



THE RED MEASURE

A Story from the World of The Hunger

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An illustrated Penultimate Dawn Cycle short story

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Mara knew exactly how much Sustenance it took to keep a person human, though no academy had taught her the figure and no priest had ever preached it. She had learned by watching people's hands shake at the ration counter, noticing which children had stopped growing, and recognizing the grayish cast that sometimes crept into a person's skin a few days before everything went wrong. The official measure was one cup. The actual measure depended almost entirely on who you were.

Nobles received enough Sustenance to waste on sharper eyesight, smoother complexions, feats of strength at parties, and spells whose only purpose seemed to be making other nobles jealous. Merchants received somewhat less but could usually buy more. Soldiers got whatever quantity kept them dangerous. Laborers received enough to report for work the following morning, which told Mara almost everything she needed to know about how the magistrates defined necessity. People in Lowmarket received what remained.

Mara spent ten hours a day measuring those remains at the South Granary, one of six ration clerks passing paper packets through barred openings to a line that sometimes wrapped halfway around the building. Above the counters hung an enormous scarlet rose, the emblem of Clan Scarlatti, painted so large that Mara could still see it whenever she closed her eyes. The petals were supposed to represent generosity. Mara suspected the artist had been drinking.



At the South Granary, the official measure was one cup. The actual measure depended on who you were.

She dragged a wooden measure through the reddish powder in the bin, leveled the top with the flat of her hand, and emptied it into a packet. The Sustenance looked finer than flour, but unlike flour, tiny crimson sparks occasionally winked between the grains. The old woman waiting on the other side of the bars watched the measure with the fierce concentration of a jeweler inspecting a gem.

"That's light," the woman said. Mara reminded her, quietly, that it was the prescribed amount, but the woman had known a full measure all her life and was not interested in being corrected by someone young enough to be her granddaughter. She leaned close to the bars and added that her husband had worked in this very granary before Mara was born. Mara glanced toward the raised desk at the far end of the room, where Overseer Penrick pretended to study a ledger while watching the clerks over its edge, then slipped another pinch of Sustenance into the packet. "If your husband worked here, he also knew when not to make an accusation where an inspector can hear it." The old woman's mouth softened around something that might have been gratitude, and she hid the packet inside her coat without another word.

That was how theft happened in the South Granary. Not with masked criminals hauling sacks through a back door, but with a pinch here, a spoonful there, or a clerk deliberately failing to level the cup. Everyone stole a little because everyone knew someone who needed a little more. The trick was never stealing enough to be noticed. Mara had become very good at it, which meant she had also become good at living with the certainty that, eventually, someone would notice.

The next few ration tokens passed through her hands in a blur until a boy stepped into the opening wearing Father's old coat. The sleeves reached beyond his fingers and the hem nearly brushed the floor, but the coat still could not hide the heat pulsing visibly through his face.

"Lio." Mara nearly forgot to keep her voice down. Her younger brother attempted a smile and said he had come because she had not been home, as though her presence behind a ration counter were some mysterious betrayal. Mara reached through the bars and caught his wrist. His skin was hot, but not fever-hot. It carried the wrong dry heat of a Reserve that had been empty too long, when the body began searching for magic in places where there was none left to give. She let go immediately and asked when he had last taken Sustenance.

Lio's eyes dropped. Yesterday, he admitted. After another question he clarified that he meant sometime yesterday, and only because Aunt Ness had needed the last of what Mara left at home. Mara stared at him. She had hidden enough for three days, but apparently Aunt Ness had been giving her own share back to Lio even while Mara had been quietly stealing extra to slow the transformation already creeping up the older woman's leg. They were passing starvation back and forth and calling it love.

Mara wanted to leave the counter immediately, but Penrick was watching. She told Lio to go home and check the green tin under her bed. When he said he already had and it was

empty, the cold feeling in her stomach hardened. Someone had found the reserve she had hidden for that evening. Perhaps Aunt Ness had used it. Perhaps a rat had developed expensive tastes. Either way, Lio needed Sustenance before nightfall, and there would be no legal way to get it.

She folded his official ration packet, slid it through the bars, and kept her expression flat. "Go home. I'll bring something." Lio started to protest, but the look she gave him sent him away more effectively than shouting would have. Mara served the next six people without remembering their faces.

The main ration bins were inventoried every evening. Every packet had a token. Every grain of premium Sustenance was weighed separately. But there was one container that existed outside the normal accounting: the sweep bin behind the sorting room, where broken packets, floor spillage, residue from storage shelves, and contaminated mixtures were dumped before being sent for purification. Officially, nothing in it was usable. Unofficially, Mara had never seen anyone purify so much as a spoonful.

At midday she carried an empty water jug toward the rear corridor. Penrick looked up immediately and reminded her she had fetched water that morning. Mara told him, with her most respectful expression, that she possessed a remarkable ability to become thirsty more than once a day. One of the other clerks coughed into her hand to hide a laugh. Penrick did not appreciate the observation, but after a moment he waved Mara on.

The sweep bin sat exactly where it always did, squat and iron-bound beneath a row of shelves. It was also locked.

Mara stared at the new lock and silently revised her criminal plan, which until that moment had depended on Penrick being a complete idiot. He was an unpleasant man, a corrupt man, and a man who polished his shoes with greater care than most people gave their children, but apparently he

understood hinges. Fortunately, the lock was new and the hinges were not. Mara found a thin metal scraper on a workbench and worked the first pin upward a fraction at a time. The tool slipped once and cut the base of her thumb. Blood ran across her palm, but the pin moved. The second followed, and she lowered the entire lid sideways rather than opening it.

Inside lay enough discarded Sustenance to keep her family alive for a month, perhaps longer. Scarlet dominated the pile, but threads of blue and gold ran through it like veins in stone, with occasional patches gone brown or strangely luminous. Mara should have taken one clean-looking handful and left. She knew that. Her fingers had already entered the powder when a rough voice behind her told her not to.

She turned to find Deren standing in the doorway. He cleaned the granary at night, and though Mara had seen him dozens of times, she had never really looked at him. The left arm was almost twice the length of the right. Thick gray plates covered one side of his neck and disappeared beneath his shirt, and his lower jaw pushed forward enough to make every word sound difficult. He was a Mal, one of those people everyone in Lowmarket feared becoming while simultaneously pretending not to see.

Mara asked whether he intended to report her. Deren shook his head, limped into the room, and pointed toward the powder. "I'm telling you not to take from there because you'll poison whoever you feed it to." When Mara explained that her twelve-year-old brother had gone without Sustenance since yesterday, Deren's face changed in the small ways it still could. He understood. That did not make him agree.

She insisted she could sort out the visibly spoiled material, but Deren gave a dry, broken laugh and asked whether she imagined bad magic announced itself with a smell and a warning sign. Mara's fear sharpened into anger. "No magic at all will turn him into this," she said, gesturing before she realized what her hand had done.

Deren went completely still.

The apology formed in Mara's mouth, but he stopped it. She might regret saying the words, he told her, yet she was not sorry that his condition frightened her. Mara looked at him and realized another apology would only make the injury deeper. Instead she asked how it had happened.

For a long moment he seemed prepared to leave. Then he leaned against the worktable and told her his wife had fallen ill during a ration cut. They had two children. Deren had given his share first to his wife and then to the children, and when his own transformation began they tried to give some back. He refused. By the time there was enough Sustenance to spare, his body had already settled into the shape Mara saw before her.



Deren knew what hunger could turn a person into - and what the granary did with those it had already abandoned.

"So we're both fools," she said. Deren's twisted mouth lifted slightly, and he agreed that this was probably true. Then he pointed toward the sweep bin and told her the more important truth: it was not ordinary ration waste.

The material came from the Keep. Noble alchemists and physicians sent experimental blends to the granary for disposal - new skin-conditioning mixtures, combat formulas, concentrated compounds, and batches that behaved unpredictably in the Reserve. The failed material was placed in the sweep bin because the granary had a cheap way to make it disappear. Deren knew because he was the one ordered to cart it away.

"Where?" Mara asked, though the answer had already begun to form. Deren's gaze met hers. The carts went to the Mal Quarter. Sometimes the experimental mixtures were mixed into their rations. If the Mals became sick, nobody investigated. If one died, there was one less mouth for the magistrates to feed.

Mara withdrew her hand from the bin and wiped the contaminated powder onto her apron. For the first time, her fear for Lio had to share space with something larger and colder. Deren had not warned her merely because the Sustenance might hurt her brother. He had warned her because he knew exactly what the granary considered his own life worth.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Mara and Deren moved together without speaking, trying to return the lid to the bin, but the first hinge pin refused to align. Penrick appeared in the doorway before they could force it into place. His eyes moved from the displaced lid to Deren, then to Mara's bleeding hand. For a moment he looked almost peaceful, like a man whose suspicions had finally been confirmed.



Penrick had a place for everything in his granary. Deren had just learned that people like him were part of the disposal system.

"I had wondered which one of you was stealing," he said. Deren stepped in front of Mara and claimed responsibility. Penrick's smile widened. It was an almost noble gesture, he said, but Deren lacked the dexterity to remove an iron hinge cleanly, while Mara had blood on the exact hand that had held the scraper. Penrick entered the room and closed the door behind him, then informed them that they had created a significant problem.

Mara tried to make him understand that Lio was sick, but Penrick's answer was administrative rather than human. Her brother should have managed his ration more responsibly; if he was too young to do so, his guardian should have. Mara asked whether Penrick knew what happened when a person went too long without Sustenance. He adjusted one spotless cuff and said that was precisely why the magistrates distributed it. Mara told him that he distributed only enough to keep people working. Penrick's expression remained mild as he replied, "I fail to see the distinction."

Deren moved beside her and told Penrick that he knew about the experimental Sustenance. That changed the overseer's face. Only for a heartbeat, but Mara saw it: fear. Penrick recovered quickly and called the contents of the

sweep bin harmless disposal material. Deren reminded him that it was being fed to people.

"Mals," Penrick corrected.

The word settled into the room more heavily than a shout. Not people. Mals.

Deren's long hand tightened beside him. Penrick, perhaps realizing too late what he had revealed, straightened his coat and moved toward the door. He would summon the watch, he said, and let the magistrates sort out the accusation properly.

Mara looked from him to the sweep bin. Red. Blue. Gold. Strength, sight, swiftness. Unstable mixtures, dangerous compounds, and enough Essence to do something very foolish. Her father had once told her magic punished people who believed they understood it better than they did. He had been discussing an uncle who accidentally removed his own eyebrows, but the principle seemed sound.

She reached into the bin.

Deren caught her wrist and told her not to. Mara looked at him, then toward the corridor Penrick was about to enter. "My brother needs Sustenance. Your quarter needs people to know what's being done to it. I don't know how to solve both problems, so I'm going to do one very stupid thing and hope it becomes two useful ones." Before Deren could stop her, she scooped up the mixed powder and swallowed.

The taste was metal, smoke, spoiled fruit, and something bitter enough to make her eyes water. For one heartbeat nothing happened. Then her Reserve filled so violently that Mara doubled over.

Essence slammed through her body. She had never possessed so much at once, and the sensation was not warmth or pleasant tingling but pressure, as though her skin had become a vessel far too small for what now lived inside it. Colors burst across her vision. Blue sharpened sight until individual flecks of dust became visible in the air. Red

tightened every muscle until the pain in her cut hand vanished beneath raw strength. Gold bent movement around her, making Penrick's sudden reach beneath his coat look absurdly slow.

Mara understood exactly one thing: she had made a terrible decision. She also suspected she had only a few seconds to make it useful.

Penrick lunged for the corridor. Mara crossed the room before he had completed a full breath and shoved the door closed. The impact tore it from one hinge. It hung there for a moment, then crashed flat onto the floor. Mara stared down at it. "I meant to close it." Deren's laugh was startled and genuine.

Penrick reached for the Sustenance pouch at his belt. Mara saw every muscle tighten beneath his sleeve and moved first. She intended to snatch the pouch. Instead she tore away the entire belt. Penrick stumbled backward with his trousers beginning to sag, and despite everything, Deren laughed harder. Mara tried not to join him. The situation deserved seriousness, but apparently magic did not.

The Essence inside her surged again, painful enough to bend her over. She could not hold it much longer. Her eyes found the stone wall between the sorting room and the public ration hall, and an idea arrived with all the elegance of a falling roof. It was not a good idea, but good ideas had become scarce.

Mara planted both hands toward the wall and imagined a single command: open.

The spell struck with a crack that seemed to split the granary from foundation to roof. Stone burst outward. Shelves toppled, plaster filled the air, and a section of wall collapsed into the ration hall. Hundreds of people screamed and scattered as dust rolled across the counters.



Mara used the last of her control to tear open more than a wall.

When it cleared, Mara stood in the jagged opening. Behind her sat the exposed sweep bin. Beside it stood Deren. Penrick crouched amid the debris, clutching his trousers with one hand and what remained of his dignity with the other.

Every person in the ration hall was staring.

Mara could have tried to explain. Instead she looked at Deren and asked him to tell them.

He did not move at first. Mara understood why. For years, people had looked away from him. Children hid behind parents. Merchants refused his coins. Officials spoke about him while he stood in the same room. Now several hundred people were waiting for him to speak, and even the silence seemed suspicious of him.

Deren stepped through the broken wall.

He told them about the shipments from the Keep, the failed blends, the carts sent into the Mal Quarter, the illnesses, and the bodies. He did not shout. He did not need to. When he finished, the old woman from Mara's counter raised her ration

packet and asked whether the ordinary bins were safe. Deren assured her they were. Another voice asked about the shortages. Penrick found enough courage to stand and insist that there were no shortages, only lawful distributions made according to lawful need.

The crowd turned toward him.

Mara almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

The old woman lifted her packet. Her lawful need, she observed, seemed to shrink every month. Other voices joined hers. Questions became accusations, and accusations became a roar that filled the granary more completely than the dust had.

Mara leaned toward Deren and asked whether they should stop the crowd from reaching Penrick. He considered the overseer, considered the people, and after a moment said he did not think intervention was urgently required. Mara decided this was the most diplomatic answer available.

Then her Reserve surged again.

She gripped the broken counter. Deren's amusement disappeared at once. The mixed Sustenance was still processing, and Mara could feel pressure rebuilding behind her ribs. He told her to release it. Mara admitted she had never cast anything remotely this large. Deren's long arm came around her waist to steady her. "Then don't make it large. Make it useful."

Mara closed her eyes.

She pictured Lio sitting at their table and complaining about supper. Aunt Ness insulting the neighbors from her chair. The old woman receiving a full ration. Deren walking through a market without anyone shifting away from him. None of those were spells. Magic did not care. It wanted an

instruction, and Mara's Reserve had nearly run out of patience.

She opened her eyes and looked up.

Above the hall hung the enormous Scarlatti rose, symbol of generosity, painted red enough to glow in the lantern light.

Mara raised one hand.

The emblem tore loose from its chains.

People ducked, but instead of allowing it to fall, Mara pushed with the last of her Essence. The painted rose shot upward, smashed through the granary skylight, and sailed out over Lowmarket. A moment later it landed somewhere in the street with a magnificent crash.

The hall erupted in cheers.

Mara sagged against Deren. He asked, very quietly, whether that last part had been necessary. She smiled weakly and admitted that it had not. Deren nodded with approval. "Good. I was worried you were losing perspective."



Lio did not become a Mal. Neither did Aunt Ness.

The investigation of the South Granary lasted months, proving that governments could move even more slowly than starving people when properly motivated. Penrick disappeared before the magistrates arrived. One rumor claimed he fled north. Another said Mals caught him first. Mara preferred not to investigate either version too carefully.

The experimental Sustenance program ended, at least publicly, and the granary received a new overseer who measured the rations honestly whenever there was enough to measure. That qualification mattered. The Realm did not become fair because one wall fell down. Lowmarket remained Lowmarket. The Clans remained the Clans. Children still went hungry, nobles still discovered imaginative new uses for

excess Sustenance, and magistrates still produced documents proving that everything was functioning as intended.

But some things changed.

Deren became supervisor of a new purification room because no one in the granary understood contaminated Sustenance better than the man who had spent years disposing of it. Mara became his assistant because, according to the magistrate, she had demonstrated "unusual practical knowledge of mixed magical compounds." Deren preferred to describe her qualifications as having eaten garbage and survived. Both versions were technically correct.

Months later, Mara stood beside him while he examined a tray of recovered red powder. He tested it, smelled it, watched the granules beneath a magnifying lens, and finally passed the tray to her with a nod. Safe. Mara poured the Sustenance into the ration bin.



The new purification room did not fix the Realm. It did, however, feed more people.

Across the room, Lio sat on a barrel doing arithmetic badly and complaining with enough energy to reassure everyone who loved him. Aunt Ness had stabilized. Her leg remained changed, and no spell had restored what deprivation had already taken, but the transformation had gone no farther.

Mara had stopped measuring her life in cups.

Mostly.

On difficult days, when the line grew long and the bins looked low, Deren still caught her counting grains with her eyes. Once he reminded her that she could not feed everyone and certainly could not save everyone. Mara watched the ration line moving toward them: laborers, children, old people, strangers, and familiar faces, all carrying tokens that reduced complicated lives to a single authorized measure.

"No," she said, taking up the wooden cup. "But that's a terrible excuse for not feeding the next one."

She plunged the measure into the red Sustenance, filled it to the top, and this time did not level it.

The End