

THE  
BLENDING  
TIME

GLOBAL ALLIANCE/NORTHAM SECTOR 04



SUN COLONIST ID0004654



SUN COLONIST ID0002358



SUN COLONIST ID0004221

MICHAEL KINCH

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## CUTOFF

To All Corridor residents: As of 1 May food allotment coupons will be reduced by 10%. This emergency measure is due to lower-than-expected grain shipments from NorthAm Sector-4. We hope to receive increased shipments from Sector-2 by September.

—*Council vid-memo of 5 Apr 2069*

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Jaym stirred as morning light slanted across his cot. He squinted at the pumpkin sun pushing through layers of smudge. No hint of a sea breeze to clean out the Corridor. He'd need a level-4 breather to hit the pavement today. And now he needed to hit it hard. It was getting too close to Cutoff. When he had turned sixteen, it seemed he'd have forever before sweating about becoming a s'teener. But, bam! Here he was, seventeen and two weeks old—a genuine s'teener, and his angst was gut-churning. Because if he didn't score before Cutoff ...

Stop it! There was still time. He could get a real assignment if he pushed hard enough—and, if he got a dose of luck. Today he'd hit the Global Alliance offices. They'd see his potential and wouldn't ship him off to be a dead-man-walking Canal drone.

Jaym tossed off his sweaty sheet and leaned out the open window to stare at his gray-brown world. Every day the same: the tethered security balloon hovering over the hood; whirlwinds of dust and plastic bags dancing in the street below; a few people masked by breathers heading to the metro stairs. Jaym glanced at the slate sky. Typical Corridor summer day. No relief until October, when drizzle would return to dampen his world to a darker gray. Till then it was choking dust, grit, and heat.

As he stretched, the metro vibrated beneath his bare feet. He glanced at the clock. The 0615, right on schedule. If only he could crawl back in bed, pull the sheet over his head and sleep through the day. If only he could forget his approaching Cutoff day. But no. His daysleeper would be here in an hour, so he

yanked his sheets and pillow from the sagging mattress, tossed them in his locker, then pulled on shorts and sandals. He sniffed his tee shirt. He laid it on the bed and smoothed the wrinkles with his hand. It'd have to do for today's interviews.

Their unit was stifling, with no relief promised. Still no AC. How many days since the grid went down? Ten? Eleven? Rumor was that Pacific Solar had forty square blocks out. *Infrastructure difficulties* was the usual excuse, yet the Hillside neighborhoods of the Council leaders managed to be lit every night. But here on the flats, no cooked meals, no vid, no lights. There would be an occasional tease of electricity. Maybe ten minutes of power with neighbors whooping with relief—then, fizzle. Back to the dark ages.

He slammed his locker and headed downstairs.

In the kitchenette his mother stood at the sink in her yellow uniform, slowly stirring her cup of BrekFast. Poor Mom. The grunge assembly-line job required her to wear that annoying yellow outfit. They even made her dye her hair that humiliating mustard yellow to match her assembly uniform—yellow shorts and tee shirt. Even her scuffed shoes were yellow. Only her tee shirt's red and black Tsen-Dow, Ltd. logo broke the total canary look. He noticed dark roots showing in her hair. Should he say something? Her boss could use any excuse to fire one of the line workers. But she probably couldn't afford a new dye kit. Better just keep quiet.

"Morning, Jaym."

"Morning."

Geez, Mom had aged so much these past couple of years. Maybe it was the morning light, but the bags under her eyes seemed darker, cracked with deeper lines.

She glanced up at him. "Why're you looking at me like that?"

He shrugged. "You just look ... tired." Not just tired, he thought, worn down to hopelessness. A shadow of his once-smiling mother.

She nodded. "Tired." She looked into her cup. "Yes, I'm tired. Twelve-hour days on the line and I'm pushing forty with no chance of moving up. 'Gotta be young,' says the boss. Says I should be happy to have a steady job, and not heading for the Canal or clearing rubble from Old City." She paused. "What's the point of even going on?"

"Come on, Mom! Remember what Grandma use to say: 'Any day—'"

“Yeah, ‘Any day above ground is a good day.’ Well, Grandma’s not having any good days now, is she?”

Jaym bit his lip. Her bitterness and despair had grown deeper each day. And maybe it was catching. There had been three suicides in their building this year alone. He cleared his throat. Had to change the subject. “When’s washday? My tee shirts are—”

“Not for a week, but today’s a dampday.”

“How much?”

“Four liters. Do a tee shirt or two, but don’t even think about a shower or washing your hair.”

Good. Better her predictable lectures than her whirlpool of hopelessness.

“But I really need a shower. I’ve got interviews all week.”

It had been seven weeks since he’d finished Tech School. Most days he stood in lines, filling out applications, smiling into interview cameras at placement centers. So far, *nada*. But he told his mom he had possible second interviews with a couple of places. Anything to give her some hope.

She finger-pressed his cowlick. “Use a little gel and your hair’ll look fine.” He saw a hint of softness in her eyes as she patted his hair. She looked him up and down. “You look pale, Jaym. You feel okay, Honey?”

He shrugged and forced a grin. “Come on, Mom. I was *born* pale. Thank Grandma Johansen for my corpselike complexion and eyes.”

Mom put her fists on her hips. “Cut that out! You’re a good-looking boy.”

Jaym opened his mouth.

“No! You run yourself down too much. You’ve got a nice face with beautiful hazel-green eyes. And your freckles—well, they’re just freckles. Nothing wrong with freckles.” She poked his biceps and shook her head. “You’re losing weight, Jaym. You’ve got to eat more.”

“More of what? We’re down to one ration coupon and it’s a week till issue time.”

“It’s not like we have nothing. Maybe nothing to suit your gourmet palate, but we have basics to get us by.” She looked at her watch. “We’d better get going. Be sure to eat something before you leave.”

“Any leftovers?”

She shook her head. “And we’re out of cereal till ration day.”

Jaym shrugged. “I’ll grab a ProtBar.” He leaned against the sink counter and unwrapped a bar. Although it tasted like sawdust and ChemSweet, the bars were cheap. Ten bars per coupon.

As he chewed, he read the fine print on the wrapper. *Proudly made in South Corridor by RefuCorp, a non-profit organization.* It should read, *Made by the sweat of refugee slave labor.* Most people knew the Council Director owned RefuCorp. Non-profit? Yeah, for the camp ’gees. But how come the Council Head’s mansion looked like a hilltop castle? Word was that kickbacks from the ProtBar operation were spread around the Council, and even up the ladder to honchos at Global Alliance Headquarters. Somehow nothing trickled down to the flatlanders. Oh, that’s right! The wrapper says non-profit.

A bass thumped from the Chavez-Smith side of their apartment. His mother shook her head. “That’s so foolish. They’ll run through their reserves, then what? They’ll have nothing.”

“Can’t we tap our backup just a little?” he asked. “How ’bout an hour of vid tonight. I’m going nuts without—”

Her face darkened as she waved him quiet. “No. I am *not* like your spend-it-while-ya-got-it father.”

The dad-lecture. Was Dad even alive? It’d been three years now. They probably grabbed him for Canal work. Last time he saw Dad was after he’d lost two months of coupons in Vidpoker. When Mom found out she screamed and tried to hit him. He held her wrists until she dropped to the floor sobbing. She said she couldn’t live like this anymore—that she was leaving. Later that night Dad came into Jaym’s room and knuckle-rubbed his head. Said not to be scared, that things would be all right. He’d be on his feet in no time. On his way to school the next morning, Jaym glanced back to see Dad watching from the window.

Dad never even left a note.

His mother now stared at Jaym. He knew what she was going to say.

“Where are you trying today?”

He wadded his bar wrapper and looked down at the scuffed linoleum. “C.G. Row.”

“Maybe you should try something more realistic, Hon. You’ve got to *know*

somebody in Corridor Government to get a job.”

“Gov jobs aren’t impossible. Jos Susnec walked into Corridor Enforcement and got a patrol job on the spot. Two openings happened while he interviewed.”

Her back stiffened. “That’s because cops die. Especially around here. I *won’t* let you die.”

“I’m *not* talking about being a cop. But it’s possible I could walk into a gov office right when they have a hydro opening.”

His mother sighed. “Jaym, there are too many hydro techs out there. I wish you’d gone into solar.”

He flushed. “You know I worked my butt off just to pass radiation dynamics! The Hill kids hire tutors to get through. Or they bribe a grading assistant. I didn’t stand a chance!”

“Okay, okay.” She emptied her cup then grabbed her sack lunch and yellow breather. “Jaym, please just find something before they put you on the Canal or in the infantry.” She looked aside, chin trembling. “I couldn’t stand it.”

He forced a smile. “I’m gonna get lucky today.”

“Yes, lucky,” she mumbled. “Just remember there’re only—”

“Five weeks till Cutoff. I *know*, Mom!” He turned from his mother to towel ProtBar oil from his fingers. Five weeks. If he didn’t get placed, he might risk flight to another sector. He had considered running north, but the CanAm border was tight. Even if he made it across, he’d probably end up in their ’gee camp. Or worse, deported back and sent south for Canal Duty.

His mother wiped tear-smear mascara. “What about a clerical or supply job in the military? Your tech scores would keep you out of the infantry.”

“I’m gonna keep trying for hydro. I’m good.” Not great, he thought, but good enough—if he could catch a break. Just one freaking break.

She nodded. “Okay, hydro. Good luck, Hon. See you at 1800.”

“Just a sec, Mom. Your hair’s messed up here.” He fluffed brittle yellow strands, trying to cover gray-brown roots.

She gave him a quick, tight hug then hurried out the door.

He dropped his wrapper down the ’cycler and drank a cup of tap water the color of weak tea. As he sipped he thought about his default choices. Yes, there was always military service, a step above Canal duty. Military pay was near zero, but you

had your own bunk, unshared by daysleepers. Rumors were that infantry had a one-in-four chance of getting killed or maimed, but he'd scored high in the Corridor Placements so they'd probably put him in an office or on tech surveillance. Maybe even quiet border duty. But if they assigned him to a hot spot—say a riot or rebellion—they'd grab anybody in uniform to engage in firefights and kick in doors.

Enough of that. Had to be positive today. Needed to impress the Corridor Government interviewers. He grabbed his breather and daypack, then checked the street. Looked safe. Just a few kids on their way to school. He bolted the steel door and headed for the metro entrance.

He made it two blocks before he heard a sultry voice. "Hey, Jaym, remember me?" He glanced at the wall vid and stepped aside the increasing foot traffic. He sure did remember the babe in shorts, tight tee shirt, and hardhat. Gov propaganda of course, but she was always worth a look. He'd never admit it, but her eye contact and calling him by name helped relieve his loneliness. Too bad she wasn't interactive, but still, she said his name, and she'd always be here.

The vid girl smiled as she climbed down from a spotless digger. "Glad you stopped again, Jaym," she said in her silky voice. "Join me, Jaym. Be a part of history and help complete the Canal. All you have to do is drop by your local Canal recruiter." She winked and flexed a tanned biceps. "I've never been so fit and proud of what I'm a part of. Together we can bring MexiCal back to life. Refugees will resettle and replant orchards. So please—"

He walked on. Was anyone desperate enough to fall for Canal recruitment? Sure, his vid babe had her shiny new digger and a perfect bod, but everyone knew Canal work was backbreaking, and deadly. Rumors were that one or two thousand had been killed this past year. Cave-ins, rock falls, idiots at the controls of monster diggers who were forced to make their distance quotas. Were those quotas measured by dead s'teeners per day?

Jaym crammed into a metro carriage and held on as it accelerated. He noticed a couple 'tooted guys sizing him up. He elbowed through the crowd to the next car. There he shared a chrome pole with a girl about his age. Her designer breather—this year's model by Hil Martien—perfectly matched her tan. Embossed mask-lips curved in the hint of a smile. She had to be from Kirkwood or Edmonds Sector to



afford that mask. Her icy blues stared beyond him.

He leaned with the packed crowd as the metro hissed around a bend and braked into Sweethome Station—his stop. No words, just grunts and the shuffle of feet as two dozen passengers jostled out with him. Weird how you could shuffle with the other lemmings yet be totally alone—ignored. Did others feel that way? Though it's not like you could ask—*'Scuse me, ma'am or sir—Do you ever feel alone—even lonely—in this swarm of people going to where the hell ever they're going? Pardon me, Miss, but have you ever felt like hanging yourself like my neighbors?*

By the time Jaym walked the six blocks from the metro station to Government Row, burning tears streaked his cheeks. He should've grabbed his goggles. The heat, dust, and smog had settled thick in this sector.

The address he had for the Gov Placement Center led him to an ancient cut-stone building crowded by towering concrete units. Before he pushed through the glass doors he wiped the sting from his eyes. Once inside, he slipped his breather in his back pocket and smoothed his hair.

In the immense entranceway he gawked at the ceiling soaring above pink granite pillars. Couldn't be real granite—had to be painted concrete. He fingernailed the nearest pillar. Damn. The real thing, with different-colored crystals and tiny fossil shells. Perfectly cut and polished. He'd heard all these fancy old buildings had been torn down and the pieces divvied up for the councilors and other wealthy collectors on the Hill. Ornamental buildings were wasted resources, proclaimed the Council. Yet this one stood. Maybe it once was an old church attended by someone with connections. Hard to tell what it had been since this level was now remodeled into no-nonsense office complexes with a maze of hallways.

His footsteps echoed as he approached the information desk. The elderly woman at the counter didn't even look up from her vid pad as she spoke in a robotic voice. "Welcome to the Global Alliance Placement Center. First-time, or repeat applicant?"

"Alliance? But, I thought this was local Corridor placement."

She glanced at his face, then his wrinkled tee shirt, and frowned. "The Corridor Government offices relocated to Seattle Sector last year."

He winced. "But that's clear across the Sprawl."

“The Corridor Complex,” she corrected, her tone brittle.

“Sorry—Corridor.” Damn, he thought. It’d take most of the day to make transfers over there—even if he had enough metro passes. “Okay, Alliance jobs here. Does the Alliance ever have hydro openings?”

The woman hesitated, then lifted a brow. “You’ll have to ask at *Applications*. Fourth door down the hall to the right.” She dismissed him with a flip of her hand.

He found the door and read the stenciled words:

**Global Alliance**  
**North American Sector**  
**Application Center**

Should he knock? No, this was an application office. He took a breath, straightened his shoulders, and stepped inside.

Oh crap. At least twenty others ahead of him, all crammed on benches. The stifling room reeked of B.O. mixed with a confusion of perfume and aftershave. He tore ticket number “0113” from the autoteller. Up front the two interviewers worked behind glassed-in offices. 0082 glowed above one door, 0083 above the other. And his was 0113? Damn.

By 1400 his stomach rumbled. At this point even a ProtBar would be good. At least the numbers above the door now read 0110 and 0111. He turned his ticket over and over.

A heavy-set man with a sheet of paper came out of one office. Number 0112 flashed. Jaym looked around the room, but no one stood. Twenty seconds, thirty seconds ...

0112 morphed into 0113. He stood, squared his shoulders and walked toward the interviewer.

Inside the cramped office the girl waved him to sit. “Almost finished,” she said, wandng a vidpen at the screen. She looked no more than twenty. Bronzed hair cut neat and short. Her perfume filled the space with tropical flowers. *Plumeria*, if he correctly recalled the scent from a street vid.

“Okay, scan, please.”

He palmed the scanpad. She stretched and cricked her neck. “It’s not reading.

Wipe your hand and re-scan.” He rubbed his palm on his shorts and tried again.

“Much better.” Data streamed across her screen. “Surname and given name.”

“Jaym ... sorry, Johansen,” he said. “With an ‘e.’ Given name, Jaym.”

“Chin on the pad.”

He leaned forward. Amber beams swept his irises.

“Done,” she said. She tapped the screen. “I’m doing the data cross.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m probably data-tagged for hydro, but I did well in solar. I’m motivated to be an asset to any solar program.”

Contact-green eyes glinted at him—hint of a smirk. “The data match won’t allow it. Your solar score is eleven points beneath cutoff. Not bad, but not good enough for the wait list. And your references are weak. No Council connections either.”

He felt as if he were sinking, slipping underwater.

The woman leaned back, tapped apple-green nails on her desktop. “Well, Jaym Johansen with an ‘e,’ I see you’re getting close to Cutoff.”

*Was she reconsidering?* Had to keep his shoulders square. Make confident eye contact.

“I assume you know your options. Have you seriously considered the military? Volunteers have more choices than draftees. Certainly better than Canal duty. In the military there are many opportunities for vocational—”

He worked to keep his voice steady. “No, please. I—I must be qualified for something else.”

She fingered a jade earring and looked back at the screen. “Okay, your interpersonal tests are promising. Hmm. Good marks in cross-cultural. And you’ve volunteered at the refugee camp. Commendable.”

He didn’t tell her that he’d been assigned to brush clearing around the camp perimeter. And he only did that to get out of hand-to-hand combat class. Never set foot inside or saw dusties up close. If she dug deeper in his file he’d be a Canal rat for certain.

She pursed her lips. “Ever heard of the SUN Colonist Program?”

“Sun? That have something to do with solar tech?”

“No. It’s ‘S-U-N’, all caps. Stands for ‘Society to Unify Nationalities.’”

“Like the old United Nations?” asked Jaym.

“No. The Global Alliance replaced the U.N. concept, but with a much stronger hand to enforce peace.”

*More like a stronger fist,* thought Jaym.

“SUN hopes to break down the tribal and racial barriers that have plagued the planet since we came out of our caves.”

“Good luck with that,” said Jaym.

The girl pinched her lips. “Do you want a chance, or just make sarcastic comments?”

Jaym sat straighter and cleared his throat. “No, ma’am. It’s just that since I’ve never heard of SUN and, um ...” He coughed. “Sorry.”

She leaned back, eyeing him. “SUN was founded by a colony of Dutch Quakers, not long after the sea swallowed the Low Countries. The movement does not push religion. The Quakers have been quietly working with volunteers and charities for years, trying to help heal those areas ravaged by war, drought, and disease. But, as you know, most charities are now as withered as MexiCal. The Global Alliance, however, has given SUN a grant of seed money to launch SUN’s Colonist concept. At this point it’s experimental, but if the program succeeds it could resolve several global ... issues.”

“SUN Colonist,” said Jaym as he rubbed knuckles on his thighs. “I’d be a SUN colonist—somewhere?”

“Africa.”

He opened, then closed his mouth.

“Is Africa a problem for you?”

“It’s just that ... Africa is toast. AIDS-III, the wars, the Great Flare. I heard the Flare alone killed millions.”

“Yes, Africa has been through all of that, but people have survived. They desperately need ... help. Although it’s a trial program, the SUN concept may be their salvation.”

Jaym chewed his lip as he thought. *Would he ever see NorthAm again if he was sent to Africa? And what about Mom? At least she might get some Alliance comp money to make up for the little he brought in. He knew families of kids sent to the Canal who got extra rations. At least that’s what an Alliance DocuVid claimed. And Africa couldn’t be as bad as going to the Canal. Nobody comes back from Canal work.*

He took a long breath. "I suppose there's still fighting in Africa."

"There are Renegades, but the Alliance is providing adequate troops to protect Colonists." She glanced at the clock. "You're over our allotted time. 'Yes' or 'no' to Colony Service?"

"But will I—"

*"Yes or no?"*

## 'GEE CAMP

*“No hay mal que por bien no venga.”*

(There is no bad that comes without a good.)

—*MexiCal proverb*

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The refugee camp sprawled to the northeast, across the desolate flats of the Corridor. Behind the camp’s endless fence, Reya Delacruz walked hand-in-hand with her little sister. Leeta’s small hand was warm and moist in hers. Each girl carried a plastic bucket as they headed toward the water truck for their daily ration.

This was the monthly Coupon Day—a day Reya hated. But she couldn’t let Leeta see her anger. Had to put on this monthly act and stall for at least an hour before heading back to their tent. Reya detoured Leeta around faded tents rustling and flapping in the constant wind.

She told Leeta these detours were a game, a way to make fetching water more fun. But making anything ‘fun’ in ‘gee camp was all but impossible, especially today. It hurt so much to see that young gleam of hope in Leeta’s eyes fade during these last months of heat, hunger, and monotony.

Today most inmates hid in the shade of their tents. Others paced the fence for exercise, or stood in the baking sun with the hundred others lined up at the commissary. Nearby, under a large open tent, Mrs. Guzmán worked with the younger orphans, holding up pieces of cardboard with one-syllable words. The children chanted: “DOG! CAT! RAT!” Reya smiled. Thank God there were a few women like her. Those kids hardly stand a chance, but Mrs. Guzmán gives them a glint of hope and purpose. You’d think the Corridor government would set up some sort of school in this hellhole. After all, a few kids might get a Corridor placement. They’d be shit jobs, of course, but better than rotting here or being shipped to the Canal.

Reya leaned down to check Leeta’s breather. ‘Gee camp didn’t get much

Corridor smog, but winds whipping across the flats brought grit and choking dust devils. She stroked Leeta's hot cheek and adjusted the mask. "That better?"

Leeta nodded.

Reya steered Leeta upwind of Latrine Alley to avoid the stench and clouds of flies. As in each day's walk, they paused at the section of the fence where the wind sang through wire mesh like a chorus of spirit voices. Some evenings, when the sun dropped low and the wire was cool enough to touch, Reya would come out to press her palms to the mesh and shiver at the harmonics vibrating through her hands. She thought of it as a harp, a way to recall the music she and the other 'gees left behind in MexiCal.

A hundred meters beyond the fence a Trans-Corridor metro streaked past. A blur of faces stared at them as the Corridor-born sped past to their real lives.

"Wave at the train, Leeta." The little girl squinted into the wind and waved at the passing train. Reya took her hand and they walked on.

*Dust rats*, the guards called Reya and the other 'gees. "Dusties" if they were in a lighter mood. But during camp inspections by Corridor officials, the guards were careful to say, "Refugees." When Alliance overseers made their annual visit, Reya and her fellow 'gees enjoyed seeing the Corridor guards and officers strut like tin soldiers and kiss Alliance ass.

"Okay, Leeta," said Reya. "Now you choose the way."

"I just wanna get the water and go back. I'm hungry."

"Sure, Hon ... in a few minutes. Hey, wanna check out the new arrivals?" Leeta swung her empty bucket and shrugged.

"Okay, Sweetie. Just don't stare. Remember how people stared when we arrived? We don't want to be rude like that."

"I'll just look a little," said Leeta in her grownup voice. Reya squeezed her hand as they walked past the Arrivals area.

The Arrivals baked under open tarps. Reya noticed the numb stares of six ribby children following the two girls. If they were lucky, the kids would get meal rations soon, and a real tent—in a few days, or weeks.

She remembered how her mom tried to make their hot, wind-flapping tent into a home. Theirs had been little more than four canvas walls with a tarp roof, plus cots to keep them above the dirt floor and the evening skitter of roaches and mice.

Mom had hung the old family crucifix from a tent pole, then spent days digging through trashcans for clothing scraps. She tore the scraps into strips and for weeks wove them into a soft, raggedy rug to cover much of their dirt floor.

Although camp life was a dusty hell of boredom, hunger, theft—and occasional violence—at least there were no dunes. Leeta had another nightmare of the old place last night. Dunemares, she called them. So many nights she'd wake up sobbing, gasping for breath. Mom would hold her, rock her in her arms. "It's okay, Hon. It's okay. No dunes. No more dunes. We're far, far north of them. They can't get us."

Reya had similar dreams, but they were faded now. In her worse dreams the dunes oozed toward their old house like brown amoebas. Dune fingers crept across the withered corn patch, smothered Mom's struggling zinnias, and silently flowed around the house to rise above windows and doors as they slept.

Reya snapped from her thoughts when Leeta asked, "Why does Mom want us gone when Remington comes?"

She smoothed a lock of Leeta's black hair, avoiding her large, questioning eyes. "It's just that ... Mom needs extra time to get our ration coupons. They have to ... talk about it so she gets the right amount." *God, could she know?* But Leeta said nothing, just swung her pail as they walked on.

Refugees got a meager ration of food, but for toothpaste, soap, or any other "luxuries," as the guards called them, you needed coupons. Anyone in camp who could walk had to pull shifts in the camp's ProtCorp assembly lines to earn coupons. The guards, however, would trade coupons to 'gees for jewelry or certain "favors."

Mom's wedding ring went first, and then the silver cross she had always worn. But to Reya the greatest loss was Grandma's old mantle clock. Even though the glass face had broken on the journey north, its tick-tocking always brought back the memory of Grandma's house, the sparkle in her coal-black eyes, and even the ever-present scent of her cilantro-mint salsa. Outside Grandma's house grew an ancient oak tree that Reya climbed nimbly as a squirrel. From her highest perch she could see beyond vast orchards to mountains hazy in the distance. She loved the vast open spaces of that land, spaces that allowed her to dream she could walk to those mountains, or even the ocean beyond.



Back then the dunes were only a dark tale told by families fleeing from the south in wagons or on foot. But Reya knew something that far away could never touch their vast valley or Grandma's ranch house. She would always be free to chase rabbits through fields or collect a basket of acorns in the shade of the great oak.

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A month after the clock was bartered for coupons, Mom finally gave in. Reya remembered when she saw Remington leaving their tent. He had stepped out buttoning his shirt. He didn't see Reya, so he whistled as he sauntered back to the guard's compound.

Reya had burst into the tent. "*No*, Mom! Why?! Please tell me you didn't!"

Mom wiped her eyes. She knotted her fingers and looked away.

Reya screamed and threw the lantern across the tent.

Mom's face had flushed, but she lifted her chin and snapped back, "I had *no choice!* He threatened to cut our rations in half. I'm *not* going to watch you girls go hungry!"

"I'll report him to the Commandant! Don't *ever* let the bastard—"

She grabbed Reya's arm. "Stop it! Remember what they did to Maria Sabiná when she reported a guard? The burns? Her broken teeth?"

The rest of that night had been a blur for Reya. She did remember the numbing pain of beating her fists against the wire mesh and screaming like a wildcat. Guard-tower spotlights had quickly beamed on her, but after a few moments, moved away. Just another dustie who'd lost it and was pounding her knuckles to the bone.

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The girls finally filled their pails and started back. It had been an hour. Surely enough time.

"Hey, *chicas*," came a leering voice from a tent shadow.

Reya glared at the scrawny boy stepping into the sunlight. "Beat it, Lobo." She pulled Leeta closer.

"You're a s'teener now, Big Reya. Saw it on the board last week."

She hadn't told Leeta she'd turned seventeen—a s'teener. The age for service. 'Gee s'teeners were ripe for Canal duty or the infantry. She could be assigned within the month.

Lobo crossed his arms and grinned. “When you leave, who’s gonna watch out for li’l sis?”

Reya fought to keep her voice calm. “Leeta, go to the fence. I need to talk to Lobo for a minute.”

Leeta stared up at her, wide-eyed.

“Go on, Hon. Hey, I hear another metro coming. Wave at the people for me. I’ll be right there.” Leeta looked over her shoulder as she shuffled away.

Reya set her bucket down and walked toward Lobo. The boy’s grin faded and he took a step back.

“You goddamn better leave Leeta alone. If you even talk to her—”

Lobo held his palms out. “Hey, easy, chica. I’m trying to do you both a favor. Los Lobos will protect her. If not my gang, another will get her. You think your Mom’ll watch out for her? Hell, she’ll probably teach Leeta to—”

Reya put her weight into a punt to Lobo’s crotch. He folded, gasping in the dirt. He tried to crab away from her. She stepped on his back and hissed, “If you *ever* try to recruit her, I’ve got friends who will dangle your little *cojones* from the razor wire. Got it?”

Lobo vomited.

Reya found Leeta by the fence. “Did you wave?”

Leeta nodded, her eyes anxious.

“It’s okay, Sweetie. Don’t ever talk to Lobo, okay? He’s a bad boy. I promise he won’t ever hurt you, but you have to stay away from him. Okay?”

Leeta nodded.

They walked on with their buckets. “Reya, when are you leaving me?”

Reya shuddered, but forced a laugh. “Hey, do I look like I’m leaving?”

Leeta kicked a rock with her tattered sandal. “Some of the girls say you’re gonna leave ’cause you’re a Teener.”

“Yes, I’m now a s’teener, but sometimes it takes months—many months before s’teeners get their assignments.”

“But, then you’ll leave us, right?”

“Hey! We’re back home already.” *Damn, the tent flap is still closed.* “Hey, Leeta, we forgot to check the bulletin board. Mom likes to know about any camp news.”

“It’s too hot.”

Reya steered her away. “Come on, Sweetie, it’ll just take a minute.”

They set their buckets in the shade and walked back to the camp bulletin board. In the midst of sun-faded slogans—A CLEAN CAMP IS A HEALTHY COMMUNITY and CRIME REFLECTS ON ALL CAMP RESIDENTS—was the list of incoming dusties as well as the printout of assignees. Eleven outgoing listed today, but she rarely saw anyone she—

She clasped hands to her mouth. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Already.”

She read her name again.

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