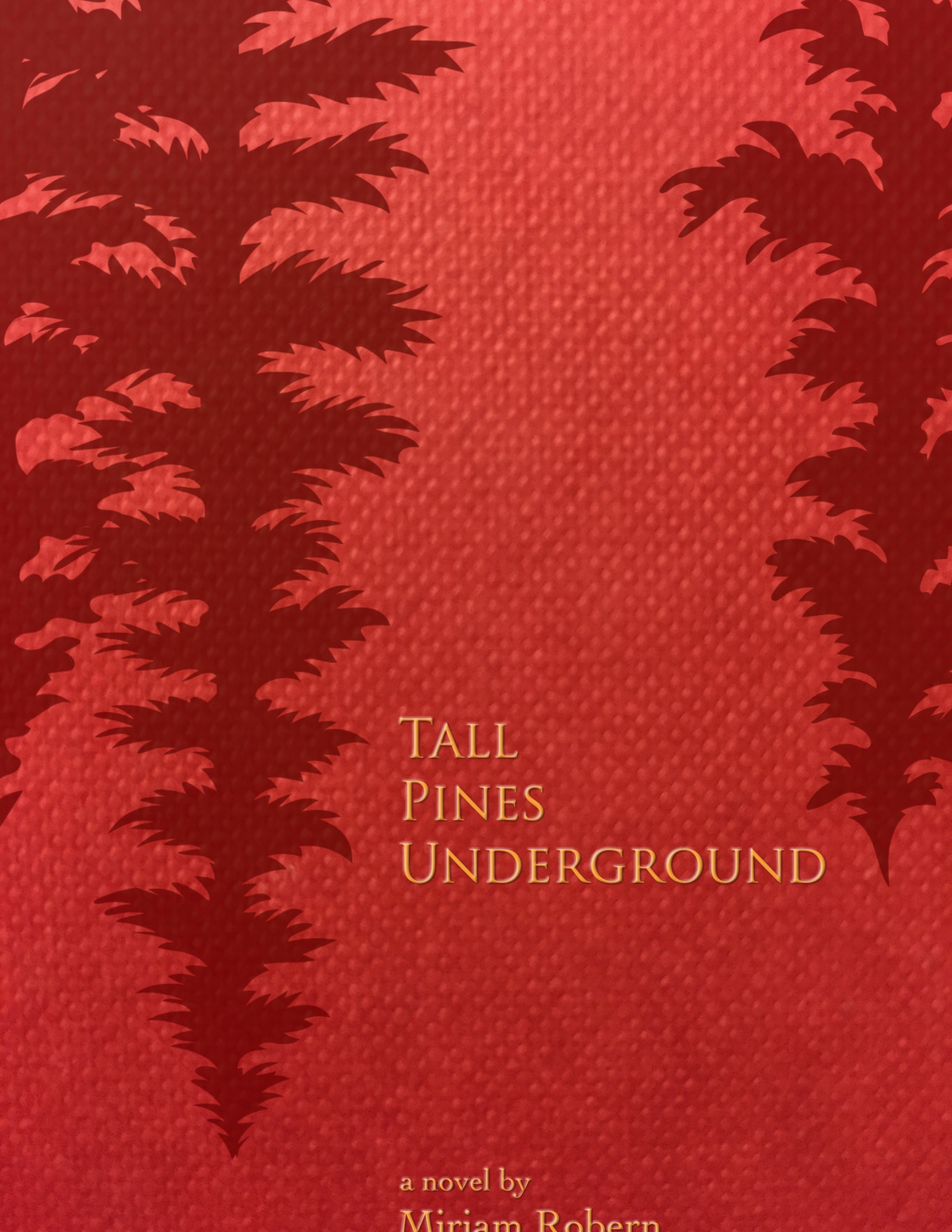
Tall
Pines
Underground
a novel by
Miriam Robern

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.

11. The Inaugural Meeting of the Tall Pines Underground

"Is anyone else kinda freaked out about just being here?" asked Samantha Jensen. "If they find out–I mean, if they think we're doing something that we shouldn't be–" She turned her pale face to the bay windows, to where Cole's pillory still stood, now empty.

"To anybody else," I told her, trying to sound both perfectly calm and perfectly confident, "we just look like a little knot of friends sitting and talking in the Mess."

I turned my calm, confident smile across the gathered friends sitting along both sides of the long table. Maggie sat opposite me, eyes fierce with excitement at finally bringing so many people in our network face-to-face. Next to her sat Barry, whose facial hair was already beginning to resemble the civil war officers he used to impersonate in reenactments. Then came Felicity, who somehow always looked clean and fresh despite taking weekly showers like the rest of us.

At the end sat the Jensens, Steven and Samantha, who I had not expected to turn up, especially as a pair. I had mentioned the meeting to Steven without enthusiasm, angling for his disinterest and hedging that, if he somehow found out later, he wouldn't feel left out because he had known. Instead he brought his wife, something of an unknown quantity to all of us.

Opposite the Jensens sat Mischa and his solemn-faced granddaughter Trina, there to dutifully translate for him. George, sitting next to her, had tried to goad a smile from her to no avail. His own daughters, about the same age, played under the watchful eye and half-listening ear of his wife Gini, one table over.

Hank had planted himself at the midpoint of the table, intent on making this meeting a success, even if he wasn't quite sure how. He was quick to listen, at the very least, but by the way his whole body leaned forward, it was plain his top priority was getting something–

anything–done before dinner.

Rachel and Rebecca had sat down next to me. Unsurprising since I was the only face the Grey Wolf girls knew. They were all smiles and excitement, eager to make new friends. Rachel had brought a guitar as promised. I wasn't sure whether to wonder if they thought this was some kind of summer camp or to try and puzzle out how a poolie had kept her hands on a piece of personal property.

"If any sweeties look suspicious," the young woman spoke up, and patted the six-string behind her affectionately, "we can sing some camp songs to throw them off."

For a moment I considered the possibility that she had brought the thing entirely for that purpose–as cheery-faced cover for potential sedition. Just how wily was this girl?

"I don't think we're doing anything wrong," Steven told the group, but primarily his wife. "Like Susan said, we're mostly here just to… get to know each other, right?"

I nodded. "It's my hope that the primary takeaway here is that we learn each other's names and faces, so we know there are sympathetic allies nearby, working alongside us, eating one table over at the Mess, sleeping two rows down in the barracks. Although not that last bit for the two of you," I added with a nod to Rebecca and Rachel. "In fact, I'd like to talk with you about branching out into Grey Wolf at some point this afternoon."

The young women smiled at that and started to agree when Steven interrupted.

"And that's what I'm saying right? There's nothing wrong with that." He looked up one side of the table and down the other. "Nobody's said that we can't do that."

"Steven," I cut in with as much professional classroom authority as I could muster. I paused a moment to get his full attention. "Right now we are networking. But our goal is to change how things work around here. And at some point, we will hit resistance to that."

"If they are smart," piped up Trina's little voice, her grandfather speaking quietly to her in his native tongue, "they will be looking for poolies trying to organize, so that they can stop us."

"So then maybe what we do," suggested Steven, "is we go straight to them. The Hosts, I mean. The Director. Transparency, right? We tell them how bad it is. We… make our suggestions. We demonstrate solidarity. Solidarity, right? And, I mean… they've got to understand, right, that things have got to change."

"Speaking as someone who has been the Powers That Be," Maggie put in laconically, "I can tell you from experience that to those in power, the solidarity of the powerless looks… quaint. We will not get the Hosts to budge without flexing our muscles."

George made a show of flexing his rail-thin arms. After a few months in the refuge, though, the effort resulted in a display of lean, ropey muscle. He seemed as surprised as anybody and quickly lowered his busted joke from view.

Mischa murmured to Trina, who declared, "The ones with guns will not listen to the ones without guns."

"Well then," interjected Barry, "let's get our hands on some guns."

I leaned forward to moderate, but Maggie spoke before I could. "That's a bad idea," she said flatly. As she spoke, she speared every other person at the table with a significant look. "We are in no shape to do that, not yet. We don't have the manpower, we don't have the access, we don't have anyplace to hide them if we get them. Yet."

I pursed my lips. It was a question I had expected, and had not wanted to be the wet blanket who said no. But Maggie's response was hardly the way that I would have answered it, either.

"Susan?" came Hank's voice, querulous. "Is that where we're going? Is… gunning up what you aim for this group to do?" He looked worriedly from me to Maggie and back.

"I don't know where we're going," I admitted, inwardly wincing at my delivery of uncertainty when Hank was clearly asking for the opposite. "But I do know that right now, guns are not the answer. Right now guns will just get people shot." The table was suddenly silent, as if no one had realized that guns might get somebody hurt. "The stakes are high. We need to be very careful about what we decide to do."

"How…" started Hank, stumbled, and then tried again. "How are we going to make those decisions? I mean, not to put it so crudely, but who's in charge, here?"

"Oh, are we going to have elections?" George grinned like the Cheshire Cat. "I'd like to declare my candidacy for Treasurer. There being no money anymore, I think the work load will suit me just fine."

This question I hadn't expected on our first outing, but given Hank's involvement I should have known better. He'd probably like to elect a whole board of trustees. "I'm not sure we really need anyone in charge or elections, not yet," I moderated again. "I think what we have right now is a loose network, and that's more than we had when we came through the gates–"

"You know what we need," put in Felicity with a bright smile, "to help us push past 'loose network' and into an organization that can really do some good? We need a name."

"I think that could also give us a sense of purpose," agreed Hank. "The banner we rally behind."

"The Grimy Revolution," suggested George.

"The Unwashed Masses," countered Rebecca with a display of faux disgust at her own shirt.

"Maybe something less confrontational," pleaded Steven. "Like… the Improvement Committee."

"The Committee for Public Improvement!" George chortled.

The conversation fractured into a jumble of suggested names, increasingly trending towards the comedic. I sat back and let them blow off steam. What we were doing was, after all, mind-numbingly dangerous. Might eventually get us all pilloried, if not killed. I caught Maggie's eye and we shared a smile.

"Is this what you wanted?" I said with my eyebrows.

She shrugged, perfectly communicating, "It's a start."

“What about Tall Pines Underground?” said Rebecca with a shrug. “It’s simple and to the point, right?”

“With just a little frission of linguistic surprise,” George chuckled. “Tall Pines, but they’re Underground? What?”

But a moment later the playful banter and now increasingly pun-derived names came to a sudden halt. I looked to the rest of the table to see what had silenced them. Half stared down at the table. The other half stared just over my shoulder. I turned.

Esther Bukhari loomed behind me, eyebrow arched. "Susan," she growled. "A word."

—

I scrambled to my feet. Caught already, in our very first meeting? Was Mischa right, were the Hosts and sweeties watching us? But Bukhari was stepping away from the table, expecting me to follow. Singling me out, not calling down judgement on the whole table. I raised a placating hand to the others. Stay calm, I tried to say with just a look.

"Sorry about interrupting Book Club," Bukhari drawled when I caught up with her.

The smile I gave her was far too bright, too relieved. She thought we were up to nothing. She thought we were a knot of friends chatting. I dialed down my expression. "It's okay," I heard myself say. "What can I… what can I do for you, ma'am?"

If she noted the respectful address, she made no sign of it. She took a pull from her ever-present, glaringly orange bottle. "Jameson says you have a box," she said as if she were bored.

"I need to know where you put it."

That brought me up short. "A box?" I stammered.

"You and your whippersnappers interrupted his people doing some work a couple nights back," she said, voice growing harder and sharper. "You ran off with a box."

"I'm not sure I know what you're–"

The woman rolled her eyes. "Don't even, Susan. You called your kids by name in front of them. It took them a couple days, but they tracked you down. And they asked me to ask you where you put their box."

"It's not their box," I protested weakly.

Bukhari tipped her head to the side, her perfect glossy-black bang bouncing. "You think I care. It's Jameson, Susan. He's a Host. He tells the likes of you and I something in the refuge is his, it is."

My brow crinkled at that. The woman kept her voice low as she spoke to me, as if she didn't want to be overheard. My friends were easily out of earshot; a handful of poolies sat scattered throughout the Mess besides us. Did Bukhari want no one to hear this exchange? Why?

"Besides, it's not a box," I pressed for time to figure out her angle. "It's a shrine."

The woman actually snorted at that. "Well it's no wonder he wants it, then, is it?"

"He wants to destroy it!" I hissed, raising my voice just enough to draw attention.

She immediately stepped close, voice cautionary and low. An unspoken demand that I do likewise. "No shit. And you and I are going to fucking help him, like good little footsoldiers."

It took me a few more heartbeats before I figured it out. “Oh. Jameson came to you," I said, "Directly. Abernathy doesn't know you're here."

The flash of her eyes confirmed it immediately. "Tell me where you hid the shrine, Susan."

I took a step backwards, considered my answer carefully, and said, "No."

Bukhari's eyebrows floated upwards as if they were about to leave her face entirely. She tried to force a chuckle through her nose. "I'm sorry, what did you just say to me?"

I dared not spare a glance backwards to my friends, but I did raise my voice. "I said no, Bukhari. I'm not helping you."

She studiously did not look around at the other poolies in the Mess. We could both feel the eyes on us. "You," she grated, "will do as I say, or I will make your life a living hell."

I laughed at that. “You think it’s not already a living hell?" Before she could respond, I waved a hand towards the Mess’s east wall, and Ponderosa beyond it. "Tell you what, I'll go with you to talk with Abernathy. We'll tell him what Jameson wants, and I'll tell him what it actually is, and we'll see what he thinks about it."

She stared at me with hatred boiling behind her eyes.

"If Abernathy agrees that the 'box' needs to be turned over, I'll cooperate," I told her, trying and failing to dampen the fierce grin digging into my cheeks. I knew I had her, and so did she. Her fingers flexed around her water bottle as if she wanted to throw it. Suddenly I remembered the gun at her hip.

With an effort, I forced myself to step closer and lower my voice. "I'm sorry, Esther," I told her as gently as I could. The skin around her eyes leapt and tensed, uncertain how to respond. "I've put you in a spot, and in front of an audience. That was… unkind of me."

"I don't need your kindness," she all but spat at me.

"Well brace yourself, you're getting it anyway," I told her with a perverse smirk I'd seen on her face more than once. "Cause I can tell you the way out of this little debacle."

She said nothing, which I took as permission to go on.

"You go back to Jameson," I told her quietly, "and you tell him I told you it's somebody's shrine. Somebody's sacred place of fucking worship. Which he didn't tell you, did he. And you tell him that you can't be a part of whatever he's got planned for that shrine."

Her lips drew pencil-thin. "And why would I do that?"

I smiled as generously as I could. "Because you're a decent person, Esther."

Baiting her in front of poolies and challenging her authority in public paled before the response that got. Her face flushed red, eyes flashing dangerously. I could hear the bottle creak under her clutching fingers. Through clenched teeth, she growled, "Have you met me?"

"I've seen the act," I answered. "Blithe indifference to everyone around her, easy acceptance of the crushing oppression she lives on top of. The water bottle you pretend is full of mimosas every day. Esther, there isn't that much orange juice in the refuge, let alone champagne or even hootch. But you want us to think you're drinking. I imagine it would have been a lot more bearable if you were."

She said nothing.

"You were a decent person once," I told her. "You can be a decent person again. And you're lucky, because today being a decent person saves you face." I tipped my head to the side to indicate our audience. "I've just told you that the box is a shrine. That's why you're so angry. Not at me, but at Jameson."

She looked me in the eye, unwavering, for a long moment. "This is not acceptable," she told me, and then repeated herself, louder. "This. Is Not. Acceptable."

And then she spun on her heel and stalked out of the Mess.

I didn't sit back down, just in case anyone was watching. In case word got back to Bukhari after she decided she wanted to retaliate against me, against whatever friends she could identify. I gave them a nod, a light encouragement to go on without me, and went for a walk.

It had been easy to think of the Hosts as a unified power block, as working together, as conspiring to keep us under their thumb. But the world isn't as simple as that, of course. It's not simple enough for the poolies to join together in solidarity and just magically fix every problem. It's not simple enough for the Hosts to see and act and speak with one voice. And that, I realized as I walked up the gravelly main road and up into the walipinis, was their weakness.

They were vulnerable.

I had spent months, now, skulking through the refuge. Months watching and waiting, trying to puzzle out how dangerous the place was, and how. If there were safe places, and where they were. Trying to find some calm corner to squeeze my family into, where nothing would touch them for howeverlong we had to stay here. And in that time, I was making such a simple error: I assumed the Hosts were unified.

Abernathy must be an aberration, or at worst a weak-willed enabler, I had told myself, hating the very idea, feeling guilty for even thinking so poorly of him. But he was no aberration, just a tired old man. Different from the other Hosts – as they were no doubt different from each other.

Each of them with more power than they had ever had, each of them with their own agenda. Each of them suspicious of the others. Each of them making moves, as carefully and quietly as possible, to preserve their vision for the future.

There was opportunity there.

I stepped down into a walipini, smiling as the warm, wet air hit my skin. I found an empty bed, recently harvested, and sat on the soft, churned earth. I looked up and down the length of the garden, at all the tender, growing green things, sheltered in this weird, half-buried

greenhouse.

I would have to be careful. We would have to be careful. We would have to listen, to watch, to prepare, and in the right moment act. Sow confusion, suspicion, dissention. Sabotage when it served us, preserve when we could. But most of all, slowly drive our jailers and overseers mad with intrigues, fouled ambitions, and bottled rage.

We would dismantle the refuge, host by host. Sweetie by sweetie, if necessary. Set them against each other, watch them squabble, and then dispose of the wreckage they made of each other. And no one would be left but us poolies.

I watched the green leaves as the light through the polypropelene turned red and finally began to fade. When I judged there was just enough light left to get back to the compound, I got up to go.

I had work to do.

—

Sound in the refuge was feast or famine. In the press of poolies working and grumbling and gossipping, the cacophony was almost unbearable. Rocks chipping, shovels biting into the ground, saws grating across felled trees, shouts at each other to step back, watch out, shut your lying mouth. Arguments over trivia that no one could confirm or life-and-death decisions no one had any control over.

If you could get away from your work crew, though, sent on an errand or delivering a batch of whatever your crew was working on that day, you stepped into another, quieter world. The distant rush of the wind would sigh up the mountainside, tossing the tops of the trees back and forth. Lonely birdsong echoed through the forest. It grew quiet enough that you could hear each claw on a squirrel's paw tap against the branch she climbed along.

No one was quite sure when the last commercial plane past overhead, but it had been a month at least. No trembling grumble of high-up jet engines broke the stillness of the mountain.

Which is why, as I stepped out of the infirmary I could hear the faint pop-pop-pop of submachine guns from some distance on the other side of the wall.

I backpedalled to stick my head inside the door of the infirmary. "There's gunshots outside the wall," I told the man behind the desk. "Figured you guys might want to know in case you need to… get ready or something."

The receptionist only bobbed his head in answer and then ducked deeper into the building.

When I turned back outside, the front gate was boiling like a kicked-over anthill. Wolfpack

soldiers and other sweeties ran down the hill to charge up the stairs and up onto the walls. Rifles, liberated from gun lockers upstairs, were tossed into waiting hands.

"Poolie!" shouted a man in uniform, advancing on me. "What are you doing down here?"

I gestured vaguely at the infirmary behind me. "I was dropping off a–"

"Nevermind, you need to get out of here. This area's about to get hot." He pumped his arm, two fingers pointing me back uphill. "Get back up to your work site."

With the sound of gunfire fast approaching, I wasn't about to argue. I hurried up the gravel road. "Are we– are we going to be safe?" I asked the soldier as I went. I had to find the boys, get us to shelter.

"We'll keep you safe, ma'am," he responded with practiced confidence. "The ringers following this patrol are going to get a real unpleasant surprise when they hit the wall." He must have seen some consternation on my face because he actually chuckled. "They're not getting inside."

I nodded numbly, and hiked up the hill. The gunfire behind me was sporadic but nearing; the shouts of sweeties on the ramparts kept blotting it out. As I reached the top of the first rise, however, shouts from outside the walls rang out.

From my vantage I could see only snatches of the treeline beyond the wall. Small groups of figures, three and four at a time, burst from the trees. In each knot of people, one or two were lugging heavy-looking cases. The rest ran backwards, firing back into the trees, laying down cover fire.

"There they are!" someone on the wall shouted. A trio of soldiers behind the main gate started spinning the huge silver wheel that would unlock the bank vault door.

I could no longer see our people, but now other figures were staggering out of the trees. They were lean, dirty, hard-worn men, most in black leather jackets. The sight of the wall visibly astounded many. Most halted in their tracks and scrambled back to the cover afforded by the forest. A few, though, let loose shouts and cries, pumping their legs to charge after their quarry before they could make the gate.

The rifles along the wall opened up. The pursuers sprayed spurts of crimson and fell.

The great door finally swung open, spilling our returning people into the refuge. Their entry aspired to orderliness and failed. Some threw themselves onto the ground as soon as they were safe. The rest stumbled over them.

A gangly woman lugging the lead end of a huge black footlocker kicked at their prone bodies

as she came through the door. "Up! Up!" her sharp voice carried over the rattling reports of the guns. She and her compatriot on the other end of the locker hauled it ten more feet inside before dropping it to the ground. She plopped down on it, elbows on her knees, to catch her breath.

I blinked, peered closer. I recognized her. Miranda. We'd worked seminar weekends together. Why hadn't I seen her in the refuge since lockdown?

Director Cole came down the stairs from the gatehouse and the woman on the crate greeted him. I couldn't hear the conversation, but she patted the crate proudly more than once. Cole's demeanor vacillated between concern and confrontation more than once.

The conference was interrupted as the two soldiers at the gate opened fire through the portal. A man from outside careened into them, battering the pair into the gatehouse wall. Unlike his biker gang friends, this one was decked out in riot gear. He threw his body at the half-opened door, heaving it wider open. Even from my distance I could hear him shouting encouragements to his compatriots. I couldn't see if there was anyone behind him, or if he hadn't realized they had all been mowed down already.

But the invader had two guns of his own, and started spraying bullets left and right. Soldiers and patrol members alike hit the ground to return fire. Cole shoved Miranda down behind the crate she had been sitting on and joined her there, all in one fluid motion. Belatedly, I realized I should do the same. I was well within the range of stray bullets. I lurched behind a thick trunk at the side of the gravel road.

I peeked around the other side of the tree just in time to see Cole make his move. The Director grabbed something off the tactical vest of a fallen soldier and flung it at the attacker in riot gear. A sudden flash and gout of smoke blossomed forth. Even as I blinked, Cole catapulted himself over the crate and into the invader. Both went down in a flailing heap of limbs.

The crack of a single shot echoed through the refuge, and Director Cole staggered up to his feet again. The other man did not move.

It seemed silent for a moment, even though the guns on the wall were still shooting, sweeties and Wolfpack still shouting to each other. All that seemed far away from the scene just inside the gate, where soldiers were quickly inspecting Cole for any holes. He batted them away, pointed them at their fallen comrades, and everyone set to dragging bodies away from the still-open gate.

Just as I was about to worry about more invaders, the rip and roar of motorcycle engines filled the air. Three dirt bikes tore past me, down the gravel road, and rocketed through the cleared gate. The riders all wore the green and black uniform of the Wolfpack. Two more trios of bikes followed in short order. The gunfire from the wall had died down, and I could hear the dirtbike whines scale up and down beyond the wall. Sporadic gunfire stuttered a few more times; the dirt bikes grew fainter.

It took me a moment to realize: the soldiers on the bikes were running down any surviving attackers. No one could be allowed to stagger away with any knowledge of the refuge's existence.

The fight was over.

Down in front of the gate, Cole was shouting. The huge black crate stood open, and the Director gesticulated wildly at its interior. He snatched up other crates, snapping them open, and then throwing them down in disgust. He turned to rage at Miranda. At my distance, all his words were garbled, but the emotion behind them was clear. Finally I caught one phrase: "Get me Abernathy!"

—

Miranda arrived at the barracks that evening with a ball of half-folded clothes in her arms. Behind her trailed a young man carrying his own parcel. His coloring was dark where hers was light, but their features were similar enough to mark him as her son. His eyes and the tip of his nose were red, but now his face was screwed up in anger. It was not pent-up rage, but the kind of anger that you hold on to, clutch close to you, so you don't drown.

His mother, by contrast, was surprisingly composed. As she stepped through the garage door, her features were fixed in a willfull, if disappointed, expression. She looked across the array of bunks and hammocks as if she were shopping for furniture. "Excuse me. Excuse me? Are there any unclaimed beds? Where can my son and I sleep?"

She still had trail dust on her, but beneath that she and her clothes were clean. She looked tired and resigned, but not ragged. She looked sweetie, not poolie, and so no one was eager to give her an answer.

I pushed myself through the gathering crowd. "Miranda!" I called out, and stepped in to give her a friendly hug.

"Susan?" she responded, disbelieving. "Hey. I didn't– I didn't even know you were in the refuge." She offered me a sheepish smile. "I'm out on patrol so often–"

"Likewise," I answered, before she apologized for things she had no control over in front of people who might be happy to blame her anyway. "Not the patrol part, but the not knowing part. I didn't even know there were patrols."

"There may not be any more now," she said ruefully. Then she bounced the parcel in her arms. "Um…"

"You need a bed," I nodded, and guided her deeper into the barracks. "I'm afraid there aren't

any bunks left, but we might find a couple hammocks next to each other…"

"Next to each other's not necessary," glowered her son as he followed behind.

Miranda cast a look of frustration and worry at the boy. "Not necessary, but surely appreciated," she told me firmly.

"Miss Soza?" came a familiar voice behind us, and the entire barracks seemed to, all together, murmur and then hush. I turned to see Joseph Abernathy at the door. "May I have a word with you, please?"

"Of course," I answered immediately, and cast about for a friendly face. "Gini!" I called, and waved her closer. "Can you find Miranda and her son a couple hammocks?"

Abernathy faded back onto the slab of concrete that served as the barracks' porch, and waited for me under the floodlights in the gathering night. A fluttery-winged bug turned wide circles above our heads, slamming its body into the light over and over again.

"Susan, I need you and your family to gather up your things."

My brow furrowed. "I– I don't understand."

The old man tipped his head back towards the barracks and looked mildly ill. "Miranda Jacobs has… vacated her suite in the lodge. I would like to invite you to take her place."

"She got kicked out?" I asked without thinking. Of course she had; that was already plain.

Abernathy's discomfort doubled. "It's not my idea of justice, Susan, but she put every one of us at risk. Five of her patrol members were shot. Two died. The refuge's location came very close to being revealed. May still have been revealed."

"Yes, but–" I started, and then realized I didn't know what my objection was. I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. "If you make living like a poolie a punishment, people are going to ask what the poolies did to deserve it."

Abernathy pursed his lips. "Living in labor pool is not a punishment, but living in the lodge is a privilege, and one that can be lost."

"Living in the lodge is what we all paid for!" I all but shouted at him. "Those lodges wouldn't even exist if it hadn't been for us."

He put up his hands placatingly. "Susan. As the man who designed, built, or rebuilt all five of those lodges, I am well aware of who paid for them. I doubt I disagree with anything you might say right now. Which is why I need you."

I ran a hand through my hair, or tried to. Shower day was five days ago.

"Director Cole insisted that Miranda lose her suite," he told me wearily. "I can't do anything about that. But it does mean I now have an empty room. I'd like you to fill it. Because I can not think of anyone more qualified."

"Joe, I…" I started, stumbled, blundered onwards. "I appreciate the thought, and the compliment, but I'm not sure I can accept. I don't want to live like that when other people are living like…" I swept a hand back towards the barracks. "…this."

"Which is why I need you, Susan," he pressed. "I need you to help me fix…" and here he mirrored my gesture, taking in the press of poolies crammed into the barracks, "…this."

I crossed my arms, uncomfortable and growing angry, and uncomfortable that I was angry at a man who was trying to do me a favor. "I thought your plan was to hunker down and wait until it all blew over."

Abernathy heaved a sigh, and suddenly I could see all of his years hanging on him. "A couple months ago, a young woman who I greatly respect guilted me out of that thinking."

"Young?" I snorted, and the tension between us melted. "Flattery is a little underhanded for you, Joe."

He gave me a wan smile. "If I wanted to use underhanded tactics, I'd ask you if you want your kids sleeping here or in the lodge."

"Oh trust me, I never lost sight of that consideration."

"There's two bunks waiting in the suite's second bedroom. The Jacobs boy slept on top and played his video games on the bottom."

I closed my eyes. "And we will work to make things better? For everybody?"

"For everybody," he agreed.

Slowly, I bobbed my head. "Okay. I accept. Let's do it."

The boys were waiting for me just inside the barracks' rolling garage door. Each of them had their clothes, bundled up, under their arms. Jackson hefted my milk crate footlocker in his free hand, and offered it to me. With Miranda's entrance, everyone in the barracks knew exactly what Abernathy must have been talking to me about. I took my milk crate without comment and stepped aside to let the boys file past.

Arthur came behind them, leaning on a cane on his left side and bearing a bundle of clothes

on his right.

"Oh," I stammered, surprised and instantly flustered. "Arthur–"

He looked to me, eyes bright and smile shining. "I always knew you'd get us into a suite, Suze."

I watched as the enthusiasm written across his face dissolved, reflecting the scowl overtaking my features. "Arthur, I'm sorry, but–"

He carefully schooled his expression, but couldn't hide the bitterness gathering in the corners of his eyes. "What is it?" he asked in his best there-can-be-no-problems voice.

"There's only two bunks in the second bedroom," I said, heart sinking.

My ex-husband paused a beat, then shrugged and plastered on another layer of smile. "Then I guess you and I will have to share."

My head was already shaking no. "Arthur, I already told you, you and I are not–"

"We're not getting back together," he agreed with me, too easily. The easy agreement he used when repeating back what he knew you wanted to hear. "It's a queen bed, right? You won't be using the other half."

Every wisp of compassion gathering in my chest immediately evaporated. "I am not sharing my bed with you, Arthur."

The bitterness in his eyes glinted. "Suze. Come on. No one else is going to sleep there."

My shoulders knotted. "The only reason I'm not slapping you right now, Arthur, is because you'd fall down."

"What did I say?" he asked, the squint of one eye betraying that he knew exactly what he had said.

"Does it even occur to you," I grated, "that I might want someone else on that side of the bed?"

He actually laughed. "What, someone here? In the refuge? You think anybody would– oh. Somebody might put up with that fat ass of yours if it meant becoming a sweetie."

I took two deliberate steps back, knuckles white around the handles of my milk crate. "Go reclaim your bunk, Arthur."

The boys were waiting for me at the edge of the floodlights, at the well-practiced distance

that put them just out of earshot of their bickering parents. I gave them a tight, bitter smile and we all filed up the trail to Ponderosa Lodge.

Book Two

Sweetie

12. The Suite Life

The door to our new suite was open and unlocked when we arrived. A day-glo keychain dangled from the key sticking out of the lock. I shifted my milk crate of possessions onto my hip, quietly pocketed the key, and stepped inside.

Once upon a time, I might have described the refuge's suites as modest. The hallway door opened into a sitting room furnished with a couch and two easy chairs, a coffeetable, and a television stand. A narrow bookshelf, empty, stood in the corner. A small safe was set into the wall beside it, its door just slightly ajar. The furniture fit the space perfectly, neither jammed next to each other nor swimming in excess space. It was a restful, peaceful space, although my parent's eye immediately flagged all the careful space efficiency as easily overwhelmed by two teens' mess.

Two doors opened on either side of the television. One led to the smaller bedroom, where Abernathy had said we'd find two bunks. The boys, long accustomed to moving in for a seminar weekend, beelined there immediately. The other door opened into our bathroom. Nothing fancy there, just a sink, shower, tub, and toilet, but I could already imagine the feel of hot water on my skin.

Opposite the television stood the door to the master bedroom: my room. Through it came the drone of a vacuum cleaner sweeping back and forth over the institutional carpeting.

"Hello?" I called as I stepped inside. The queen bed sat, freshly made, against the wall. A writing desk and chest of drawers, both cleared of detritus and freshly scrubbed, flanked the accordion doors to the closet. And on the other side of the room stooped an older woman guiding the vacuum under the bed. I recognized her from the Ponderosa barracks, but could not recall her name.

"Oh, Miss Soza," she smiled. "I'm nearly done, and then I'll be out of your hair."

"You don't have to–" I stammered. "I mean, I'm sure we can vacuum our own rooms–"

"It's all right," the woman answered cheerily. "I'm happy to."

"It's just a little silly," I insisted. "We're both subscribers, after all. I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Mercedes," she supplied, straightening. She considered me for a moment, weighing her words. "I clean all the rooms on this floor, every day. It's my job."

"Yes, but–"

Mercedes speared me with a look. "This is my job, Miss Soza. The alternative is breaking rocks all day in the sun. And I don't think this old body would last too long out there. If you take my meaning, Miss Soza."

I admitted defeat. "Yes, Mercedes. I understand. Thank you for cleaning up after us. I should warn you, I've got two teenagers in the other room."

She coiled the vacuum's power cord around its handle. "Oh, kids are nothing. It's the grown sweeties who occupy most of my time."

Once she was gone, the boys reported that they'd divvied up the drawers and put their clothes away. All of thirty seconds' work, given how little we had. I thanked them anyway.

I was suddenly struck by the sense that the three of us were rattling around a too-big box for us, getting the immaculate interior all mussed with our grime. "Who wants the first shower?" I asked with forced cheer. They insisted I have the honor.

I stripped out of my work clothes and left them on the bathroom floor in a pile of three days' sweat and grime. The shower took a few minutes to pull water from the rooftop heating tank. In the meantime, the compact bathroom filled with the errant spray of cool, clean water. The skin all over my body suddenly itched in anticipation.

The pipes trembled as the hot water came through, and the cool mistiness warmed into a humid blanket. Later, the boys would inform me that my grateful groan stepping into the stream of water was audible outside.

A new loufah hung next to the soap dispenser and I proceeded to scrub myself raw. Shower Day bathing for poolies basically required me to choose between a thorough scrub or washing out my hair; attempting to split the difference always left me feeling vaguely gross. I scoured every trace of dirt, rock dust, fertilizer, and fish shit off of me, then lathered my hair until it was twice its usual size.

My last rinse slid the suds down my sensitized skin and left a bone-deep fatigue in its wake. I had exhausted myself with the vigor of my scrubbing, albeit after a full day of physical labor. I twisted the water off, wrapped the waiting robe around my shoulders, and told the boys it was one of their turns.

Caden had wandered down the hall to the lounge and plundered the lodge's library of DVDs. The two of them were sprawled on the ground at the foot of the couch, halfway through some irreverent not-for-kids cartoon. Less enraptured than his brother, Jackson leapt up to go next. He stumbled back out in a wash of steam just as the cartoon reached its end.

I wasn't watching, per se, so much as lounging on the couch amid the sounds of my family–and only my family–doing boring, everyday things. Jackson watched Caden disappear into the bathroom before confiding in me that there were no more towels. I smiled distantly, eyes half-lidded, in response.

Hijinks, all in good humor, and with a towel fetched from the linen closet by the time Caden sheepishly asked for help through the door. Had I missed the shenanigans without noticing they were gone? Had the boys continued their brotherly sport all this time and I'd been too tired, too strung out, too dirty to notice? The boys testing and joking with each other seemed just as warm as my terrycloth robe and my shower-cooked skin. I settled down into that warmth like a cat in her favorite lap.

Caden revealed his real prize from the DVD library, a battered copy of an old family favorite comedy. I suspect we all could recite the dialogue, even the sound effects, from start to finish. But we settled in to watch it, half out of nostalgia and half out of enjoyment of the familiar performances.

Caden curled up on the couch next to me. Jackson sat on the floor with his back against the couch, just close enough that I could touch his still-damp hair.

It was heaven.

It wasn’t lost on me that these simple pleasures were impossibly out of reach for more than a hundred people just next door in the barracks. It stilled my hand on Jackson's neck more than once. But I pushed the guilt away, out of mind. That was for tomorrow. Tonight I was clean and warm and comfortable, with my boys around me, and that would have to be enough, at least for one night.

—

First Mess was strange. The general shape of things–the long tables, the boring food, walking down the buffet line to fill our plates and then bussing them after–was all the same. All of this took place in Third Mess under the grueling promise of the coming day's labor, just as the

day before and the day to come. Not so for the Hosts and sweeties.

First Mess possessed a nearly alien lightness, the fresh start to a new day that I'd hardly noticed I'd missed from my mornings. The sunlight streamed in through the bay windows warmer and brighter. Breakfasters ate leisurely and comfortably, chatting amicably and smiling at each other. Even the same damn rice balls tasted fresh and flavorful.

It was all the same, but it was all entirely different.

"Welcome to the grownups table, Soza," Bukhari said as she slid her tray onto the opposite side of the table. She settled onto the bench and smirked at Jackson and Caden, then jerked her chin towards an empty table on the far side of the room. "The Pups usually sit over there, boys. You don't want to be sitting with Mommy when your peers show up."

The both of them looked uncertainly at me. Caden's finger danced along the side of his tray. I waved them off. "When in Rome, boys. But you know you can always sit with me, right?" I got no answer in response.

"Now that they're gone," Bukhari went on before they were out of earshot, "congratulations are in order. I'm not going to tell anybody about your dinner date with the old man, but rest assured, everyone's going to assume you got here by sleeping with him."

"And here I thought you were just rude to poolies," I responded drily.

"Best remedy for that rumor, of course, is getting back on the horse pronto," she went on blithely. "You should know, the lotharios have a system in place, so we don't step on each other's toes."

"I am not a lothario," I grated.

Bukhari actually snorted she laughed so hard and suddenly. "Please. I heard how you shut down your ex last night. This whole place is going to be bubbling over with that one by tomorrow morning. Delightfully harsh, Soza. I didn't know you had it in you."

"Arthur has a great talent for drawing it out of me," I sighed. "Listen, Bukhari. Did you want anything substantial, or are you just making sure we won't go steady with the same slave?"

She gave me wild eyes. "Slave?!?"

"They're required to work and not allowed to leave," I shrugged. "That's pretty much the definition."

"Yeah well by that argument, we're all slaves here, except maybe the Hosts."

I lifted an eyebrow. "You think what sweeties do qualifies as work?"

She shoveled food into her mouth and washed it down with orange whatever. "It's a pain in my ass that I have to do every day, sounds like work."

"You wanna trade jobs with a poolie?"

The woman rolled her eyes. "Some work is less shitty than other work. Doesn't make it not work."

I didn't respond, mostly because I didn't have an answer. I thought about janissaries and court scribes, who had been slaves but still held a certain amount of power. I doubted Bukhari wanted to hear me wax academic. But still she sat there, inviting conversation.

Janissaries reminded me of Miranda. "Hey," I said, "I'm in Miranda's old suite. She said she was out on patrol? I thought nobody went outside."

"Oh, you're nowhere near that level yet," Bukhari insisted with a shake of her head. "Patrol's only for the most trusted people. Blessed by Cole and Tzavaras. Mostly Wolfpack, just a few sweeties from other lodges."

"What do they even do, though?" I pressed. "Seems like having them out there all the time invites discovery."

"Well first off, it used to be they'd scrub traces of new people who just showed up," she answered. "Move the cars and the trucks off the trailhead, cause that'd be a dead giveaway, right?"

"Where to?" I asked. "That's got to be a lot of vehicles."

Bukhari gave me an elaborate shrug for an answer. "But with so few new arrivals, I dunno what Patrol gets up to these days. Top secret missions and shit. Although Miranda and Ana have mentioned there are more people out there, roving around and armed to the teeth. Dunno what they're eating, but we're gonna have to wait it out a while longer before they die off."

"Well that's… gruesome."

She shrugged again. "It's what we're here for, right? Waiting out the apocalypse. And there's no sugar-coating it: that's waiting for six billion people to starve to death or kill each other."

Conversation died after that, the both of us finishing our breakfast with little enthusiasm. I excused myself a few minutes later.

David found me back in my room a little later. "You know about the staff meeting?" he

asked after we exchanged pleasantries.

I nodded. "You're the third person to tell me. Joe told me twice."

"Good good," he answered, and then hefted the box in his hands. "I have a present for you." He set the box down on the coffee table and rummaged around inside it. "First, your phone."

"My what?"

He passed the slim little rectangle over. I cradled it uncertainly in my hands, like it was some delicate flower, a reminder of a world so far gone that it seemed alien. All its little dings and scratches, which I hadn't realized I had memorized, blazed back familiarily.

"Bit of luck, there," David explained. "Your phone was being used by a Beaver sweetie who we… well. Lost on Miranda's patrol."

I winced. "So this was last used by a dead person."

He gave me a small, uncomfortable smile. "Afraid so. But we didn't have to trade anything for it, or anything like that."

"I'm sure there's brisk traffic in the trade of poolies' stolen property," I muttered darkly. I swiped the device open and paged through its digital contents. "Looks like all my apps are here. And pictures, that's…" Suddenly an old photo of the boys and my mother came up and tears sprung into my eyes. "That's actually… oh god, David, I didn't even think about losing all these pictures until now and…" My voice failed me. I took a deep breath. "Thank you, David."

"I'm still negotiating for Jackson and Caden's devices, but we wanted to make sure you were connected." He put out his hand in a clear may-I-show-you gesture, and I let him have the phone. "You're already on the wifi network, password is the same as before."

"We still have wifi?"

"Wifi, intranet. No internet, obviously," David nodded. "There's a guy over in Beaver that keeps all this working. This app here we use for messaging in the refuge. It's already got all the Hosts and the Ponderosa sweeties listed. And apparently Beaver Lodge, too? Must have been added from… the dead lady. Ahem. Anyway, you can contact whoever's got a phone." He scrolled down the long list of contacts and came to a different section at the bottom. "These are all-calls. This one messages everyone in Ponderosa. This one messages everyone in the refuge."

"All the sweeties," I corrected absently.

He nodded. "Yes. You're right, of course. Use these all-calls sparingly. Emergencies and the like. There's a scrabble game I like on here, too, if you want play sometime."

"Why don't we–" I blurted, hesitated, then pushed through. "Why don't we allow poolies their phones? Surely nobody can get a signal any more and compromise security."

David gave me the phone back. "Charging, mostly. Our solar cells can't charge five hundred phones every day. That and, while almost everyone brought their phones, you'd be surprised how few brought their chargers. Sharing and fighting over charging cords… that's a hassle we don't need."

I frowned down at the device. "And they could use the phones to organize," I said quietly, and looked up at him. "Yeah? Or should I not say things like that out loud?"

David shook his head, too quickly. "No, you're right. I'm sure the Hosts have thought about that, too. And you can always speak freely around me, Susan, but… tread carefully with the other sweeties and the other Hosts. You never know what they understand, or what they'll do. And they all have guns."

I bobbed my head. "All right. What else is in the box?"

"Ah. Well." David somehow managed to look even more uncomfortable as he turned and pulled out the next 'present.' He held out the gun belt and pistol as if offering me a plate of rotting food. "Now you're armed, too. It's… it's for defending the refuge."

"Sure it is," I sighed, and took it.

"I've got sidearms for Jackson and Caden, as well," he went on. "Dad says they're both pretty good shots. Anyway, when you're not wearing your weapon, it needs to be in the safe in your suite."

I nodded. "Which will be always."

David tipped his head side to side. "Some assignments require you wear it. Gatehouse duty. Anything that takes you near the wall."

I crossed the room to the safe and piled all three guns inside. "Understood." My voice was hollow. "Speaking of the boys, how does their work rotation go? Are they just assigned to work groups like poolies, or…?"

The younger Abernathy looked dumbfounded for a moment, and then shook his head. "No, your kids don't need to, I mean, Dad and I won't assign them to crews."

The break from David's customary straightforwardness did not go unnoticed. I hadn't ever seen sweetie kids on crews, but I also didn't want to assume the worst. "So, what, they all play hooky all day?"

"No, the kids head over to Wolf Lodge for Pup training."

"This sounds like something I'll enthusiastically approve of," I deadpanned.

David chuckled unconvincingly. "They get gun safety, which most of the kids desperately need, survival training, that sort of thing."

"All day?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I mean, I see the kids poking around in the afternoons, so it's mostly mornings, I think."

I crossed my arms and made what I strongly suspected was a futile effort. "Well my kids don't need gun safety or survival lessons, they've been up here dozens of times. More often than you have, I think. So can we work them into the job rotation, instead?"

David looked uncomfortably at his chalkboard tablet, the ground, and then finally at me. "I don't think that will be possible, Susan."

"Why not?" I asked, and then answered myself. "Bad precedent? Don't want to make the other sweeties feel uncomfortable about how their kids aren't pulling their weight?"

His lips twisted bitterly. "This place runs on precedent."

"I think you mean privilege," I shot back, and immediately regretted it. "Fuck. But that's not your fault, of course. I'm sorry, David."

He shook his head and didn't meet my eye. "You're not wrong. Privilege and jealousy. And too many guns." He paused a beat. "Martin asked these sorts of questions. Loudly." He didn't have to say, "…and got shot for his trouble."

"All right," I caved. "I guess my kids are part of the leisure class, now, on pain of death. Anything else?"

He shook his head sheepishly. "Staff's in twenty minutes. See you there."

I nodded silently, and he made his way out.

—

"George!" I sputtered in surprise. Yet there he was, standing in the second-floor hallway of the Ponderosa lodge. I shut my door and gave him a smile. "What are you doing up here? So early? I mean, obviously you're allowed, I'm not trying to…"

"Course not," he grinned. "Hey, congratulations on your housing upgrade."

I glanced back and my closed door, my smile weakening. "Yeah, it's… kind of embarrassing."

He shrugged, in that way that George shrugged, so eloquently indicating that this was one of the many details of the world about which he could not be bothered to care. "Somebody needed to take it, and you've probably been to more seminars than everybody else in the barracks put together."

"Thanks, I–"

But then the door beside him opened and a towel-clad woman leaned out. "Found it," she declared, holding out a sock to George. A moment later she noticed me standing there and gave me a proud smile. I didn't recognize her – East Asian, heavy-set, her long wet hair still sticking to her neck. George took the sock without comment. Once her hand was empty, the woman swatted his backside playfully and retreated back into her room.

George stuffed the sock into his back pocket quietly. When he finally spoke, his voice was sober and resigned, without a trace of humor. "You're going to see a lot of things from a different angle, now. A lot of people from a different angle." Finally he met my eye. "You may not like what you see."

Later, I would chastise myself for not leaping forward to hug him, to assure him that I didn't think any less of him, that I understood that he had to do what he had to do. But in the moment, I just stood there as he walked away.

—

The Ponderosa lounge was a cozy space at the midpoint of the building's long first-floor hallway. A rough circle of couches filled most of the space; a few plush easy chairs plugged what gaps were left.

One wall was filled with south-facing windows, floor to ceiling, to catch as much sunlight as possible and reduce heating needs. They also afforded a beautiful view of what seemed like trackless woods. If you knew where and how to look, though, you could spy a stretch of the perimeter wall and one corner of the water treatment building.

The overall result was a warm, comfortable haven well suited to a good book and a mug of hot cocoa.

It was terribly suited for a staff meeting.

There were more than twenty sweeties in attendance, filling every couch cushion and seat.

The bare walls did nothing to muffle sound, filling the room with a cacophony of echoed whispers and conversation. It had the air of a poorly-managed seventh grade classroom.

I recognized most of the faces as I stepped into the room; I'd worked under half of them, after all. They all recognized me, either by those prior encounters or by reputation. I was the new sweetie, after all.

Some eyes slitted slightly at my entrance, identifying me as the interloper among them. No doubt Miranda had friends who'd miss her, who might blame me for her absence. It wouldn't be the first time I was blamed for something I had no control over.

Others nodded in greeting, with tight smiles of conditional welcome. Was I a hopped-up commoner to them, about to demonstrate how little I deserved the elevation? Or were they aware of how thin their own veneer was, and worried if I would toe the line of their tin pot despotism?

Welcome to the privileged class. Don't fuck it up.

David, at least, gave me a warm smile and showed me towards a chair. "Everybody? Everybody. Let's get this started. Guys. Our… barracks subscribers are on their way to breakfast, so let's do this, huh?"

From my seat I spied a slow parade of heads, just visible over the porch railing, making their way past the lodge. Poolies, our poolies, on their way to Third Mess.

"Guys!" David all but shouted. "Let's get through these items so you can pick up your work details when they're done with breakfast. You don't want to have to track them all down after they start wandering."

The seemed to convince the crowd of sweeties, who reduced the volume of their chattering by half.

"Thank you," David said, and then nodded to his father, all but crumpled in a chair nearby. "Dad?"

Abernathy pushed himself forward. "If you would all join me in welcoming Miss Susan Soza to the lodge. She and her two sons Jackson and Caden will be taking Suite Four. Please be gentle with them as they learn the ropes here."

"What happened to Miranda?" demanded the woman from upstairs who had returned George's sock. The rest of the room grumbled in agreement, even though everyone knew exactly where she was.

The old man pressed his lips together. "I'm afraid Miss Jacobs'… performance recently

has…" but he ran out of words. "She and her son will be rooming in the barracks, going forward."

"So she's a poolie, now?" asked a man somewhere behind me; I couldn't place who.

Abernathy looked pained. "Miss Jacobs will be working in Labor Pool," he confirmed with a weary nod.

"So that's it?" demanded the Asian woman. "We're no better than Mountain Lion or Eagle or fucking Beaver. Piss somebody off and you go sleep in the shed."

"Miss Jacobs got two people killed," David cut in, with all the rhetorical disdain of someone pointing out facts that everyone knew. "And three more shot. She fucked up, Ana."

"And Patrol is dangerous," Ana shot back. "You're going to be very disappointed if you expect us to return with zero casualties every goddamn time."

"We don't expect that," Abernathy the Elder sighed, barely audible.

"Well what do you expect?" Ana demanded. "How bad can the shit get before we know that we shouldn't even bring our patrol back in to the refuge?"

The Host frowned as if hurt. "Miss Thao, you know you and your patrol will always be safe at the refuge."

"I'd rather take my chances out there than be made a poolie in here," she spat. The ambient wash of whispers and grumbling rose in volume and agreement. "Mister Abernathy, you cannot bust us down to poolie for fucking up. Especially when we are operating in conditions over which we have no control."

"Miss Jacobs' error was particularly egregious," Abernathy insisted weakly. "You will just have to trust the judgment of myself and Director Cole that this reassignment was deserved."

"So Director Cole busted her down to poolie," someone else put in.

Abernathy raised his hands and nodded slowly. "I didn't say that," he said, but everything in his body language screamed yes. "You just… you just need to trust me, this punishment–er, reassignment was justified."

"We all know you wouldn't kick us out, Joe," Esther purred from her seat in the corner.

The Host sighed. "I don't want to kick anybody out. But I must say, I will if I have to." Nothing about the statement was believable, and the room's ire subsided.

"And on that note, work assignments," David stepped in, a stack of tablet-sized chalkboards

in hand. My welcome to the lodge dissipated, not that I minded. No one seemed in a welcoming mood.

Five sweeties were assigned sentry duty, Ana Thao among them. Carla Mathers, a registered nurse in her former life, was sent off to the infirmary. Two matronly women nodded quietly when given creche duty, minding the kids of the refuge too young to work. Peter White was directed to oversee the housekeeping staff with as much disinterest as the three ladies assigned before him. I assumed these were regular assignments that never changed, surprising no one.

Then came work details. "Westin, you are pulling in soya. Your team is–" and David rattled off ten first names, two Marks as "Mark S" and "Mark P." He then handed the top chalkboard over to Westin.

I had noticed the custom of using poolies' first names and had wondered at its origin. Watching David call off work crews, I suspected I was looking directly at the source: the chalkboards. Listing off full names would be tedious, not to mention taking up more of the tablets' precious real estate. Easier, and more compact, to use the relatively unique first names.

The real question was who started insisting on using last names for sweeties.

"Bukhari, you are going to take Soza and show her the ropes."

"Oh, that sounds like fun," my ordained guide grumbled.

"You'll be leading three small gather teams," David continued, undeterred.

"Three teams?" Bukhari sputtered. "Tell me I at least get Teddy."

"Teddy's on another team," the younger Abernathy insisted curtly, but that didn't stop Esther.

She turned to Joe. "Mister Abernathy, I am happy to show Soza around, but while I'm showing her stuff and juggling three teams, it would be really helpful to have somebody trustworthy at the work sites we're not personally watching. And no poolie's better at that than Teddy."

All eyes fell on Joe, who pursed his lips and tried not to make eye contact with anybody, least of all his son. David already looked disappointed, as if he knew he was on the losing side.

"Very well," Abernathy conceded with a wave of his hand. "Swap out somebody on her list with Teddy," he directed David, who rubbed out a line on the top chalkboard with a sigh. An undercurrent of dissatisfaction rolled through the room. No doubt the remaining sweeties who hadn't yet received their assignments were all wondering if they'd just lost the eager foreman from their own team.

More than a few looks I received made it clear that the blame for losing Teddy would land squarely on Bukhari, and by extension, me.

Welcome to the Leisure Class.

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 loging 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 sweeties."

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-depriciating 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 repsonsibility, 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.

14. Decent

While I spent my days supervising labor gangs, the boys were invited to join the "Pups." It was never quite clear how much room that invitation had for polite refusal, and so after breakfast they marched off towards Grey Wolf Lodge to "assist and train."

That first evening I grilled the boys on what had happened, and was met with ambivalence. "It's like JROTC or something," Jackson said with a shrug, as if that were any kind of explanation.

"I get the feeling," chimed in Caden, "that a lot of the kids showed up at the refuge without… well. I don't think they came up for many seminar weekends, you know?"

Jackson chortled from where he'd collapsed onto the couch. He deepened his voice, obviously impersonating someone: "Damn fools wouldn't know the business end of a gun if it shot their thumbs off!" Caden guffawed in response.

"So it's gun safety?" I asked, skeptical. "Every day?"

"Gun safety, drilling, fire control, survival, stuff like that," Caden explained with a shrug.

"ROTC stuff," I repeated softly, despite the uncertainty coiling in my belly.

"And it's just the mornings, not the whole day every day. But you know. Stuff these kids should know."

"Certain," Jackson bobbed his head.

A moment later both of them were making excuses for the evening, touching up their hair in the bathroom, and heading out the door to hang with friends. Good to know, at least, that the apocalypse didn't change teenagers very much.

But the next day I got my work crew started and stood there, half-helping and half-lost in thought.

I could, if I wanted, head over to Grey Wolf Lodge and see what the Pups were doing for myself. My crew was perfectly capable of working on their own. In fact, they seemed more comfortable with that than with me hanging around, insisting on doing my fair share.

I didn't want to be that kind of sweetie, though. I'd resolved to work side-by-side with my work crews as much as posible; it only seemed fair. But I worried after my boys.

And no doubt the boys, if they saw me snooping around and spying on them, would be more than a little perturbed. Not for the first time I reminded myself that they were close enough to

grown, especially in this new dark age we lived in, that I should get used to treating them as adults.

Still, something about their dismissive description of the Pups struck me as off. Too casual, too flippant. As if there were some aspect of the day they didn't want me to know about. Or my mothering impulses were cranked so high they were delivering false positives.

An hour later I was excusing myself from my place on the harvesting line. I had been so distracted I'd fallen two beds behind the rest of the team. No doubt they'd tell the rest of labor pol that I didn't think I had to work as hard as anyone else. I resolved to go get a peek of the Pups and then come back with redoubled effort, my suspicious and fears hopefully allayed.

Grey Wolf Lodge was a brutal brick of a building, part of the original camp. Abernathy had done his best to retrofit and improve the place, but there was little to be done. In the evenings he'd swear the building was Frank Lloyd Wright's first draft for the apartments that would lead their occupants to kill each other.

It was all hard right angles and on the edge of a small clearing, a sore thumb to an observer in the sky. Its green roof had been supplemented with green rag netting draped over each side, pulled out like a tent. The Wolfpack often lounged in the shade underneath.

Not wanting to look like the spy I was, I walked down to the lodge through the trees rather than down the gravel road. From a hillock just a stone's throw away I found an excellent view of the Wolfpack and the Pups.

The Grey Wolf barracks had been thrown together on the opposite side of the clearing. In the ensuing months the space between had been trampled flat. I'd learn later that they called it the Yard.

Unsurprisingly, the mercenaries had turned the place into a military camp. Supply dumps under air camouflage nets formed a low perimeter around the Yard. Soldiers in fatigues but not their flak jackets lounged on a few picnic tables and some of the crates. They joked and pointed at each other, as well as throwing the occasional taunt at the kids drilling in the Yard.

Because the Pups, some forty or so teens, were lined up in columns, standing at attention. A pair of drill sergeants stalked back and forth, inspecting postures and grips on weapons. Each kid held a semi automatic rifle in their hands.

Jackson and Caden stood among them, spaced apart either to hide their familial connection (if they'd chosen their spots) or to suppress it (if they hadn't). Of all the kids there, my boys were among the most comfortable with the guns in their hands, and I beat down a sudden surge of pride in their comportment. This wasn't the time.

One of the sergeants shouted out a question. Her back was turned to me, so I couldn't hear

the particulars. As one, though, the Pups answered thunderously, "Sir Yes Sir!"

"There ain't a lot of us real soldiers and most of your parents are pretty much shit with a weapon," the other drill sergeant took up the tirade. "Which leaves you as the second line of defense. If you can pull your shit together long enough to prove we can trust you. Otherwise, this place is gonna topple over the first time it's hit by a stiff breeze. Are you going to let that happen?"

"Sir No Sir!" came the response.

There was a great deal more of the same after that: a relatively transparent program of denigration and scorn alternating with the promise of redemption with compliance. Your typical "tear them down to build them back up again" mantra.

The world they came from, they were told, had collapsed under the weight of its own bullshit. I couldn't really argue with that. I did take personal exception to "your parents sold you out for a quick buck, they just hoped they'd die before it came to this." Some of us had tried, although given who most of those kids' parents were, the charge might have been true in the main.

The drill lasted a good while longer and then the Pups were dismissed to their fire teams, to practice their weapon maintenance. Jackson headed directly into the lodge along with most of the kids, but Caden and a couple others reported to a knot of soldiers lounging under the air-camo's shade.

A few words were exchanged, but a moment later the soldiers were handing over their guns. The kids set down and methodically field stripped the weapons, cleaned them out, and reassembled them. This was something that I'd seen Caden do before, had learned how to do alongside him, in fact, on a seminar weekend long ago. What surprised me was the brisk efficiency of the other kids who, one presumed, had not been up here for vacation every few months for years. The Pups had been quick learners.

After the guns had been cleaned, the teens went through all the pockets on the soldiers' flak jackets. One Pup disappeared inside and came back out again with full hands; she and another teen packed whatever she had fetched into the same pouch of two different harnesses. Restocking, I assumed.

It seemed like a petty thing, foisting off such a menial task to the Pups. But would the soldiers trust their poolies with such a job? Did they want poolies even touching ammunition, let alone guns? Easier, surely, to let the sweetie kids do it, and tell them it was a privilege and an honor to apprentice themselves to the mighty warriors.

My brain was boiling over with these cynical but sadly likely scenarios when the tableau below was interrupted. Into the drill yard sauntered two young ladies–Zoe Cole and her

roommate Cynthia Clark. They greeted the soldiers with casual familiarity but went straight for where Caden was zipping up a tactical vest. He scrambled to his feet.

I couldn't hear the conversation, but I didn't have to. Miss Clark teased and unbalanced Caden while Zoe flirted with him. My boy struggled to maintain his poise, respond to Zoe's advances in kind, and not appear overeager to talk with the pretty girl. By the ladies' body language and the tinkling of laughter that did reach me, he enjoyed mixed success with all three.

Nevertheless, when the girls turned to go, Caden went with them. Zoe took one arm and Cynthia the other, steering him away towards the rest of the compound. Their giggles faded on the crisp mountain air.

—

Later that week, my team and I were picking soybeans. The poolieswere still eyeing me uncertainly as I bent over to get my hands dirty, when Aubrey found me. "A word, Soza."

I dusted off my hands and glanced up and down the length of the walipini. Four poolies worked their way down the rows, by this point well practiced in the task at hand. I didn't give them any parting directions; they needed none. I followed Aubrey outside.

I kept meaning to poke my head into the infirmary or find Aubrey at First Mess, but hadn’t yet. Either I was swamped with learning how to fill my new role without oppressing anybody too hard, or else I was just scared. Or both.

The last time we'd spoken, Aubrey had pulled rank on me and left me sobbing on the ground. I could see the same little copse of trees from the door of the greenhouse. Now there was no difference in our standings. Would that change anything? By the set of her shoulders and the absence of any sashay in her hips, she'd come here for a confrontation, not to make amends.

She stalked off some distance from the walipini wall and then turned slowly to face me, hands on hips. "What have you been telling your children?"

I managed to restrict my reaction to a lift of my eyebrows. "Quite a few things. I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific."

"About you and me," she hissed, even though no one could possibly hear.

"Oh," I could feel my cheeks color. "They figured it out on their own. Months back."

She looked at me like I was crazy. "And how did they do that?"

"By the fond looks of affection I used to give you," I snapped back. "Before you started acting like this."

Either the protestation of affection or the rebuke seemed to knock her aggression down a few pegs. It was a few minutes before she said, "Your younger kid, the one with the floppy hair, he came at me all goofy smiles and shit after breakfast. Said he was happy that I was in the refuge. For your sake."

I smiled softly. "Caden. He's sweet."

"That's not sweet. That's a problem."

I suspected why, but I wanted to hear it in her words. "How so?"

"They can't go around telling stories," she said warningly.

I nodded. "You're closeted."

"Yes, I'm in the closet," she grated. "But it's more than that."

I raised my eyebrows, inviting her to elaborate.

"I'm not here on my subscription," she explained. "I'm in my Father's suite."

"I see."

"…in Mountain Lion Lodge." Now she lifted her eyebrows for emphasis.

I groaned in response. "Now I do see." I took a deep breath. "I take it your father toes the party line?"

"He's a deacon in Park's church," she said miserably. "If he finds out, Susan, if anyone finds out, I won't be tossed out in the cold to work with the poolies." She wrapped her arms around her shoulders. "They'll marry me to some man who thinks it's his God-given duty to rape me straight."

My whole body wanted to crush her into a hug, but I moderated the impulse down to putting my hands on her shoulders. She leaned in, allowing me to hold her tight for just a moment before staggering back. She cast teary eyes around, making sure that no one saw.

I held her out at arm's length. "Okay. We're not going to let that happen, Aubrey."

She gave me a glare between withering and hopeless.

"The boys know better than to out somebody," I assured her, making a mental note to make sure they knew better. "Your secret is safe. You're safe."

"No one is safe in here," she responded miserably.

"Well then it's time we changed that," I answered with a careful balance of care and heat.

She scoffed and broke free of my grip. "Good luck with that."

"Hey, if we don't make each other safe, nobody will." She didn't answer, and so I pressed, gently. "Like someone I know who's making sure a certain poolie is getting the medicine he needs."

She turned away, turned back, turned so she was only half-facing me. "You don't think I'm running drugs any more?"

"I never thought you were running drugs," I said, too quickly. "Not when I had a chance to really think about it. Teddy doesn't have anything you want."

She arched an eyebrow. "Not that you believe in my moral character, but because there's no profit in it."

I shrugged. "I am an economist; some assumptions come to me quicker than others." We both fell quiet. "Do you need me to keep delivering?"

Aubrey squinted at me uncertainly. "You don't mind? I don't want to get you in trouble, now that you've got something to lose. And your kids in the balance."

"I don't mind," I told her. "I trust you. If you say Teddy needs it, he needs it. I'd be a bad sweetie if I didn't take care of my poolies, right?"

She fished into her vest and produced an envelope crumbled around two long bumps. Vials. "You'd be a stand-out sweetie if you gave a shit about them at all."

I slipped the envelope into my vest. "Here's to low bars. Teddy's not in my work group today, but I'll get it to him soon."

She nodded. "He should have a couple days before his current supply runs out."

I nodded, too. Both of us stood there, heads bobbing, not knowing what else to do. "So," I hazarded. "See you at Mess sometime?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she answered, and only then caught the implied invitation. "Um. I have breakfast and supper with Father, and lunch with infirmary staff…"

"Then I'll wave from across the room," I smiled, backing off as quickly as possible. I took a physical step backwards, too, and made a show of looking to the nearest walipini. "I should get back."

"Yeah. Right," Aubrey agreed, backpedalling herself. "No telling what those poolies will get

up to without supervision."

"They're probably nearly finished with their rows," I laughed. "I should be in there to help."

"Okay. See you at Mess." And with that she turned and hurried away. I watched her go. After a few minutes she slowed her pace; I couldn't be sure, but it looked like her rear swayed side to side.

I chuckled at myself and made for the nearest greenhouse. Still closeted. What had I been thinking?

—

Esther Bukhari was the product of a rarified world of inescapable duty, necessary stewardship, and transcendent music. Her musical prodigy was identified so early that she had no memories of a life that was not defined by the bars of musical notation, a relentless practice schedule, and the ever-escalating value of her hands.

"Even lovers," she confided with a groan, "all fellow musicians, of course; music is entirely incestuous. But did they want my ass, my pretty face, my sparkling personality? They only ever lusted after my hands."

Her hands were insured for a ludicrous sum even as a child. When she turned eighteen and the policy turned over to her, it promised her seven figures if her hands–and musical career–were crippled. Every year the number grew as her career soared.

She performed locally as a child and regionally as a teen. When other girls her age were contemplating college, she was choosing which symphony to join. Her own educational dreams were sharply limited by which school would let her tour and perform, interrupting and interfering with her studies constantly. Music programs were happy to have her. No other program really understood.

Esther could have abandoned music for college, at least technically. She was an adult. But the very idea was unthinkable, a possibility her parents never even presented her. They had supported her, chased her through her meteoric ascent, even discarded their own careers to better shepherd her talent. In the end, their role as parents-of-the-prodigy eclipsed everything else about them.

When she moved out for symphony-and-school across the country, they followed her, to "manage her affairs" so that she could focus on her music, the music, the ever-present, inescapable music.

Esther did love to play. When she tucked a violin under her chin, she entered a world that made perfect sense. Everything fell into beautiful order. Music was for her as water is to a fish.

She breathed it, she swam in it, it held her up, and it swept her away. Sometimes she wondered about the world beyond music, but her parents and teachers and fellow music students all assured her it was not worth her concern.

She had an incredible gift, everyone told her, and it was her duty to share it with the world. Her duty to hone her talent endlessly. Her duty to shape her life around the demands of her career.

If she had been allowed to pick her life, she would have picked the one she had. She told herself that this was just as good as picking it herself.

At twenty-four, Esther signed onto the Metropolitain Philharmonic. The symphony's prestige and reputation were the lesser half of her reason to join; the greater portion was one of their inducements: custodianship of an authentic Stradivarius. The exquisite instrument would remain the property of the symphony while in her possession, of course, but the legalities didn't matter. She could play it every day, whenever she liked; she kept it by her side at all times.

It was the first thing she touched that was worth more than the hands she held it with.

The world was falling apart outside her gilded cage, but she hardly knew. Audiences were down. Tours grew short. When she asked why Sydney wasn't on next season's schedule, she was surprised to hear that the city was under martial law. The symphony dare not risk the riots, the food shortage there, the brewing civil war.

How strange, she thought, that such a thing was happening in Sydney, of all places. It never occurred to her that it might be happening elsewhere. She didn't think to check; she didn't think to ask why catastrophe had befallen Australia. It wasn't music, so it wasn't her concern. She'd learned that a long time ago.

Her subscription to the refuge had been a gift from a longtime fan. "Your talents must be preserved, no matter what happens," he told her. She could never figure how to stop the notifications that kept invading her email.

Every time she would open a refuge email to delete it, she would be assaulted by apocalyptic doom. Refugees fleeing the inner cities. A bewildering tangle of little wars in countries she'd never performed in that somehow added up into some global crisis. Mercury poisoning the rice harvest. Too many pictures of children, scared or hungry or dead. Her email was full of nightmares.

I remembered Cole's missives from years ago. I had found them a mish-mash of old news and cynical encouragement to maintain your subscription. I'd shut down those notifications before things started getting bad, though. If Cole's doom and gloom was Esther's only access to the collapse of civilization, I could only imagine how terrifying it must have seemed.

And then the tour's last leg was cancelled and the tour manager disappeared. The quartet she was travelling with were politely informed that check out was at noon. No, the front desk did not have any record of travel plans arranged for the musicians. Home was a continent away.

The apocalypse had come home–leapt out of the refuge emails and into her life, her inviolate world of music and beauty. The Philharmonic was cancelling engagements and if that wasn't the end of the world, Bukhari didn't know what was.

She told the front desk she needed a car. They called a livery company, but the driver refused to drive fourteen hours into the mountains. He wasn't very interested in leaving the city at all, in fact. But he would take her to a car rental.

Compared to most subscribers, Esther's journey to the refuge was uneventful. The roads were clear. Every gas station she stopped at gladly took her credit card, although one or two were out of gas, anyway. She made it all the way to the winding mountain roads before she encountered trouble.

In retrospect, slowing down and pulling over for the two ladies and their flat tire had been a mistake. She asked if she could help; they asked if she had a tire wrench. When she told them it was a rental, they suggested a wrench might be tucked away with the spare underneath the trunk compartment.

The guns game out as soon as she opened the trunk for them. Esther's sudden fear was matched only by their growing disappointment. The only thing in the trunk was her rolling suitcase. No computer bag, no tablet, no electronics besides her outdated phone. Hardly any cash.

Esther watched as they ransacked her few belongings, feeling numb more than anything. Did any of these things really matter if civilization was falling apart? All she wanted was to get to the refuge safely. Her stick-up artists might need these things more than she did if they didn't have somewhere to go. She could just let them take it all.

And then one of them pulled the Stradivarius case out of the front seat. "What's this?"

"No!" the words flew out of her throat. "No, that's–"

The bandit smirked triumphantly as she opened the travel-scuffed but bulletproof lid. "Oh wow. This looks… old and valuable."

"No, please," Esther gasped. "It's… it's nothing, it's just sentimental. It was my grandfather's."

"Well Grandpa's violin looks like the only thing you've got that's worth anything," she sneered, and snapped the case closed. "Now get back in your car, girly, and drive the fuck

away."

"You don't understand," Esther pleaded with them. "I'm– I'm a violinist, it's what I do, it's everything that I am, and– and nobody's going to make violins for a very long time. You can't take that away from me."

"I just did," the woman grunted, and swung the case behind herself. "Now get in the damn car before I waste a bullet on you."

"Please, that instrument belongs in a–"

The gun made a noise louder than anything Esther's ears had ever been subjected to. She fell backwards onto the open road, legs going out from underneath her in terror. Frantic, she patted her shoulders, her neck. No blood. No holes. A warning shot?

"I mean it, get in the damn car!" howled the bandit as she rounded the vehicle. The heavy black gun seemed to stalk her like a tiger.

Esther wrenched open the driver's side door and climbed into the seat. The keys were still in the ignition, and one frantic twist later, the little rental came to life and screamed down the mountain road.

She kept her head low as she sped around curve after curve, until the woman and the guns (and the Stradivarius) were out of sight.

To this day, Esther doesn't remember the next twenty-four hours very well. By the time she reached mile marker 1723, night was gathering. A family of subscribers sat parked on the side of the road, bedding down to make the hike to the refuge in the morning. They say she was raving, wild, barely coherent, but they convinced her to sleep, and escorted her up the trail the next day. It was really only in quarantine that she finally came back to herself.

Abernathy welcomed her into Ponderosa lodge, bringing her to her new suite personally. She was the lodge's third subscriber to show up. She was the vanguard of the oncoming tide–or possibly just one of the paranoid who'd mistaken tough times for the apocalypse. Back then, even the Hosts weren't sure if the recent surge in subscribers was the real thing or a false alarm. Even the satellite television still worked then.

But night after night, the only thing on television was bad news. She watched the world fall apart sitting next to Abernathy in the Ponderosa lodge. Every night they were joined by more new arrivals, watching the news with desperate eyes.

Until one night, the satellite feed just blinked off, right in the middle of a broadcast. The sudden, blue-tinged darkness in the room seemed to press up against them, smothering with the warm summer air. They were alone, cast off all together like a lifeboat kicked away from a

sinking ship.

No one said anything; they all just went to bed.

Esther didn't think about how her purpose in life was gone. She hardly thought at all, in fact. But she did not really need to think about it; she simply knew it. Without a violin in them, her hands and her gift were worthless. What was left, picking soybeans?

But the sun kept rising in the morning. Chores to do, meals to eat, even soya to pick. Life went on with or without a purpose.

The lodges filled up. There was talk about splitting the suites. Esther felt vaguely ill at that; what would she do if someone invaded the funereal air of her rooms? But then the other lodges started turning their storage garages into bunkhouses, which were comfortable enough. Only temporary, of course.

And new faces every day, each one more clueless than the last. Hands to hold, bearings to get ahold of. The same damn conversations over and over again. It was the end of the world and everyone had to be told three times over that no, there was no cell service, not anywhere in the refuge.

Abernathy had her pick up new poolies when they got out of quarantine; he had other details to worry about. Like organizing labor crews, now that there were just too many Ponderosa subscribers to all work together on one task each day. And then the old hands who'd been in the refuge the longest, the ones who'd been with Abernathy in that suddenly blue-dark room, were parceled out poolies to direct, and why not? They knew better than anybody how things worked around here.

"All of which was going just fine until some mouthy poolie told me I was going to do the decent thing because I used to be a decent person," Esther concluded, eyeing me with baroque frustration. I had found her in the lounge, more than a little tipsy on somebody's hooch.

"Well you were," I insisted, "and I think you still are, when you take the time."

But she slowly shook her head, staring into the smoldering fireplace. "I don't think I ever was. A decent person. Not really. What good did I do anyone?"

More drunk than I thought, apparently. "You were, and still are, a custodian of incredible music," I assured her. "And when you met those ladies on the road, you stopped to help."

"Yeah, that turned out so well."

I stood up with a yawn. It had been a long day. "I didn't say you were wise," I squeezed her

shoulder as I passed her en route to my rooms. "I said you were decent."

15. Out of Control

"Susan!" the Director's voice, jovial and only the slightest bit breathless, split the mountain air. He tromped up the crumbling path, waving to get my attention, and grinning ear to ear. My work crew looked up from the trees they were hacking apart, uncertain at the Director's intrusion but happy for any interruption.

I handed my hacksaw off to a worker without one–they'd been clearing the work area of chunks and branches in the absence of a real tool–and strode downhill to meet Cole. "Director."

"Greg, call me Greg," he told me, hands on hips and still grinning. He looked me over, a quick flick of his eyes up and down. We were an hour into lumbering, so I was already sweaty and disheveled, a handkerchief wrapped around my hair and suited up in the sturdiest clothes I owned. But these clothes had been clean this morning, and I had showered the evening before. I presented a very different picture than the last time we'd talked, when I was a bedraggled poolie. His chin dipped down and up, the barest nod I had ever seen, but his smile reached his eyes. Apparently I cleaned up well in his estimation.

"Yes, of course. Greg," I agreed, trying to cover the sudden flush of heat across my face. Stupid. Dimly I wondered if he played everyone like this. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"I need to borrow your crew," he answered nonchalantly. "We're rolling out polypropylene and the more hands, the better. That's not stuff we can replace if we tear it."

"For a walipini?" I asked needlessly. The greenhouses were roofed with great sheets of polypropylene–tough, clear plastic sheeting–before the air camo went on top. The stuff let sunlight in without letting any heat out, which let the gardens inside survive the winter. "Um. We just got started here–"

"So it should be easy enough to switch gears," he cut in with a smile.

The smile I gave him in return was placating, if not patronizing. "I mean I'm responsible for this crew bringing in lumber to the planer."

He waved a hand. "And you will. Leave behind a few to clean up what you've felled so far–looks like only half of them have proper tools, anyway–and bring the rest out to the fields. Bring 'em back when we're done."

I crossed my arms. "Director Cole–er, Greg. Mister Abernathy's expecting me to–"

Cole stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder. "Susan, relax. I'll smooth things over with Joe. And David, as I expect he'll be the one who's more upset."

He was right about that. The elder Abernathy seemed happy so long as everyone pitched in. His son was the one worried about output and schedules.

Not to mention, Cole was the Director so therefore Abernathy's boss, and my grandboss. How much of this was song and dance, I wondered. Had I at any point actually intended to refuse Cole's demand?

"Alright," I shrugged. As he grinned in triumph, I called out the names of poolies who were working without tools or whose work with tools wasn't amounting to much. We counted up tools and locked them in the tool cart, and I promised the remaining workers that I would be back to check in later. Then we were off.

My crew knew where we were going, and rolling out plastic sheeting was far easier than hacking apart tough pine trees, so they preceded Cole and I in a ragged but light-hearted line.

"Settling in alright?" he asked me as we walked.

I started to answer, but tripped over the seemingly simple question. How to answer? "Yes, it's so much more comfortable as the oppressor," or "Yes, it's nice to be in the suite that I actually paid for?" Finally I settled on, "Yes, thank you."

"I don't see you at First Mess very often."

"I try to eat with the rest of Ponderosa," I answered lightly. "I think it's good for morale. Builds trust."

He nodded meditatively. "I suspect you're right. I guess I have it easy; my whole lodge eats at First."

There wasn't any answer to the man plainly outlining his own privileges, so I merely nodded. We walked on in silence for a while, and then I glanced over at him. His face seemed tied up in frustration and hesitation. I realized he was trying to think of something to say, to make conversation that wasn't about the weather. I decided to throw him a bone.

"And how are you doing these days, Greg?" I asked. "How heavy is the head that wears the crown?"

He chuckled at that, at least, and shook his head ruefully. "Above water, but only just," he smiled. "This place was a lot easier to run when everybody left on Sunday afternoon."

"Missing the good old days?" I prompted, seeing if I could get him to talk again.

"Well who doesn't," he responded easily. "With the satellite out and no ESPN, I've got nothing to do all day." He laughed; a joke.

"I see you out here working every day," I countered generously, but also truthfully. Like myself, Cole worked alongside his crews.

"Work to be done," he shrugged, but I could see in his face that he appreciated the recognition. "You know, it's funny, I built this place hoping it would never be necessary. I spent nearly twenty years on a contingency plan, and if you think that's strange–and it was–it's even stranger seeing it all come to life. All the policies and procedures we agonized over–me and Joe and Martin and Don, sitting around a table on the deck in an empty campground, dreaming how it would work filled with people–and now the people are here, the policies and procedures are in motion, and we're… lurching into the future." He shook his head in disbelief. "Sometimes I think the fact that it was planned makes it even stranger."

I gave him a sly smile. "Did you ever wonder if it would actually work?"

He scoffed. "I never thought we'd find out. But Joe and Martin… they were smart guys. I knew they'd get it right." Cole's speech and confidence seemed to dribble out. I glanced back at him and saw he was staring down at the trail, expression distant.

"I heard about Martin," I said, attempting sympathy while going in for the strike. "I always liked him. He must have been a good friend."

The Director nodded, licked his lips. "He was. Losing him was… a blow."

Losing him to a grisly murder, I couldn't help but wonder, or losing his support? Having to kill your friend to keep your dream alive? How heavy *was* the head that wore the crown?

But then we reached the walipinis, set out in deliberately skewed rows, nets of green rags stretched out over opalescent panels. I imagined I could feel the warm, verdant life nestled inside each one. When we came to the far end of the greenhouses, though, I was surprised at what I saw.

Two long rectangles had been dug into the ground, the bones of new walipinis. But the digging was not finished. The walls along the uphill sides were only just started. The struts across which the polypropylene would be stretched were missing.

"I thought we were rolling out plastic?" I asked, confused.

Cole started handing out shovels to my poolies. "We are," he answered confidently, for my

ears and theirs. "If we put our backs into it, we can be rolling out poly by the end of the day."

I gave the Director a thunderous look and he had the grace to look just slightly ashamed at his deception. Still, here we were and there was work to be done. I shepherded my crew into the worksite. One by one they picked up tools and made themselves useful.

I didn't see Cole for a few hours after that; it's possible he avoided me after bringing us here under false pretenses. I certainly didn't seek him out. I ate lunch back with my lumber crew when I checked in with them–they'd delivered two hefty trees to our tiny little "mill" and had just brought down a third. When I returned to the walipinis he was waiting for me.

"You're the Director of the whole refuge, Greg, you could have just told me you wanted us to dig and build and roll out," I said by way of greeting. I wasn't angry; I was far too weary to be angry. Even as a sweetie I was working my body every day, and I was also tired of watching the parade of injustices that my new position afforded me. Cole's deception was par for the course, and I couldn't be bothered to have a reaction any more emotional than a perfunctory reminder that his clever set of half-truths wasn't necessary in the first place.

He shrugged apologetically. "It sounded better in my head if we were just doing poly."

I studied his demeanor, his shoulders not quite slumped, his eyes not quite meeting mine. He didn't need to keep standing there, and yet he did, just like before when he was so desperate to make conversation. I decided to take a risk. "Make it up to me," I suggested, "by allowing me one impertinent question."

He grinned, hopeful and grateful. "Of course, Susan. I like talking with you."

Wait and see how you feel in a moment, I thought, and squared my shoulders. "Why did you overbook the refuge?"

His eager face fell, and he looked back at our combined work crews, well out of earshot below us. When he faced me again, his expression was a battle between dread and challenge. I could see how little he wanted to answer, and how much he wanted to surprise me, amaze me, with the right answer.

Cole put his fists on his hips. "Well first of all, I'm hardly alone in this. Lots of other refuges did the same."

I lifted one eyebrow. If he was going to make this about winning my approval, I'd happily milk that for more information. "Other refuges?"

"Tall Pines is hardly alone in this… industry," Cole said with a slight chuckle. "Hell, there were trade shows for us up until last year. I talk with a dozen other refuges over the sat phone.

And nearly all of them overbooked. It was standard practice."

"Standard practice established by whom?" I asked, a touch incredulous. "The experienced apocalypse survivors?"

He laughed at that, and rubbed the back of his head. "Well you've got me there. Hard to guess how much to overbook by when civilization hasn't ever fallen apart before."

Something in his answer struck me. "How much?" I repeated. "How much… did you overbook by, and how many of the subscribers actually showed up?"

"We overbooked a thousand percent," he answered, as flatly as he could. It was like he was confessing a terrible sin but did not want to recognize its gravity.

"You sold each suite to ten different people?" I gasped. "Ten different families. They all thought there was a safe place waiting for them, and…"

"And just over a fifth of them actually made it up here," he finished grimly. "A lot more than we expected."

I lifted one eyebrow. "That should be a cause for celebration, not a disappointment. Too many escaped violence and starvation?"

He held up a hand and looked pained. "I am. Grateful. I am very happy so many people made it, even if it makes things… difficult going forward. The apocalypse just happened slower than we thought it would."

For a moment, I felt a flash of sympathy for someone who'd simply made a bad bet. But then I reminded myself: a bad bet with other people's lives in the balance. "You should have consulted an economist," I told him ruefully, "or a historian. We would have told you apocalypses are glacial, grueling affairs. Most take a generation or two. By comparison, this one's lightning fast."

He smiled thinly. Cold comfort. "We have, in the pantry under the Mess and buried around the grounds, three thousand fifty-gallon drums of rice. It will never go bad as long as it's sealed. We have twenty-six miles of perimeter wall, built in the middle of nowhere, ten miles away from the nearest access road. We have water reclamation, solar power, god damn air conditioning. We wouldn't have any of that if I hadn't overbooked the refuge. On a tenth of the budget? Impossible. We wouldn't have been viable." He said the last, not angrily, but with the force one puts into a statement one needs to be true.

My heart was pounding. "How… how did it feel, promising safe haven to people you didn't expect to make it here? Taking their money for services you didn't think you'd have to provide?"

I'd only asked for one impertinent question, but couldn't stop myself asking.

Cole looked down at the ground, but his expression barely changed. "You know… not that bad," he admitted with a sigh. He looked up at me, squinting slightly. "They weren't all like you, Susan. Hardly any of them were like you. Rich fat cats, mostly. One percenters. People who spent their lives wringing as much profit out of the world as they could, not caring at all what they crushed in the process. Most of our subscribers, Susan, could only afford the fee because they destroyed other people's lives on a daily basis. These are the people who wrecked the world, that were wrecking the world when I took their money, so no, I don't feel guilty selling them a tenth of a suite and telling them it was all theirs."

He rolled his shoulders and looked out at the poolies toiling in the dirt. In a flash, I saw them as Cole must have seen them: bankers, executives, hedge fund managers, and high society scions, all bent over the first real work of their lives, complaining at the toil while billions of people outside our walls starved because of their greed.

I wondered if Cole worked alongside his poolies not to share the burden but to enjoy first-row seats to their discomfort.

"I took their money," Cole went on even as he stared at them, "and I built this place. This place, that would stand even when their world fell apart. A place where Zoe would be safe."

Everything clicked. "You built the refuge for Zoe."

He turned to me, nodded once, and looked out over the crews again. "The rest of us just get to live here."

—

I rarely ate lunch in the Mess, preferring to eat with my crew at our work site. My motives were always murky.

It had started as a noble impulse, a demonstration of solidarity. I'd sit on a log and eat my rice ball like any other subscriber, the meal bookended by working alongside my crew. The other sweeties thought I was crazy, and so did most of the poolies, too.

But the food from the cart was the same fare served in the Mess. The view from the log, with the mountain breeze brushing along the little hairs on my arm, beat the view from the Mess benches easily. The fact was, I liked lunching outdoors.

And no doubt it was never lost on the poolies that if I wanted to eat elsewhere, I could. They had to eat where they worked. No escape from the toil for them; it haunted them even as they ate.

So I felt vaguely guilty as I sat across the long table from Caden, our lunch spread out between us. But he'd asked me to have lunch with him and I wasn't about to turn down such an offer. We'd chatted cheerily for fifteen minutes, but I could tell he was working himself up to his real topic of discussion.

"So," he said, tone and pacing dropping down. Here it was. "Zoe asked me to be her sweetie."

"You're already a sweetie," I said on impulse, buying time. I had expected this, if not now then soon, but I still fought to keep my emotions off my face. She was almost five years older than my sweet boy; she would chew him up and spit him out. He wasn't ready for a relationship that included casual sex and cohabitation. But to say that so bluntly to a teenager would only convince him of the opposite.

"She means move in with her," he explained needlessly.

"She means join her man harem," I countered unhappily.

"Yes, but…" Caden sighed, and then the words came out of him in a rush. "She's the Director's daughter, and CeeCee is Miss Clark's daughter…"

"CeeCee?"

He waved a hand. "Cynthia. She's Mavis Clark's daughter. So… her mom is a Host."

I wasn't sure where this was going. "And?"

He rolled his eyes as if the answer was obvious. "Can I say no?"

"You can always say no," I answered immediately, with what was probably a dangerous amount of heat.

"No, I mean… without making things hard for you. And Jackson. And Dad."

I could feel my features hardening. "Did she say as much?" I growled. "Did Zoe Cole threaten you?"

In a flash, Caden went from awkward to panicked. "No, no," he said, a little too loudly. A few heads turned in the otherwise quiet hall. "Mom, no. She never said anything like that. Or CeeCee," he added, pre-empting my next question.

I locked eyes with him. "Caden, if they or anyone else ever does, you know I will protect you. I will burn this place down before anyone hurts you."

"Mom." He reached across the table to grab my hands. "Nobody threatened me, okay? Set

down the flamethrower." My son watched me until I deflated. "I was just thinking, with… how things are around here. Me turning her down could make trouble for you. You just got into the lodge and all."

"Honey, even if that were true," I said, squeezing his hand, "I'd go back to labor pool to keep you safe. And honestly that might simplify my life. You don't have to…" I closed my eyes as I realized what I was actually saying out loud, "You don't have to join the man harem."

"Um. Okay," he mumbled, and looked down at the table.

Something was off.

He licked his lips and said, "I mean. Are you sure?" He seemed almost hopeful that I might not be able to protect him, and all at once it made sense.

"Oh Christ, you want to go, don't you?"

My youngest child didn't meet my eye, hiding behind his curly bangs.

"And you think I'll disapprove," I pressed. "That I'll think less of you."

One eye flashed at me from under his mop. "Maybe."

I leaned back, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath before answering. "Caden honey, I will not think less of you. Zoe's a pretty girl, and… all her friends are attractive, too. And you're sixteen so really why would I be surprised that you respond to an invitation to a non-stop orgy."

"It's not like that," he protested immediately. "It's not… it's not all sex all the time."

"But it is sex a lot of the time," I put in. "Cram six horny twenty-somethings into a room with nothing else to do, what else should anyone expect."

"Mom, it's not like that," he repeated, and then resorted to mumbling. "I think I kinda really like her."

"Her being Zoe," I clarified. "The collector of pretty boys."

He looked left and right, as if someone might overhear. "Yeah."

I reached forward to grab his hand. "I worry. It's my job to worry, and nothing will change that. And right now, I worry that you're walking into a… situation, a relationship that is nowhere near equal." I paused a beat. "You maybe kinda really like her. But I want her to maybe kinda really like you back. Not just… collect you."

"Yeah, I, um. Well. I mean. Me, too," he finally managed. "It's just that–this is the way to

find out if she does."

I leaned back and heaved a sigh. "Well that's the first point in this conversation where you've sounded like yourself. You've thought this through."

He bobbed his head, bangs bouncing. "I have. I've thought about it a lot. Especially since we got the suite, I see a lot more of her, and we talk, and–"

Caden launched into one of his monologues and I kept listening–really–even as I considered my young son. It was clear that he was smitten, but also that Zoe had paid attention to him, made him feel special, even drew him out of his shell.

He was just six weeks short of sixteen, and quite capable of falling in love. Hell, for most of human history, people were married and parents by sixteen. And that was probably, I reflected, how things were going to be going forward.

But a man harem, my mind railed: is that the future, too? I took a moment to pick apart my feelings on the power dynamics involved (troubling), the divergence from a traditional coupling (been there myself), and the implied group sex with my son in the middle (here I ran out of emotional fortitude). I balked at whether I was upset at a real threat or just confronted with something beyond my understanding.

I remembered coming out to my mother, a few weeks before she passed, and her inability to comprehend the shape of my life.

"Uh huh," I said automatically, one of those small conversational sounds to keep somebody talking. I realized I'd lost track of what Caden was saying. He was flushed with excitement, recounting some conversation he'd had with Zoe (or maybe CeeCee), and there was a certainty in him that I'd rarely seen before. His mind was made up, I realized.

Caden was joining the man harem whether or not I gave my blessing.

I could stand in his way, or at least try, but I'd be picking a fight I would not win. All I'd get for my trouble would be his resentment. All I'd be telling him is that I didn't trust him.

I started in my seat and a flash rippled across my skin. Was it that simple? Did I trust my son to be an adult? And more upsetting: were we already to this point in his life, and in my parenting? Sixteen.

"Mom?" Caden stumbled to a halt. "You okay?"

As an answer I leaned forward and trapped his hands in mine. "Caden, I trust you," I said, feeling out the words as I said them. I nodded softly. It was true. "I'll still worry, but… you're

obviously capable of making your own decisions."

He blinked, mouth open, for a few heartbeats. "Really?"

"Yes, really," I laughed. "Just be careful. Part of making your own decisions is making your own mistakes, and learning from them. And it's not up to me to judge whether this decision is a mistake or not. Not anymore, I don't think."

Caden beamed at me from across the table.

"Just. Practice safer sex," I was compelled to throw in.

"Mom." He made a face. "There's a ton of condoms, don't worry."

"I will worry," I repeated, banishing the line of questioning asking why he already knew there were a ton of condoms. "But I won't interfere." My stomach did a somersault at the words, but I pressed on. "Which may inspire you, young man, to refrain in the future from implying that you're being sexually assaulted when you are not. There are easier ways to get me to go along with your plans."

He winced. "Yeah, I did that, didn't I?"

"You did," I nodded. "Don't do it again."

--

Our peaceful reverie was ripped apart by shouting from across the Mess. I had noted the knot of sweeties two tables behind Caden the moment we'd sat down. The five of them were loud and boisterous, passing around a pair of pitchers sloshing with a sickly brown concoction. The lot of them had gotten progressively drunk as Caden and I had talked.

Now one of the men was leaning forward and shouting at his companion across the table. The start was incomprehensible but as his volume rose, he ended with, "shut your lying mouth!"

The other man decided against the better part of valor and surged to his feet. "I'd like to see you try!" He was a big guy and the backs of his legs smacked the bench on his rise. The men on his left and right threw their arms out to avoid falling.

The first man, elaborately mustachioed, made a grab across the table for his new enemy's shirt. The pitcher and cups between them toppled and the hands of cooler heads sprang forward to rescue the hooch.

I watched as the explosive tangle of limbs grabbing for precious alcohol or simple balance convinced both shouting men that their loud disagreement had escalated to a full-on brawl. The big man grabbed the incoming hand and yanked, swinging his opponent into his neighbor. The

man's other hand, flailing, raked fingernails across yet another face.

I all but dragged Caden across our own the table to get him away from the brewing fight, then stood up, myself.

Despite many best efforts, hooch splashed across the table, along with a wave of its sticky-sweet scent. The two combatants shoved the furniture aside in a momentary display of cooperation and then threw themselves at each other.

The hostility of the two men had skyrocketted to the point where their sole intent was now to inflict as much pain as possible. The big man had his burly arms wrapped around the other man's ribs, squeezing like a boa constrictor. His opponent, one arm free, drove his elbow into the larger man's eye socket over and over. At both their hips, presently forgotten, were holstered heavy pistols.

There was no way they would remain forgotten for long.

Their friends had retreated to a safe distance, one of them cradling the surviving pitcher protectively. I recognized him.

"Westin!" I hissed, then shouted. He glanced back in my direction, unwilling to tear his eyes off the fight for very long. I waved at the melee. "Westin, do something!"

Westin did nothing.

"Stay low and get out of here," I told Caden, pushing him down the aisle of benches, towards the nearest door.

He went a few steps before noticing I wasn't following. "What are you going to do?" he asked, bewildered.

"Something stupid," I answered, and stepped up onto the table. I hopped table to table, then stepped down into the makeshift arena the two fighters had constructed.

The bigger one finally released his grip, staggering back with one abused eye winced shut. The second man struggled to keep his feet as he sucked air back into his lungs. Both of their bodies tensed, however, to rush back at each other.

Muttering a curse at myself, I stepped in between them.

The shorter man tried to wave me aside and when that didn't work, grabbed for my shoulder. I twisted away. "Woman, get out of the way," he growled.

I looked from his scowling face to the other man, who had finally blinked enough stars out of his vision to see me. "This stops," I said as plainly as I could manage, "Right now. You're

making drunken fools of yourselves."

The man behind me grabbed again, this time catching my sleeve. At the same time the big man advanced. "Hiding behind a woman?" he sneered.

"Both of you will have to go through me to get at each other," I mom-voiced at them. "You're making fools of yourselves. Drunken fools."

The man trying to pull me aside by my sleeve snorted. "It takes more than a couple glasses of bathtub wine to get me drunk, lady."

I spared him half a glance. "I think you've lost some tolerance in the last few months, friend." Despite the disdain I poured into my voice, all I wanted was to provoke a response, a verbal one. If he was talking, he wasn't fighting. If he wasn't fighting, their adrenaline could die down.

"Listen, lady," the big man growled down at me, "this doesn't concern you. Get out of the way before you get hurt."

I locked eyes with him. "Are you going to hurt me, friend?"

He licked his lips. "Just move. He's gonna–"

But his opponent was already in motion. He released my sleeve. When I pulled away reflexively, he ducked the other way, trying to quick-step around me. I whirled around to see where he was going, knowing all he needed was one swing to reignite the fight.

But instead of a precise bob and weave, the mustachioed man went "Huck!" with his arms thrust awkwardly to his sides. Snaking around his shoulders and chest were two dark arms. From over his shoulder peeked Aubrey's face, grimacing with the effort of restraining him. She threw me one wink, and then set to wrenching him away.

I turned back to the bigger man, sidestepping to interpose myself again. "Playtime's over, alright? What's your name?"

He watched like a hawk as the other man was frogmarched away, not answering. I asked again. "What?" he finally answered.

"Your name," I asked a third time, enunciating like he was some kind of halfwit.

That at least got me a glare. "Ben," he grumbled. "Ben Fitzgerald."

"I'm Susan Soza." I put out my hand to shake, and leaned over to block his view of the other man. "Pleasure to meet you."

He shook my hand, falling into the familiarity of old routines. Finally he looked me square in the eye. "You know this doesn't change anything. That punk is still going to get what's coming to him."

I didn't release his hand. "No doubt. But–" I pulled him closer and leaned towards his ear. "When that happens, how about you don't do it in a crowded room with guns on your hips, waiting to be drawn in anger." I paused a beat, then felt compelled to make the point perfectly clear. "You pull shit like this again and it's more likely you get somebody else shot than him."

His brow fell and I could see him actually start thinking instead of reacting. "Fuck."

I clapped his tricep and released his hand. "My work here is done," I muttered, and turned to find Westin gaping at me. I collapsed onto the nearest bench and pointed at the brown pitcher in his hand. "Pour me some of that before I completely lose my shit."

The hooch was sour and sticky-sweet, but undeniably alcoholic. I did not savor the taste, but the warmth down my throat and in my belly calmed me just enough that I didn't vomit from nerves.

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