wedding a year later could have been mistaken for a finance-and-government networking meeting (and Jeremy closed two deals at the reception and one more the day after), but Meliena would not have had it any other way. Her side of the aisle may have been a little sparser (and less well dressed) than his, but her guests were everyone she wanted to share the special day with.

She stopped modeling. She dropped out of school at the end of the semester. She settled into a life of socializing, home decor (his houses were all in desperate need), her rigorous beauty and fitness regimen, and high-profile networking events. She actually did get into charity work, as a natural extension of everything else. She and her foundation worked hard to increase access to healthcare for marginalized and vulnerable new mothers (like her mother had once been). And every night, she fucked Jeremy into the flor with practiced technique and genuine enthusiasm.

He brought her to the Tall Pines Refuge a handful of times for various seminars and to view the

property. I never crossed paths with the couple, but we must have dined at opposite ends of the Mess on more than one weekend. She never really understood the appeal or believed in the necessity of the place, but she trusted him. If he said it was a good idea, it must be.

Of course it turned out he was right, and the world started falling apart. The two of them were at an after hours mixer attached to a agribusiness and finance convention when rioters burst in from the street with baseball bats and handguns. The Joneses tried to run, tried to hide, but the mob was hunting the bankers they blamed for their lost jobs and hungry children. The police eventually regained control, but not before they had cornered Jeremy, broken his legs, and beaten him so thoroughly his liver failed.

At the hospital, the doctors explained that he needed a liver transplant to live. In all the mounting chaos, however, the federal organ donor network was in disarray. What would have been routine a year before was now an impossibility. He was going to die.

"And the worst part," Meliena told me, "is that just the week before I had realized: I had never fallen in love with Jeremy, but I had grown to love him. I told him so on his… on his death bed."

And he told her two things, in turn. First, that he

had loved her and had since he asked her to that wedding on Fiji; she had made him feel alive and coming home to her had been the best part of his every day.

But secondly, he insisted that she must not wait for him to die, which was going to take days if not weeks. He made her promise to go, as soon as possible, to the refuge. It wasn't safe to stay, and the way up the mountain was growing more dangerous each day.

So she left, as promised, the next day. They had made the trip enough times that she packed (for one), drove (without trading off shifts), and hiked (alone) from memory. She never stopped, not even for gas (the car was electric), not even for police lights, which probably avoided most of the obstacles on the road. She promised Jeremy that she'd come here, and only after she passed through the front gate did she fall to the ground and cry, sob, bawl.

Meliena hardly noticed the indignities thrust upon her through quarantine, barracks housing, and work detail. Sure, it was not what they'd been promised, but without Jeremy, any lesser deprivation seemed irrelevant. Her only difficulty was Sundays, when no one woke her up in the morning, no one told her where to go, no one told her what to do. She couldn't even sit outside the rolling garage door of the barracks

and stare off into the distant basin without someone trying to engage her in conversation.

By the time it was me disturbing her Sunday afternoon, Meliena had been drawn about halfway out of her shell. She supposed she had friends; at least, there were a few women she seemed to eat and work with more often than not. They would chatter around her, but she rarely contributed much to the conversation. What was there to say? She had been happy, and now she was not. The very idea that she might be happy again did not seem to occur to her.

I did not know what to do with or for the poor woman once I had her story (she had not once asked me anything about mine). In a better world, she might respond to therapy, if her loved ones could convince her to go. But in the refuge, with neither therapists nor loved ones, her future seemed bleak. Which scared me.

Meliena was an intelligent, capable, and above all very driven woman–her story made that eminently clear. She might now have no focus, but that hardly meant that she had also lost that drive. Eventually, something would bring her out of the morass of hopelessness that had claimed her. She would rise like a phoenix reborn.

But what could rouse her from that black pit? I

could think of nothing good that might do the job. The woman's natural beauty–obscured but not eradicated by poolie living and neglect–might draw the attention of someone with more desire than impulse control. That would end poorly.

Or if someone heard enough of her story (which she was eager to share with me, once asked; she hated the thought that Jeremy might be forgotten), they could dangle the possibility of her husband's miraculous survival in front of her. There was little that woman wouldn't do, I thought, for a reunion with her beloved.

I usually shared brief overviews of my one-on-ones with Maggie, and pointed her at potential prospects, encouraging her to get to know them as well. But I refrained from telling Maggie anything about Meliena for more than a week.

When I finally did mention her, I gave as truncated an account as I could. Meliena was just a trophy wife, I told Maggie, kicking myself for selling the woman so short. I said she could use a friend or four, but I didn't think she'd be much use for our network.

I didn't say: this woman is a bomb waiting for just enough jostling to explode. You could twist her head around to point her at any target you liked, Maggie, and you might just care about her little enough to do

just that.

## *10. Assault Vectors*

Meanwhile, Maggie and I continued to expand our fledgling network. I managed a one-on-one with another poolie every day or two, usually just chatting over work or at lunch. People leapt at the chance to tell their stories after weeks of being little more than a body forced into labor. Sharing histories and experiences felt like becoming human again. It took the barest nudge to get them started, and then the stories started flowing out.

Barry was a city comptroller and wild for civil war reenactment; he actually signed up for the refuge with other "soldiers" in his "unit." He wasn't sure if they didn't keep up with the subscription or if they just hadn't made it up the mountain once things went south. His wife blamed him for bringing their family to the refuge; it could not be any worse out there than it was in here, she insisted. He wasn't sure about that, but when I suggested that conditions inside the refuge

could be improved, he was all ears.

Felicity had always loved the mountains and living in "the bosom of nature's abundance." She'd signed on with the refuge as a sort of wilderness timeshare, letting her come camp and learn on weekends. Abernathy had been a big draw for her, and I'd crossed paths with her on many seminars and retreats. But at those events I hadn't learned that she practiced environmental law, operated a Clean the Bay non-profit, and had inherited one-third of a ubiquitous fast food chain along with her two brothers. They refused to buy her out, and so the trade in saturated fat fueled her efforts to clean up the rest of the planet.

Mischa spoke little English, and so most of our conversations went through his eight-year-old daughter Trina. As best I could tell, Mischa had acquired controlling interest in a number of oil fields, then banks, and eventually a television station. I was never quite certain how he had come to head up such an impressive business empire; before he was a mogul, his daughter explained, he had been "a soldier." But then he had run afoul of the powers-that-be. He liquidated what he could and fled his home country. Life as an international financier was harder—I got the impression that he had been losing money since he'd fled—but all that came to an abrupt end a

few months ago. He laughed as he explained that even though his subscription was an artifact of his refugee paranoia, in the end it had paid off.

Maggie found the one-on-ones harder to pull off, through some mix of inexperience and already burned bridges. People were less eager to trust her, knowing her own sordid history and predilection for talking like a caricature of Che Guevara. But she pushed past their suspicions of her ulterior motives and talked, sharing her own story as much as getting theirs. We shared notes and pointed each other to those poolies who showed the most potential for taking action. Maggie did her best, but she was always impatient.

"We've worked our way through half of the labor pool," she groused over the tub she was scrubbing. "When are we going to actually do something?"

"Half of Ponderosa's labor pool," I corrected mildly. We had swapped out parts of the water reclamation apparatus with spares and were now cleaning out the parts that had been in use for the past month. "At some point we'll need to figure out how to make contacts outside our lodge."

"Yeah, well maybe if we do something," Maggie repeated, "they'll take notice and come to us."

I transferred my tub into the rinse bin. "We do something public and more than just poolies will take

notice. Once the sweeties find out we're organizing, they will move to stop us."

"Bring it," she growled at the lime caked along the rim of a glass reservoir.

"These are the sweeties that walk around with guns on their hips, Maggie," I reminded.

"Those are for show," she sniffed. "Most of them couldn't hit a barn door."

I paused in my scrubbing. "It doesn't take a great amount of skill to fire into a crowd of people. And I think you underestimate how eager some of those sweeties are to use the guns they've been carrying around for months."

She waved her scrub brush. "So we do something not public. So they won't find out."

I watched her for a long moment, long enough that she felt my eyes on her and looked up. "Tell me what you're thinking about," I asked when our eyes met.

Maggie shrugged. "I don't know, I'm not the expert, here. A… rally? We all get together and see how many of us are sick of things and… I just think it would do us good. Right now we're all so isolated."

I exhaled, trying not to show my relief. I'd half expected her to suggest some sort of midnight sabotage–something violent and dangerous. In comparison, a rally was downright reasonable. "So a

meeting," I said, musing. At her nod, I moderated, "Not everyone we've spoken with, or even everyone we've flagged as potentials, are ready for that sort of commitment."

"So we just invite the ones who are ready."

I nodded thoughtfully. "We could do something like that. Just gather in one corner of the Mess some Sunday afternoon."

"Next Sunday afternoon," Maggie corrected. "This coming Sunday afternoon."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I doubt anyone will have prior commitments or schedule conflicts."

"We get together, we put names to faces for everybody else," Maggie said, riffing with growing excitement, "we tell some stories, air our complaints, maybe vent a little frustration, and… talk about a way forward."

That last set off my alarm bells. "A way forward?" I prompted.

"Stuff we can do," she answered readily. "I dunno, strike? Figure out how to target the worst of the sweeties, get them demoted to labor pool? It's happened before, we can make it happen on purpose. Or hell, figure out how to get our hands on some of those guns."

And there it was. "Maggie–" I started, exasperated,

and then realized I didn't know what to say next.

"You don't think we're going to need guns of our own at some point?" she challenged. "We won't change this place singing kum bay ya."

I held up a placating hand as I gathered my thoughts. "I am enough of a realist to acknowledge that it may come to violence," I admitted. "I hope it won't. I will always strive to find a peaceful solution. But you are right–at some point, we may need guns. But. We are not at that point yet. We are nowhere near that point yet. And stealing guns and hiding them is far more complicated and dangerous than we're capable of pulling off right now."

Maggie was quiet in response, intent on scrubbing. I couldn't tell if her scowl was for me or whatever she was trying to scrape off the inside of the tub.

"Can you imagine, how fucked we would be," I pushed, "if we made a mistake there? If we got caught? If somebody got shot?"

My co-conspirator reluctantly nodded. "I suppose. But what do we do in the mean time? How do we get to the point that we can start considering that kind of action?"

"Well we start with this meeting," I told her. "I think it's a great idea. You're right; we are isolated. Seeing that we're not alone will do us some real good. We

can compare notes and get a better idea of what's happening all around us."

"We're being worked like slaves by idiots masquerading as feudal lords," Maggie grumbled. "What's complicated about that?"

"Any system gets complicated when you look at it close enough," I told her, feeling like I was back in my classroom. I shook it off. "Like the cabins."

That got her attention. "What about the cabins?"

"We laid foundation the other day and I sunk the heating and cooling loop with the Director."

"Came down off his lofty perch, huh?"

I tipped my head side to side. "I got the feeling he gets pretty hands-on on a regular basis. It's not like we see how Golden Eagle works on the day-to-day."

"I can tell you, Beaver Lodge works exactly like we do, just with more pressure to squeeze performance out of labor pool." Then she waved her hands. "But you were talking about the cabins."

"Yeah, and the thing of it is," I went on, "those cabins aren't going to house a lot of people."

Maggie paused in her scrubbing. "Like how many?"

"It's hard to say," I admitted, "but they're not much bigger than a pair of suites. Maybe four bedrooms? If we put a family of four in each bedroom, we'd need to

build twelve cabins just for Ponderosa. Expand that to the whole refuge, that's sixty cabins. And it's not like the population actually breaks down into convenient four-person families like that. We'd probably need twice as many until it's actually families in bedrooms and not random groupings of people."

"Yeah, I think your boys are great and all, but I'm in no rush to make them roommates."

"So a hundred cabins?" I pressed on. "Even assuming we have the materials on-site and enough room for one hundred build sites–and I doubt that a great deal–it's taken Ponderosa six weeks to get one cabin half done and two more foundations dug. Even if we speed up with experience, that's at least a year for twelve cabins, assuming the other lodges are progressing like us. Take winter into account, and a conservative estimate says it's a year and a half until we have cabins for everybody."

"Mother fucker," Maggie breathed.

"Even if we get better and faster," I went on, "and this is still assuming we can dig up that many rocks and fell that many trees, it's at least a year before we're done. And the Hosts aren't stupid. They've got far more information than we do, and they can do math."

The woman scowled. "You're getting at something but I'm still reeling at a year of grueling labor."

"The Hosts know that the cabins won't solve the poolie housing problem. Not any time soon. So the question becomes: what is the actual purpose of the cabins building project?"

Maggie stared at me for some time before repeating herself: "Mother Fucker!"

Maggie tried to go back to scrubbing and found she couldn't. "I bet they're for the Hosts," she spat. "Have you seen the little cubbyholes they've got to live in?"

"If they were for Hosts, we wouldn't be building one for Abernathy," I pointed out. "He likes his cubbyhole, been living in it for years already. And besides, we're building three, and the other lodges are supposed to be ahead of us, so even more."

"For sweeties, then," Maggie revised without missing a beat. "Because the suites they're in aren't good enough for their delicate sensibilities."

I refrained from mentioning her own delicate sensibilities which she'd indulged in a lothario's suite for a few weeks.

"And when sweeties move into a cabin, that frees up a suite," she continued with the renewed vigor of fresh injustice. "Which the Hosts use as an incentive to keep us poolies in line. Favorites get promoted to the lodge. So poolies, then sweeties, then whatever we call the fucks in the cabins, and the Hosts on top.

They've got this whole caste system game nailed."

"I'm not sure they're that intentional about it," I moderated, even as I remembered Cole talking about "building culture."

"They're entirely intentional about this," Maggie insisted. "It's just like the empty suite in Beaver lodge."

I blinked. "The what, now?"

"The empty suite in Beaver," Maggie repeated, and actually started scrubbing again. "Have you not heard of this?" When I shook my head, she explained: "Clark keeps one of her suites empty, just waiting for the right subscribers to prove themselves worthy of it."

"Seriously?" I asked, incredulous.

Maggie snapped her chin up and down in one sharp nod. "I've seen it."

"And it's not… damaged, or its bathrooms' broken or something?" I suggested, groping for some reasonable explanation.

"Aw, aren't you cute, trying to find an excuse for them," she sneered. "No, Polyanna, it's a perfectly functional suite. I tried the taps, and…" She faltered for a moment, then pushed on through. "I can attest the bed works just fine, too."

Maggie fell silent after that, no doubt reliving old betrayals and recriminations in her head. I,

meanwhile, was trying to come to grips with a suite sitting empty in Beaver lodge while dozens of families slept in makeshift cots and hammocks just next door. A functioning shower. Space to stretch out, to feel comfortable, to feel human. All of it, denied to homeless refugees (what else were we?) to make us work harder. It was monstrous.

I set aside a clean tub and picked up the next one. "I'm starting to look forward to our little gathering, Maggie. Thank you for suggesting it."

I never told Maggie anything more about my interaction with Cole, about how I got him to talk. I didn't tell her about Aubrey, either, but there was little secret to keep, there, outside of whatever was in those vials. But I'd flirted with Cole and he'd responded. Somehow that felt more significant than running drugs for a sweetie I'd slept with months ago.

Did I hold my tongue about Cole because I feared that Maggie would want me to exploit that link with the Director of the refuge? Did I stay quiet about Aubrey because I knew Maggie would have nothing but disdain for an affair with a sweetie?

Or did I just want to keep those interactions to myself, a secret only for me to know–for me to mull over in my bunk at night?

Sometimes I wondered if I kept delivering

Aubrey's envelopes just for her perfume. Each time she gave me a handoff I would smell her for the rest of the day, as if I could turn around and she'd be there behind me. When she stepped close, the heady mix of that fragrance, her body heat, her breath, even the barest hint of her sweat in the summer heat… it overwhelmed me.

I told myself that I trusted her, in my more sober moments, that I knew she was a woman of principles and if she said it needed to be done, it did. But what did I know of her, really? Two nights of drinking wine on the Lodge balcony, chatting and flirting: that was all I had to go on, and in that moment most of my attention had been focused on oh-god-is-this-really-happening, not some inventory of her moral character.

But I did know Cole. Compared to my one weekend with Aubrey, I'd spent dozens working alongside Cole. An intense man, and a driven one–so driven, in fact, that he'd disregard the little problems until they turned into big problems. Reckless. Your typical man-with-a-vision who'll stop at nothing to see it come true. And this was the man whose eager smile and responsive chatter I was keeping to myself? Why?

In all the time I'd known him, over the course of years, he'd never made a move, never expressed

romantic interest in me. Had things changed, cooped up in the refuge for who knows how long, putting him on the prowl for companionship? Or had I, perhaps, imagined it all?

I was not young. Two grown boys in my wake, too. These were not the kind of things that men looked for, in my experience. If Jameson could marry the three prettiest girls in his Lodge, no doubt Cole could, too. For all I knew, Cole kept a rotation of sweet young things from Golden Eagle cycling through his bedroom.

Maybe I hadn't said anything about Cole because Maggie might laugh at the very idea I'd turned his head. And that laugh would shatter all of it, like a house of mirrors collapsing. If Cole couldn't possibly want me, neither could Aubrey. The only person who could want me was Arthur, and that for nostalgia more than anything else. More accurately, the sense that he'd had something taken away unjustly and he'd like it back, if only to prove that he'd never really lost it, never fumbled it, never screwed up.

Every once in a while, though, I'd catch Arthur looking me up, not possessively but with a familiar hunger in his eyes. It wasn't all nostalgia and wounded pride with him. And if Arthur wanted me like that, perhaps it was not impossible that Cole and

Aubrey might, too.

Which was the core of it, I realized: I kept these interactions to myself just to preserve the possibility of romance, that I might be wanted. Day to day, I was a dusty, dirty, achey, stinky mess, accounted as nothing more than a strong back and a pair of willing hands. Barely human. But if someone might think of me as something more… even the hope of it made me feel alive. Made me forget the grime and the stench. Kept me sane.

Even if it was the resident despot. Or some sort of drug-running rogue medic. For the sake of retaining my sanity and humanity, I'd take what I could get.

—

"Hey, we remember you!" cried one of two young women who dropped their trays onto the table and sat down opposite me. For a moment, I struggled to place them. One plump, blonde, and cheery; the other lanky, brunette, and also cheery. Neither could be more than twenty-five; I felt like I was back in the first few weeks of fall semester, trying to remember the names of new students. "From church a few weeks ago, right?"

"Oh, right, of course," I responded with a nod. They were the two girls from Gray Wolf Lodge who'd sat near me. "How goes your hunt for some nice

young men?"

They tittered at that, but the giggles died off quickly.

"Not so well," I observed.

"We are not the only applicants for the positions," the darker-haired one noted sourly. "And we're not sure the others are playing fair." She looked sidelong at her friend, who shared an aggrieved sigh with her.

"There are rumors," the other one explained, "that the Mountain Lion boys have a… secret hideaway somewhere in the refuge, where they…" She waved a dispirited hand.

"Apparently it's pretty seedy," her friend put in. "But it has a tatty old mattress, so it gets the job done."

I wrinkled my nose in sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that. Remind me your names? I'm Susan."

Rachel was the curvy blonde; Rebecca the brunette. "Thanks for letting us sit with you, by the way. We don't know a lot of people in third mess."

Making conversation, I asked why we had the pleasure of their company. "Oh, we were playing waitress for the Wolfpack while they had their–what was it–strategic planning meeting," Rachel said, and then giggled. "Not that I think that will happen again."

Her friend shared her amusement. "Did you see

Tzavaras's face?" she laughed. "She was so pissed."

My ears had immediately perked at 'strategic planning,' so I prompted the conversation along, hoping to steer it back towards what they might have overheard. "Do they usually have… waitresses for their meetings?"

Rachel shook her head. "No, it was some lieutenant's bright idea. He got his hands on some hooch, and wanted… well. I got the feeling he was hoping we'd wear less as we poured drinks."

Rebecca snorted. "Yeah. Because when I was packing to hike through the mountains to a secret summer camp to wait out the apocalypse, I made sure to grab my bikini."

"Well I did," Rachel said with a smile. "But mostly because my one-piece was dirty and I thought, you know, maybe swimming? Before we found out what it was really like."

I chuckled along with them, then applied a little pressure towards juicier details. "You said Tzavaras was angry. Did she just not want you two overhearing their bickering about poolie management?" I hoped, though, that there had been more sensitive information bandied about.

"Oh, no, that's not what pissed her off," Rebecca laughed. "She was upset that one of her guys wanted

us to be eye candy. Chewed him out for it but good, too."

My eyebrows lifted. "Is she… normally so… concerned?"

Rachel looked uncertain but Rebecca nodded eagerly. "Tzavaras has got our back. I mean, I just assume it's from being a lady in the military for so long, but she takes no shit on the misogyny front." Then she covered her lips with the tips of her fingers. "Oh, excuse my language."

Rachel winked conspiratorially across the table. "We may have… tested the quality of the hooch we were serving."

I laughed. "Any good?"

"Oh, it was awful," Rebecca giggled.

Rachel looked dubiously at her friend. "And stronger than it looked."

"Tzavaras okay with drunk soldiers at her strategy meeting?" I prompted with a smirk which I hope invited gossip.

Rebecca snorted. "I think that's the only reason she let us stay," she tittered.

"I'm sure they were only talking about who digs what hole, anyway," I said. I wasn't sure if I was more amused or frustrated at how diffident the two tipsy ladies were proving to be.

"No, they were all looking over maps and talking about–what was it–assault vectors. Seizing targets."

"Force multipliers," the other put in. "Site B."

A scowl knit itself across my brow. "Maps of the refuge?" I asked, trying to tamp down my instant suspicion, or at least make it less visible. Was Tzavaras planning some sort of coup?

"No, road maps, city maps," Rebecca shook her head. "Not here. Other places."

I frowned. "Were they… hypothetical war games and the like?"

Suddenly grave, Rachel shook her head. "No, they were very serious about how much risk they were willing to take for each target."

"So they're planning raids," I concluded soberly.

For a brief moment, Rachel met my eye and I could feel the full, terrible weight of the revelation. The Wolfpack weren't happy guarding the henhouse.

Rebecca, missing the gravity between the two of us, shrugged. "When all you've got is a hammer, right? And Tzavaras is in command of a whole bag of hammers." A beat later, she realized what she'd said and dissolved into giggles.

"If they piss someone off and lead them back here–" I said to Rachel fearfully. She only shrugged helplessly. As if we didn't have enough to worry

about inside the refuge, now I could contemplate the spectre of raids against a poorly-selected target, more capable or more vindictive than they appeared, escalating to some sort of petty war.

Not to mention the sickening prospect that all our work would be supporting a band of plundering bandits. A voice in the back of my head sourly noted that we'd jokingly called the refuge proto-feudal, and now we'd achieved full bloom.

The two women had gleaned no further details, so we moved on to other, less distressing topics. Almost out of habit, I fell into the ebb and flow of a relational meeting, interviewing the both of them.

Despite appearances, Rachel and Rebecca were not old friends who had come to the refuge together. Rachel was 19, fresh from taking a year off to backpack around Europe–a trip funded by her stock broker parents. She had planned to attend her mother's alma mater in the fall, but wasn't very enthusiastic about the prospect. Those plans had obviously been cancelled in the panicked flight to Tall Pines.

Rebecca, by contrast, was a university sophomore studying anthropology and dance ("because why have one useless major when you can have two?"). Her boyfriend had insisted on bringing her to the refuge

when his parents decided it was time for the family to bug out of civilization. They did not have a spare subscription for her; it was a terrible gamble that could have left her abandoned outside the gate. But the boyfriend hadn't made it–gunned down before they ever reached the mountain–and so Rebecca took his berth.

The two met in the Gray Wolf labor pool and latched on to each other immediately. It was easy to see why: Rachel looked up to Rebecca's relative maturity while Rebecca relied on her friend's familiarity with the refuge and the refugee elites who populated it. (Even tipsy, Rebecca had carefully deflected any questions about her family's wealth growing up.) They served as each other's bulwark against the refuge's sometimes incomprehensible yet ever-present dangers.

I heard myself say, "Hey, after lunch on Sunday, there's a bunch of us meeting up here in the Mess. Just to… chat, hang out, maybe vent our gripes to sympathetic ears. If you wanted to join us?" Why was I inviting them to the networking event? Had I got caught up in the rhythm of the relational meeting and invited them by reflex?

They hardly struck me as the type to take action, but rather the type to roll over and vainly try to follow

whatever rules were inflicted on them. Perhaps they'd cry to each other in a weak, private moment about how it was all so hard. But stepping up to change the rules themselves must have seemed as alien to them as bucking down to honest labor would seem to Bukhari.

Perhaps it was their youthful vitality (how much did I miss having students to inspire me!). Did I unconsciously detect some hidden reservoir of determination beneath Rebecca's obfuscated past? Or most likely, I told myself, it was that strength they clearly gave each other, the strength to persevere against an incoherent but plainly hostile world. That was something that our fledgling network could use.

Both of the lit up like lightbulbs at the invitation. "I'll bring my guitar!" Rachel promised, and before I could ask how she had come to possess one, they rose to leave. "It was really nice catching up with you!" they smiled, and then disappeared into the press of poolies filing out the doors.

What had happened? It felt like my head was spinning. I chuckled at myself and downed the rest of the water in my mug. Young people.

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