



TALL
PINES
UNDERGROUND

a novel by
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13. A Welcome Tour for the Unwelcome

Bukhari's displeasure at tutoring me disappeared as soon as we started up the hill towards the Mess. "Okay," she told me, "if we play this right, we've got a chill day today."

"As opposed to the normally grueling day of a sweetie?"

She grinned, ignoring the jibe. "We give Teddy the job furthest from the Mess, that's probably lumber. With Teddy in charge, you only have to walk out there two, maybe three times the whole day."

"He cracks the whip for us, how convenient."

"Teddy is a self-cracking whip, he's marvelous," she gloated. "I try and get him on my team as often as possible. But that leaves two more teams, collecting rocks and milking goats. Rock crew is shitty work that nobody likes to do, so you have to yell at them all day long. I swear they stop working when you're not watching."

"I've never seen a work crew stop when unobserved," I told her with a slow shake of my head. "We— I mean, they... poolies know their work is going towards expanding housing, and everybody wants that."

"The Revolution requires every comrade's labor!" Bukhari chortled. "Good, good. Hey. I bet you know what all the poolies say behind our backs, huh?"

I made a show of scoffing. "Poolies work too hard all day for gossiping afterwards. It's work, eat, sleep, and little else." Certainly they aren't organizing an underground resistance movement, centered around my friends.

Bukhari seemed to take the answer at face value. "The milking crew is tricky," she went on, and frowned down at the chalkboard tablet with our list of names. "It's chasing down goats and trying not to trip over their shit, and the animals hate getting milked, and yet some of the poolies really seem to like the job. Working with animals, I guess."

"Well why don't we ask for volunteers?"

"Ha!" the woman laughed, explosively loud. "That's a slippery slope no one wants to go down. Cause nobody wants to break rocks. Nobody wants to dig walipinis. Or, I mean, I'm sure a handful do, but not as many as we need. If we let poolies pick their jobs, nobody would do the shit work that's absolutely necessary."

"There's... ways of managing that," I said, my hands grasping at empty air in front of me as if the ways could be picked like fruit. "I was an economist."

Bukhari shook her head. "Poolies do what sweeties tell them to. It's the only way we're going to get this place to work. It sucks having to yell at people all day, but at least its better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"Getting yelled at," Bukhari grinned at me. "Anyway."

She waved at the chalkboard. "We put three poolies on milking duty and we tell them that they should be able to milk all thirty goats by the end of the day. They'll think they can do it by lunchtime, but they'll play along cause they think they'll be able to slack off. Then about the time they get to twenty, they'll realize they don't know which ten of the goats they haven't milked yet, and so the rest of the day they're chasing down and trying to milk dry goats. They get a little desperate near the end, but they'll probably pull through."

"That's... quite a detailed prediction."

She shrugged. "I've watched work crews tackle the job dozens of times. Two poolies can't wrangle and milk. Four or more poolies can manage the herd well enough that they don't lose count and then they're done by lunchtime. I'm telling you, three poolies is the right number."

I didn't respond at first. I'd milked the goats a few times, in work crews of various sizes. Each time we'd paced ourselves to milk all the goats within the time we had, not to mention each goat really needed to be milked twice, and they were usually eager to get milked, anyway. You didn't need to count or manage the herd, not that Bukhari seemed to know that.

I couldn't tell if Bukhari's haphazard description of the work detail dated back from the earlier days of the refuge or she'd just constructed the story in her head to fit her prejudices. Nor was I sure if I wanted to correct her either way. "So how often do we check on them?" I asked instead.

"If we check in with Rock crew and Goat crew on the way out to Logging crew and then again on the way back, that should do," she answered, calculating. "So two check-ins on Teddy's logging operation, four each on rock-breaking and goat-milking. Which is maybe an hour in the morning and an hour after lunch. Leaving us about six hours to ourselves. Not bad."

"Is that... normal?" I asked incredulously. "We seriously work just two hours a day? What do you do to fill the rest of the time?"

Bukhari looked over the tablet of names. "Well if Sam here is willing, I'll take him off rock-breaking duty on our second check-in, escort him to the lodge, and have him fuck the living daylights out of me."

My stomach lurched. "And that level of coercion doesn't... bother you? I mean, does Sam

feel like he can say no?"

"I'm not a fucking rapist, Soza," Bukhari spat. "I make sure they're into it first. And most men are. Horny fucks."

I opened my mouth to ask how she "made sure," then thought better of it. I let her keep talking—apparently she was evaluating Sam for a longer-term assignation, but wasn't convinced he had the requisite "staying power." Luckily we reached the Mess before she got into specifics.

A few poolies were already milling around on the deck of the Mess, waiting for work crews to form up. Among them paced Teddy, like a gas giant planet surrounded by moons. Bukhari beelined towards him.

"Teddy, you're with me today," she cried, all smiles. "I've got a screwy-ass assignment—three teams—and I'm not going to manage without you."

The big man frowned and held out his hand for her tablet. "Three teams?" he echoed. "Why?"

"I'm showing my apprentice how it's done," she said, waving back at me.

Teddy looked up and spotted me for the first time. His face immediately folded into a flat scowl. "I see. I guess Miss Soza hasn't been around long enough to see all the inner workings?"

I was about to protest, point out that I'd taken a shift at all the work assignments at least once and what's more I'd attended the seminar weekends for literally years. But Bukhari spoke first.

"Don't be unkind, Teddy. I think the Abernathies want her to see the work details from the other side. Something that even you haven't seen, big guy."

The Hawai'ian grunted instead of answering, and I could see the source of his displeasure clearly. "You wanted the next promotion to sweetie, didn't you, Teddy?" The words leapt out of my mouth before I could consider whether they should be spoken aloud.

He lowered the chalkboard, which looked minuscule in his massive paw. "With respect, Miss Soza, I've been busting my ass for exactly that since I got here. Since before you were here."

I nodded with all the sympathy I could muster for my former taskmaster. "It's not fair. It's nowhere near fair," I told him earnestly. "Nothing inside these walls is fair."

"Hey now, enough of that," Bukhari interjected. "We've got work crews to organize. Who do you want to take logging, Teddy?"

The big man looked over the list, but not before regarding me for a long moment, uncertainly. He picked a few names and noted that Gini had a talent with the goats, and enjoyed

the work, to boot.

"Good to know," my tutor nodded. "Can you take your crew out to the cut line and get started? We'll be by to check on you before lunch."

"Sure thing, Miss Bukhari. Miss Soza." And with that, he ambled off to collect his lumberjacks.

"Didn't David list which poolies were assigned to which tasks?" I asked. "Teddy just pulled his crew from all three groups."

"It's not like David's going to find out we rearranged things a little," came the defensive answer. "Besides, Teddy knows better who's going to do better logging than David. Teddy's out here every day. David's cooped up in the lodge office with daddy."

Bukhari then proceeded to demonstrate how to gather one's work crew from the stream of poolies flowing out of the Mess. This mostly consisted of shouting a good deal and then relying on the poolies to shuffle themselves into groups. I tried to recall how many mornings I had heard my name called by the day's sweetie overseer. At least half the time it was another poolie who'd helpfully pointed me in the direction of whoever had shouted my name.

What a mess of wasted effort, topped off by Bukhari confiding, "You can see how they start the day off dragging their feet and acting like they can't hear you. Expect that all day long."

Eventually we assembled our two teams and led them out of the post-breakfast chaos. First we dropped the majority at the upper riverbed along with a tool cart, and then escorted three poolies to the goat paddock.

The refuge kept fifty-odd goats, most of them does. They ate table scrapes and kitchen waste, turning that into milk, manure, and baby goats in the spring. Abernathy had tried for years to turn their milk into cheese and yoghurt, to better preserve it, with little success. That became a moot point once the refuge locked down, however. The overbooked human population used up every ounce of the goat's dairy production every day. There was never anything left to preserve.

Their paddock was remarkable only in its size, encapsulating a broad meadow some distance from the refuge's main loop. The fence ran just inside the surrounding tree line, and the goat shelters all bore green roofs, making the whole affair overlookable from the air. The goats preferred the shade, and so congregated on whichever side of the paddock offered it. Over the course of the day they would slowly migrate from east to south to west.

"Are you... familiar with this detail?" I asked Miranda as we circled around the fence towards the gate. "I'm still hazy on whether you ever supervised labor."

"I only played taskmaster a couple times," the ex-sweetie answered easily enough. "Never for this detail. But. I did milk the goats on a couple weekends. And my aunt actually had a vanity farm where we spent summers when I was a kid. So I think I'll be okay." She flashed me a brilliant smile that had to be ninety percent bravado.

I put a gentle hand on her upper arm to slow her down, pulling her back from the trudging line of the work crew. "Miranda, I wanted to... talk with you about my taking your place."

She watched the rest of the crew proceed onward from under a cocked eyebrow. "What about?"

"Well I'm sure you know that I—" I started, frowning. "Of course I wasn't involved in the decision to reassign you, and I'm so sorry that you and your son lost your suite..."

She waved a hand to stop me from floundering further. "Listen. No hard feelings. You had nothing to do with it and you couldn't give me back the suite if you wanted, anyway. Besides, it's my stupid fault. I deserve this."

"Nobody deserves this," I corrected without thinking.

"I got two people killed and half a dozen injured," she said, cocking her head as if I was willfully ignoring obvious facts. "I'll do my time busted down to poolie, and in a few months I'll win my way back into the lodge again."

I must have looked at her like she had lost her mind. "You... you think that's likely? For you to go back up, somebody else has to go down."

She sniggered. "You kidding? Have you met the Ponderosa sweeties? Buncha slacker prima donnas who'll do anything to avoid anything that even smells like work or responsibility. It's only a matter of time before one of those losers fucks up. And Abernathy's under strict orders not to let things slide any more."

"Hey Soza! What's the hold up?" shouted the closest slacker prima donna from inside the paddock. "We've got a time table!"

Miranda sneered at Bukhari, at a far enough distance the latter wouldn't see. "Hell of a tutor Joe gave you."

"She's a fun one," I answered absently. The both of us started walking towards the gate. "What do you mean, Abernathy's under strict orders?"

But the woman only shrugged. "Not my place to tell tales about the conversations of my betters," she said airily. I immediately remembered Cole standing over her inside the gate, whole body tensed livid, shouting for Abernathy. "Just watch yourself, okay? I want you down the hall

when I get back to the lodge. We can have movie nights and talk about boys."

And then we were at the gate, and Miranda was ambling after a nanny goat who wasn't sure about getting milked by strange hands.

Bukhari appeared next to me. "Now off to the cut line, back here for a check in, and then I am going to collect some ass."

—

I didn't see Maggie except in passing until Saturday, when she was assigned to my team cleaning out the water treatment building. When we gathered up outside the Mess that morning, she wouldn't meet my eye. Attempts at conversation were met with noncommittal responses. Finally I pulled her outside, away from the rest of the work crew.

"Is there a problem?" I demanded, immediately regretting my tone. I suddenly realized I was hurt by her brusqueness, that I hadn't noticed that she'd become a friend. I pinched the bridge of my nose. "That came out wrong."

"What, like if there were a problem, my acknowledging it would make it my fault? Wrong like that?"

"Not my intention," I sighed. "It's just... you seem standoffish today. Like you're mad at me."

"Should I be mad at you?" she shot back. "Because I can't tell. You said we were in this together, but the first chance you got to jump ship, you did. You left us in the dust."

"Nothing about my goals have changed," I insisted. "I am just as dedicated to fixing this place today as when we first interviewed each other."

"Yeah, looking out on our poor, unfortunate situation from your suite window," she sneered.

I shook my head. "Maggie, it's not like that. I have the boys to think about, and I can do more good as... as a sweetie."

"You'll be a kind and benevolent slavemaster?" she asked with mock sweetness. "Give me a break. You switched sides."

"Maggie, there are no sides," I groaned. "Everybody loses out in this system, trust me. You should see the sweeties, they're just as scared as the poolies—"

"I've seen the sweeties, I lived with them for sixteen days, remember? Longer than you have," she spat. "I don't care how paranoid they are up in their lodges, they're still cracking the

whip over our backs at the work sites every day."

"I'm not trying to equate their experiences with yours," I protested weakly.

"Then stop. Are we done? I've got work to do."

But we both knew she couldn't leave without my permission. "I'm saying," I grated, "it's in the sweetie's best interests to fix this place, too. So even if I had changed sides, I'd still want to work with you."

"Yeah well don't plan on it," she snarled. "And don't try to join us in the Mess tomorrow afternoon. You're not welcome."

"What?" I gasped, dumbstruck.

"We still get that freedom, right?" Maggie sneered again. "One day a week we don't have to put up with sweeties telling us what to do."

The pit of my stomach was trying to drill down into the ground. "Maggie," I protested, "we started that group together. They're my friends."

"Yeah, we're not so sure about that anymore." Her eyes slitted. "Samantha thinks you brought us together to round up dissidents. That now you're a sweetie, you can turn us in to win points. Or you already have, and that's why you got a suite."

"That's ridiculous," I breathed, unbelieving. The woman was always skittish about organizing, but I didn't think she was this paranoid. "The meeting was your idea." I waved at the wall behind Maggie. "You suggested it to me in this very building."

But the woman only folded her arms and pursed her lips.

"Maggie, you could tell them," I insisted. "The meet up was your idea."

"Was it?" she challenged me, eyes steely. "I was new to organizing and you were filling my head with new ideas all day every day. It'd be pretty easy for you to get me to make the obvious suggestion."

My jaw dropped open. "You don't believe that," I whispered, half-stating, half-asking.

She shrugged again, as if she didn't care either way. I saw a flash of Maggie's old demeanor, the high-stakes business negotiator, the shark among sharks. "I'm not sure it matters what I believe, Miss Soza."

"Maggie, don't be like this," I pleaded. "You can trust me."

But she slowly shook her head. "No I can not. We can not." Then she softened, just barely. "It's too damn dangerous to trust you."

—

It wasn't my first breakfast at First Mess, but probably within the first week, that Charity Park sat down across from me. The boys had already migrated away to eating with their peers (or sleeping through breakfast entirely), and as I was not as quick as teenagers to find my own peers, I was sitting alone.

"May I sit here?" she asked first, and I had to rouse myself from my thoughts to look up and answer. But the only thing I saw at first was a field of soft orange fleece: the jacket she was wearing. My jacket.

I shook my head and forced myself to look her in the eye. "Yes, of course," I stammered, pulling my own tray needlessly closer and gesturing to the empty space across the table.

She gave me a generous smile as she sat. "You seem a little flustered. Everything okay? I'm Charity."

"Susan." I plastered on a very fake smile. "No, you just... startled me a little," I lied, making more deliberate eye contact.

"That crazy church lady is sitting across from you," she warned with a smirk. "Or that Korean lady. That can be a shock around here."

I choked on fake laughter. "Oh no, hardly, not that," I assured her, a little too hastily.

Charity unfolded a napkin across her lap and watched me, bemused. "I somehow doubt you're still reeling from the incredible honor to eat with we lofty sweetsies."

My chuckle in response was at least a little more genuine. "No, I got over that pretty quickly."

"Well good," she answered with more than casual emphasis. "We're all in the same boat, here. No need for silly pretentions."

I nodded, a little uncertainly. "I couldn't agree more."

She settled into her breakfast, but a bite later returned to the topic. "So what is it? I feel like I'm putting you off, Susan, and the last thing I want is to make you feel uncomfortable."

I looked her in the eye. "If I answer, I may make you uncomfortable," I warned, but she dismissed the very idea with a tiny shake of her head. I took a deep breath. If she wanted to be

adamant, I'd be transparent. "You're wearing my fleece."

"Your fleece?" she echoed, and splayed her hand across her soft and warm chest.

I gestured to the clothing in question. "It was confiscated when we went through quarantine. A week later you were wearing it." I paused a beat, then added, "It's my favorite jacket."

The woman blinked once, twice, then smiled. "Well of course it is, it's a fabulous jacket." And then without a moment's further hesitation, she pulled the zipper open and shrugged it off her shoulders. "Here, you should have it back."

I opened my mouth to protest, but instead cleared my throat. "Thank you," I murmured as she pushed the fluffy lump of outerwear across the table.

"Well thank you for letting me borrow it, if that's the right word. It isn't." She laughed, self-indulgently, trying to recognize the awkwardness of the situation and dispel it at the same time. "Walter and I did not pack very well," she explained. "I didn't realize how cold the mountain air could get in the evenings. He found the fleece for me in storage, and he knows I do like that color."

I didn't know how to answer that, whether to accept this non-apology for stealing my jacket or to insist that she must have known where it had come from. Or question how this conversation would have gone if I were still a poolie. I heard myself say, "You won't be cold?" so apparently I had decided to play polite. Something about Charity seemed to encourage it.

She waved a hand. "There are other jackets." And there certainly were—other jackets taken from other poolies. I pulled my jacket back over my shoulders, feeling distantly guilty at the familiar fit. I knew too many poolies who wore two or three thin shirts at a time to get through the morning without shivering.

I caught a faint whiff of some floral soap or perfume she must have worn once.

"I've asked around about you," she was saying, with that self-depreciating smile again. The smile acknowledged the absurdity of her words while inviting me to take her innocence at face value. Making conversation. "You have two boys?"

"Eighteen and fifteen. Nearly sixteen," I answered.

She blew on her instant coffee. "Well that's a blessing," she murmured. "I'm always glad to hear a family got into a suite and not some random singleton. Which is not to say they don't all deserve a comfortable bed, of course, but I do feel we should see to our youngest first." She smirked. "All those twenty- and thirty-something singles can put up with dorm life for a few months. Privacy isn't something they really need if they're living right."

It had been a few years since I spoke the evangelical dialect of implication and unspoken assumptions, but Charity's cant was familiar. My mother and her friends spoke it fluently, communicating a boatload of judgment using words that could later be dismissed and disavowed as innocent, friendly, and unfailingly polite. I merely smiled at the seeming non sequitur. "Do you have kids?" I asked instead.

"We did" she answered, with the sharp, compartmentalized sadness of a long-practiced answer. "We lost our Luke about a decade ago."

"I'm so sorry," I said, automatically but no less honestly.

She smiled gratefully, a gesture as sharp and practiced as her last answer. "I try to fill that void with caring for other people's children, as best I can. Walter and I host four little ones in the second bedroom of our suite. At least it's warm and safe, you know, and they see their parents at dinner, so they get that parental time. In addition to what Walter and I can provide, of course."

For the life of my I couldn't figure how to ask if the parents had willingly handed over their children without implying they hadn't. Something else to seek out third party verification over. I hoped that Charity really was acting as altruistically as she claimed. "That's very kind of you," I said instead.

She shrugged. "We do what we can, you know?" I nodded and smiled—there wasn't much to argue about there—but she wasn't done. "That's our role. Your new role, as a sweetie."

"Is it?" I asked, allowing her to elaborate. My rusty evangelicalese said this was what she'd approached me to talk about in the first place.

"It's the price we pay for our comforts, our private suites, all our privileges," she told me, voice aimed directly between rueful acknowledgement and earnest nobility. "We have to be examples to the rest of the refuge. Show them compassion and sympathy, demonstrate what good, honest living looks like, so they can follow suit." She smiled over her mug, almost sadly. "It's the only way we'll make it through these dark times."

How close, I mused to myself, and yet so far from anything I could agree with. At least Charity recognized her good fortune—I'd seen too many sweeties simply accept their status as deserved. But the pastor's wife felt as if she had to pay for that good fortune with good behavior, as if such an act would balance the books and justify her suite.

But how to respond? How to acknowledge her almost-but-not-quite-there philosophy without shaming its inadequacies? I smiled, I nodded. I told her, "It's so refreshing hearing someone actually recognize that their position as a sweetie affords them privilege and power." But I had already, immediately screwed up; Charity actually twitched at my last word.

"Oh, I don't know about power," she demurred. "That's the Hosts, God bless them. They've

got the power, and thank God, because I couldn't imagine the responsibility of running this place and keeping us all safe."

All at once, I recalled the ladies around my mother's kitchen table, the quiet, pious self-defeatism, the adamant helplessness they espoused. I imagined Charity taking a seat with them and reaching across the table to help to snap peas.

Charity did not—perhaps could not—see her position and all her privileges as power. She refused to see herself as having power over others. And with that blindness came the inability to use that power to lift up the less fortunate. The inability to see her responsibility to do so.

As long as she believed herself powerless, she would never be responsible for using that power. And if she never felt that responsibility, she could never fail to live up to it. She could remain forever innocent: acting good, behaving good to soothe her conscience, but never doing good. Never challenging the system that gave her all these comforts and privileges in the first place.

"Well then here's to the Hosts," I lifted my cup. "Defenders of us all." It was snide, but with as much irony as Charity packed into her conversation, I doubted she'd even notice.

"Exactly," she agreed with a cheery smile. "And with ladies like us supporting them, keeping things civil inside the walls, I think we'll all be... very safe and very comfortable, for a very long time."

The conversation shifted to lighter matters as we ate. She rattled off the names and ages of all the children in Mountain Lion, along with compact descriptions of each, and mock-guiltily confessed which were her favorites. I assured her that we all had favorites when it came to other people's children, and felt just slightly guilty that I couldn't name the kids in Ponderosa. If anybody needed an extra eye on their safety, it was our kids.

"I do worry about little Mattie and Jean," Charity said, her voice dropping just enough volume to signal an intimate confidence. "Their father seems to have a different lady friend every week, plucked out of the labor pool like... apples from the produce section."

I nodded slowly. "I've been a little... concerned about similar relationships," I admitted. "The power difference between sweetie and poolie makes me wonder if the poolies ever feel comfortable saying no."

Charity bobbed her head. "And how confusing must it be for the children? They need a proper mother, not a steady stream of... well. As you say, they may not feel like they can say no, so I'm not about to cast aspersions on their characters. I place the blame on the father. He should know better."

Once more I found myself unsure of how to push back against the wave of Charity's

presumptions. "Well I do think that single parents can raise their children just fine without pairing up—" I started.

"Well of course," she agreed immediately, backpedalling. Was she testing me? "And of course I'm sure you do a fine job with your boys. I don't mean to imply otherwise. But it's... it's a temporary situation, right?" She smiled at me indulgently. "Not to be vulgar, but you want someone to share your bed, right? Share your life, your daily victories and challenges?"

I actually felt myself blush. "Well that would be nice," I agreed, and then nodded more affirmatively. No need to softpedal. "I mean, I do. Want that. But in my case, that happening before the boys are grown... seems unlikely. Especially in this place."

"I don't know," Charity demurred, sipping at her tea. "Walter's officiated eight weddings since we got here. Even in a place like this, there's still the chance for happily ever after."

I bit back on the impulse to ask if Walter would marry my girlfriend and me. It would be unfair to hold her accountable for her husband's homophobia, after all. I also shelved away the fact that when I thought of my fictional girlfriend, Aubrey's face appeared in my mind's eye.

"Well," I said instead, "let's just say it's not a high priority for me right now."

"No stepping out with the lads?" she asked, tone light and teasing.

I smiled at that, for reasons she wouldn't understand. Smiled because she wouldn't understand. "No, no plans on being a Lothario," I said. "Lotharia? Although I suppose it's a specific character, so it keeps the 'o' ending. I think it's a character. From a play?" I realized I was babbling. "It's so weird living without wikipedia on hand to check everything whenever you like, isn't it?"

A cloud of confusion momentarily passed over her face. "Oh, like on a phone?" she asked a moment later, and pasted a smile on her face. "I'm afraid I never figured out how to make my phone do that. I think we're all better off without such distractions."

Right, I thought but did not say. Better off without the distraction of facts.

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