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The Soldiering Life and Hard Bread

“Mylo... Mylo, it’s time to get up.”

Mylo opened his eyes. The sun coming in through the gaping opening in the wall made it difficult to focus right away. He lifted his hands and rubbed them while letting out a big yawn. “What time is it?”

He felt the blankets move as his sister stood up and walked across the room. “Breakfast time. Here, eat this.” Her hand held out an apple to him. He pushed himself to sit up, moving his eyes away from the sun, then grabbed it joyfully and took a huge bite. His sister sat back down on the bed. “Looks like you are hungry.”

Mylo nodded vigorously as he crunched another mouthful out of the apple. “Where’d you get it?”

“You won’t believe it. Someone just handed it to me when I went out to get some water.”

Mylo looked up. “They just gave it to you?”

His sister smiled back and tousled his hair. The sunlight that passed through the hole landed gently on her face, hiding the dirt that covered it in a brilliance of light. A cut had appeared across her cheek that had not been there the night before. “Yup! He just handed it to me, so I thought I’d come right back and give it to you!”

Mylo smiled as he wiped his mouth of juice. He held the apple up to his sister, “Want some?”

Her head shook. “I’m not hungry. That’s all for you!” She stood up and dusted herself off. “Once you’re done we’re going to go find

more food. Sound good?”

Mylo nodded as he shoved the apple farther into his mouth, trying to get as much out of each bite as he could.

Echoes from the street below made their way up the rocky walls and through the hole in the wall. The daily clamor of the market on the street below where they lived was Mylo’s favorite sound in the morning. He stood up and walked out of the blankets strewn across the dusty floor to look down on the busy people.

Everywhere he looked people were busy carrying on with their ordinary routines. The sun had risen higher in the sky, bouncing its rays off of the rough white stones that made up the surrounding buildings. A few of the buildings had holes pocketing their tough exteriors. Some were small, but others spanned the length of an entire building.

The whole street was a mass of color and sound. A warm breeze passed by, carrying with it the smells from further down the street. Fresh-baked bread and cooking meats saturated Mylo’s sense of smell. He closed his eyes and basked in the warmth of the sun as his senses took in his surroundings.

A din from the same direction as the wind snapped Mylo out of his trance. A group of six men were walking in formation, each heavily armed and covered in armor.

“Look, Kay. Soldiers!”

His sister walked over to him and looked out the hole. She put a hand on Mylo’s shoulder and pulled him in closer. “I wonder what they’re doing here?”

Mylo started bouncing. “They’re probably here to catch the bad guys!”

Kay tousled Mylo’s hair again. “Probably!”

Mylo took another bite of his apple. “I wish I could be a soldier...Do you think that one day when I grow up that could happen? Do you think I could be just like Dad?”

Kay sat down on the ground and started wrapping her feet with strips of cloth. “When you grow up, Mylo, you can be whatever you want.”

Mylo’s eyes grew wide. He started imagining life as a tough soldier. He would travel to distant lands to save people from the rebels that killed people and destroyed buildings. Those people would be so grateful that they would make him a hero and give him all the food he could ever want to eat.

The last few bites of apple didn’t seem as exciting anymore. He moved away from the hole and put the apple down on a rock in the corner of their room.

“What are you doing?” Kay stood up and walked over to him. She picked up the apple and held it in front of his face. “Don’t

waste food. You never know when you'll be eating again."

Mylo reluctantly grabbed the apple and finished the last few bites, his mind still fixated on the soldiers. "Do you think Dad will come back?"

Kay finished tying the end of the cloth into a knot so that it would not fall off. "I don't know. Maybe we will see him again someday."

Mylo perked up a bit. "Then maybe he can take us to live with him!"

Kay motioned for the apple core. Mylo had eaten most of it, but there was still a little bit of fruit clinging tightly to the side. Kay nibbled a bit of it off and tossed it into a small pile in a corner of their small room. "I sure hope so," she muttered.

"Can we go to the market now?"

Kay smiled and nodded. She grabbed a few pieces of cloth and wrapped up Mylo's feet the same way she had wrapped her own.

Kay grabbed a satchel from the corner, and the two climbed out the hole. The sun had risen quite high since Mylo had awakened. The two stood on a narrow ledge that spanned the length of the old building. They made their way toward what used to be the building next to them. Now it was a pile of rubble that leaned against the wall of where they lived. The two hopped onto the pile of rocks and climbed down to street level.

Mylo looked up at his sister. "So what are we doing today?"

"We are going to see who can get people to give the most food." She scanned the market street and then looked down at her little brother. "Who ever has the most by the end of the day wins. Deal?"

"No fair. You already have a head start!"

Kay chuckled. "Fine, I'll let you go first. Just be careful and stay where I can see you, alright?"

Mylo nodded and dashed off into the crowd. People were everywhere, mulling about between the different stalls. Mylo threaded through the crowd to find his favorite stall on the street, a bakery. Two men were walking in front of Mylo, deep in conversation.

"Where do you think the soldiers were off to?"

"Another faction of those rebels was located, so they probably wanted to stomp it out before it grew any larger."

"Do you think they could also help with the rat problem we have here?"

"Did you get robbed again?"

"Yup. I turned my back on her for one second, and the next thing I know, I'm missing a few apples."

Mylo slipped past the two men and ran ahead. The mob thinned out a bit as he reached his favorite shop. Mylo clambered onto the counter so he could see what was for sale. Various pastries and breads sat in baskets, waiting to be bought by hungry customers.

"Hey, Mylo! What're you up to today?"

Mylo looked up. Gustavo was pulling a tray of fresh-baked bread out of a brick oven.

"Hey, Gustavo. Me and Kay are seeing who can get the most food today. She gave me a head start 'cause she was able to get some before I woke up."

Gustavo set the tray on a stone platform behind him and turned back to face Mylo. "That was nice of her!"

"Yup! She's a great big sister."

Gustavo laughed. His voice echoed out of the stall and off the opposite wall, filling the air with joy. He took a seat on a small stool behind the counter and started rifling through things. "How old are you now, Mylo?"

Mylo pulled himself up, crossing his legs on the counter, and held up his fingers. "Six."

Gustavo sat up on his stool and rubbed his large stomach. "Six? Wow, you're getting big! That means you need a lot of food. So here's what I'm going to do for you." He motioned for Mylo to lean in closer. "I'm going to give you two of my best loaves. Free of charge!"

Mylo jumped up. "Really?!"

Gustavo nodded. He pulled two loaves of bread out from under the counter. "Here you go! Enjoy them, little buddy. Say hi to Kay for me."

"Thanks, Gustavo!" Mylo took the loaves and hopped off of the counter. He weaved his way back through the crowd and found his sister standing in the shadow of the rubble pile they had climbed down. A man was standing next to her making conversation.

"So, how old are you?"

She didn't look back at him. "14."

"You're almost a fully grown woman. You need a nice, strong man in your life to keep you safe."

She looked up at the man. "There is already a man in my life. And because of him, I won't stoop to your level." She turned away and started walking toward Mylo.

Mylo held both loaves of bread high above his head. "Look what Gustavo gave me!"

Kay gave him a hug. "Wow, that's a ton of food! I don't think that I could beat you today."

"Did you even try?"

"Yup, but no one would give me anything."

"That's cause you're not as cute as me!" Mylo stuck out his tongue.

"Sure," she laughed. "Let me take these back to our room. You wait right here, okay?"

"Yup!"

Kay put both loaves into her satchel and started to climb the wall of the building.

A commotion started down the street. The soldiers from before were heading back up the street, only another man was with them. The soldiers formed a tight group around him, escorting him through the crowd of people. The seventh man wasn't wearing any armor and had his hands tied behind his back.

The situation seemed similar to one that had happened before. Mylo remembered when he was little, soldiers had entered his home and had escorted his dad away in the same fashion. Mylo started to follow them.

The soldiers moved swiftly through the mob of people, pushing aside those who didn't get out of the way fast enough. Mylo tried to keep up, passing through the crowd in the wake of the soldiers. Gustavo's shop came into view. The soldiers stopped briefly to buy a loaf of bread, then continued on their way. Mylo waved as he continued to follow the soldiers. Gustavo did a double take when he saw Mylo and tried to jump over the counter to catch up with him. His large stomach hit against it, knocking several loaves of bread onto the dusty ground.

Mylo giggled at the spectacle and continued following the soldiers. His imagination floated towards the soldiering life. He marched behind the group, waiting for the day he could be like his dad and become a hero.

The soldiers soon stopped in the middle of a courtyard. Mylo stood back as they climbed onto a platform and pushed the man down to his knees.

Mylo's mind filled with excitement. "This must be when they select the soldiers. That could be me one day!"

One of the soldiers walked forward, holding a scroll in his hands. He unrolled it and began reading: "On this day, the criminal known as Makine, second leader of the rebellion, shall be put to death." The soldier rolled up the scroll as two others drew their swords.

Mylo's smile dropped.

"MYLO!" Kay ran up and pulled him in close, turning him around and putting his head in her shoulder. "Why did you run off? I got so worried."

"Dad's not a hero, is he?" Mylo's breathing became shaky. "He's not off fighting bad guys and saving the day."

"No, Mylo. He's not."

Tears started to well up and seep out of the corners of his eyes. He began to weep. "WHY DID YOU LIE TO ME!"

Kay gently put her hand on the back of his head. "Before Mom died, she told me never to tell you about Dad. She wanted someone in this family to grow up seeing the world the way it was meant to be seen. With all the beauty, love and happiness that we all hope exist. Through innocent eyes."

Mylo wrapped his arms around his sister and cried. Kay picked him up and carried him back down the street.

Gustavo was sitting on his stool, clearing the counter of bread crumbs and dirt. "Kay," he motioned for them to come near.

He pulled a loaf of bread off the stone platform behind him. "He's had a rough day, huh?"

"Very. Thanks for the notice."

"I would've done it for anybody." He offered the bread. "Take this. I know how much you need it."

Kay grabbed the loaf, bowing slightly, "Thank you very much."

"See you two tomorrow."

She continued walking. They reached the building. Mylo wriggled free of Kay's arms and started to climb up to the roof. Both made it up and down the narrow platform towards their hole in the wall.

Mylo sat down on his pile of blankets, wiping his eyes.

"Here, Mylo. Have some of Gustavo's bread."

"No, I want the loaves he baked for me." Mylo crawled over to the rock in the corner and picked up one of his two loaves. He bit into it and immediately pulled it out of his mouth. "It's hard."

"It's day-old bread." Kay broke off a piece and struggled to chew it. "Gustavo has always given it to us. He can't afford to give us the fresh stuff."

Mylo sniffed and took another bite of bread. "I guess it isn't all bad."