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Copper Stream

I sat on the stairs, looking up at my apartment. It wasn't *really* mine, as Great Products Inc. liked to remind me constantly. Company housing wasn't awful. A comfortable bed, a full kitchen, and hardwood floors. It seemed great, but I missed the rest of the world. I didn't have time outside of work.

Work started in four minutes. It took three to walk there. I padded down the stairs and across the street. It was not yet five in the morning, and still dark. You could just spot the moon, low in the sky, not as bright as it had been the past two mornings. My colleagues complained about the hours, but I didn't mind. I always liked routines, and five AM to nine PM isn't the worst I've heard of.

The GP Inc. campus was convenient if nothing else. The factories weren't connected to the company apartments, but they might as well be. Each department had its own quadrant, with its dormitories and factories inside. They remodeled three years ago, in 2037, to minimize employee movement. The long, arduous hours indoors made the short walk seem like a treat.

My shift started out rocky. I was a manufacturing technician in charge of quality control. In just the first hour, eight of the two thousand new T-shirts had an error. Three were printed backward, one was missing a finishing seam, and the rest were already unraveling. A new batch would need to be started, and the whole department would have to stay an extra unpaid fourteen minutes.

The rest of the day continued with no other catastrophes, but the minutes passed slowly.

After sixteen hours, I could barely keep my eyes open. Announcements were at the end of the day, and we collected in the lobby, looking at the big screen.

“Good work today, Textiles. As a reminder, breaks for any reason, including bathroom, phone calls, or non-company situations, are strictly once every 120 minutes. We at Great Products Incorporated are a family, and when the individual steps out, they step out on the entire family,” the speakers blared, with the sound of Calum Tanner, the CFO of GP, “In other news, there was a fire in the homewares factory. The fire almost left the facility, but an assembly line engineer was able to stop it before it spread. We don’t know the impact it had on productivity yet, but as soon as we get that data, we will share it right away,” they didn’t mention the death toll or even the name of the person who stopped the fire. Only the data.

I walked out of the building. How many innocent people were alive this morning and dead by tonight?

“Psst. Jamie! I have to talk to you!” I pivoted, the whisper startling me.

“Jesus, Grace. It’s dark,” Grace was shorter than I was, but around her, I felt small.

“I don’t think the fire was an accident.”

“What?”

“I don’t think it was an accident. One of the homewares guys tried to start a union last week. And I think he’s dead now,” Grace wasn’t one to conspire.

“Who told you? Who else knows?” my mind spun in one hundred different directions.

“I can’t tell you. No one else knows, except you, me, and…” she trailed off.

Grace left me alone with the night. The moon was bright at this hour, and it followed me home. I missed feeling the sun, how it warmed me from the outside in. I take company-mandated vitamin D supplements now.

I ate, slept, and woke up, the routine forever the same, although going into the factory that morning felt different. I swiped in as usual and got to my station early. Before the machines got turned on, an announcement blared through the PA system.

“Good morning, GP family! We are here to announce a change to our schedule. We have heard your requests for shorter hours, but these modifications damage us as a family, and we are always looking to strengthen our bond. Instead, starting today, we are instituting a new plan. Each member of the family will now work sixty more minutes.”

My hands shook. They killed an unspeakable amount of people because one person spoke up, and now they were holding us here longer. We were being controlled.

I talked to almost no one that morning. I was too scared that I wouldn't be able to restrain my anger and say something that could get me fired, or worse. I ate my lunch alone in the fifteen minutes we had and tried to cool down.

After work that day, I didn't go straight home and to bed. I went to Grace. She knew the right people.

“I want to form a coalition. To try and demand rights of some sort,” we were sitting in her bathroom, the only private space without cameras on campus.

“I'm assuming you understand the risks involved with that,” she spoke eloquently.

“I do. Who do I talk to? Who will join me?” Grace knew more than I did.

“I know people all across the company. I just don't know how people will feel so soon after the fire.”

I grimaced, “Will you help me?”

“I'll join you. On one condition. We stick together.”

“Of course. Thank you,” I paused, “for everything.”

When I got home it was midnight. Well past curfew, but I know the patrollers started with northern apartments and made their way down, so I was safe.

After we talked, Grace sent me the names of everyone she knew who might be willing to help. Throughout the following week, I found time to talk to each person. I ended up with four of the nine people Grace had suggested. Our new schedules, with seventeen-hour shifts made communication hard, which I knew was the point.

Grace called us the Moon Troop because we met in her bathroom, where the only thing you could see from the window was the moon, bright as ever. We created a list of demands and decided that the only way we could get something done without dying in the process was to go to management with a petition. Not just any management. We would visit Mr. Calum Tanner before work started the next Monday morning.

The week leading up was stressful. I was angry about work, worried about getting caught, and slightly excited for what was to come. Soon enough, it was Monday morning, and I was waiting with Grace for the other four outside of the main office.

They showed up, one after the other, stone-faced and ready. We went in, and just like we planned, requested an audience with Mr. Tanner. After a hesitant yes from the older man at the front desk, we took the elevator to the twelfth floor.

“What can I help you with?” Calum Tanner spoke in a monotone voice, not looking up when we entered his office.

“We have a petition to show you,” Grace spoke, more confident than I would be.

I slid the stack of papers across his desk, full of signatures from every department and every position.

“We are requesting our hours shortened,” I spoke this time, “we have thousands of

employees asking, begging, for more time off. People are barely getting six hours of sleep, hardly enough to sustain a career of factory work.”

“I see. We will review it and get back to you soon. Now, I think you should all be working,” Calum Tanner’s unfriendly face finally looked at us.

“Fine,” Grace turned on her heel, the rest of us following her out.

I worked the rest of the day, my head not quite in the right space. Before I could leave at ten, my companions and I were called to the office over the loudspeaker.

I was the last of us to get there. We stood the same way we did this morning.

“You need to get off campus,” Calum Turner was standing in the empty lobby. He looked taller than he did earlier.

“What?” Grace looked around, “I don’t understand.”

“You all posed a threat to our family at Great Products Incorporated. We can’t have that kind of attitude in our team,” his voice was infuriatingly dry.

“All we did was ask for slightly more liveable conditions. If that poses a threat to your business model then maybe you should change it,” the words were coming out of me, unfiltered. I couldn’t stop them if I tried, “you lure us here, with your promises of a good wage and company housing when all that does is keep us here longer. You use your so-called ‘family’ as means to exploit your workers. And we won’t stand for it.”

A silence fell over the room. Everyone was shocked. Finally, Mr. Tanner spoke, “You have two hours to pack your things. A bus will pick you up and escort you off campus. If word of this exchange leaves this building, something much worse could happen to you, Jamie. That goes for all of you,” I hated that he knew my name.

We left the room as a group, too stunned to speak. I spent ten years being exploited by

this company, only for it to end like this.

The bus dropped us off an hour from campus, in the middle of a small, rural town. Grace and I found a tiny motel that would take us for the night, and when we got to our room, I immediately fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up the next morning confused. After the haze of what happened last night settled over me, I went for a walk. I ate a real meal. I felt the sun on my back, my arms, and my chest. I soaked up its rays for hours, with Grace by my side the entire time. We were inseparable.

After a few days, I got a new job at a bank where I worked twenty hours a week. After a few more days, I was able to get an apartment of my own (with Grace across the hall, of course). In most of my free time, I reflected. How was I able to speak up like that? Why did I let my employers treat me like that? What happened to the people that didn't get out?