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We stand on the hill and stare down at the rows of white tents below. Countless of them. I've never seen anything like this. I wonder how many people are living here and what their life is like. What my life will be like. I marvel at the fact that we've made it. Despite everything, here we are, after walking on our aching feet for such a long way. We've travelled 450 miles, someone in our group says.

I can feel the fear and worry fall away. It is the promised land after all. Mama looks as if she can hardly believe her eyes either. She too has suddenly relaxed.

Beside me are Chieng and Majok and Thiko, as happy as I am. And then, even though we've just walked so far, and our bodies

and feet are full of pain, I can't resist. 'Race you!' I shout, and we tear away, kicking up dust.

It's like we're back in the village, like this is any old day and we're racing home from school. The bombings never happened, everyone is still alive. Thiko and Majok fall behind, leaving Chieng and me neck and neck. Little by little I pull ahead. Then I remember that he's not yet found any family and I pretend to stumble, slowing enough for him to overtake me.

'Beat you!' he says, grinning madly when we reach the gates. 'That's a first.'

We pant as we wait for the others to join us. We want to go through together.

At the gate are five men in uniform, with blue helmets that look like Mama's soup bowl. They're UN soldiers, I learn. The camp is protected by a barbed-wire fence but it's falling apart in places, with shreds of plastic bags clinging to it. We peer through it into the camp.

Every inch of ground is covered, with tents, people, belongings. And garbage, I can now see. Garbage seems to be strewn all through the camp. Further inside, people are waiting in line for something. There are several lines and they're long. I can't see their end or their beginning. Other people are putting up makeshift shelters of bark and twigs. Some are just sitting on the ground and staring at nothing, it seems.

Now that I'm up close I suddenly feel differently about the camp. And I can see Thiko thinking the same. Then Nyanbuot reaches us and she doesn't appear to like the look of it either.

Thiko gives me a slight nod as if to say, We can do this. So I smile and pat Nyanbuot's head and try to look confident as the rest of our group join us.

When everyone is there, one of the UN soldiers motions us through the double gates. He seems to have no energy in his arm, as if he's tired of doing this for the whole day. Some people hurry through eagerly, others hang back warily, but once inside we all end up moving like a shoal of fish. There's nobody to tell us where we should go, we just walk through never-ending rows of tents that look as flimsy as cardboard. There are children chasing each other and squealing with laughter, but other children are lethargic, sitting in groups with flies clustering around their eyes and nostrils. We pass a little boy lying on the ground just as he vomits, and a girl, maybe his sister, tries to get him to sit up.

The sun burns down. People squeeze into the shade cast by the tents, some watching their children play, some just staring into space. I wonder nervously if I will like living here.

I walk with Mama and Nyanbuot and eventually our group comes across someone who leads us to an office building, where a white man comes out to meet us. The concrete wall of the building looks like it's just been painted, in yellow and brown. There are more UN soldiers outside the building.

The white man talks quickly in English. He sounds like he has a lot to do. 'We've been trying to get everyone to register,' he tells us, 'but we're filling up quickly.'

My stomach drops. Are they going to turn us away?

'But there's still space available,' he goes on. 'Can you form a line, please, over there by that table.' He points to where we should go. 'Once you're done you can get settled in.'

The table is a long rickety thing with a number of African people and three white people sitting behind it and a long line standing in front of it. Many of them look like they've been waiting for

some time. We shuffle away to take our place at the end of the line and the white man goes back inside.

No one is sure what the registration involves but whatever it is it must be complicated, because the line doesn't appear to move at all. Several people give up and wander off. Mama sees me watching them and shakes her head.

'We'll wait our turn,' she says. 'We'll do this the right way.'

The right way means waiting several hours. When we finally reach the table the woman asks our names and what village we are from and writes them on a form, then she tells us to stand to one side with a group of others and wait for a UN worker to show us where we can set up.

We can hardly believe it. We waited all this time just for it to be done so quick? I wonder why all those people before us were at the table for so long, but before we can ask any questions the woman has already moved on to the people behind us.

When the UN man arrives, our group, which includes my family, Chieng, Majok, Thiko and her mother, follows him through the maze of tents. Nathan was the only white man I ever saw up close before, but I don't want to think about him just now. I must help out where I can as we settle into this new home, if that's what it is.

We pass more piles of garbage and the air is thick with unpleasant smells. Along the paths between the rows of tents are signs, but I don't know what they mean and the rows don't seem to be in any order. We go down one row after another and I see a few more UN soldiers as we walk. I can hear moaning coming from some of the tents, where people must be sick. We come upon an old man sitting on the ground who's so skinny you can see his bones. He seems to be looking at me but I realise he's not. His face is

hard, like the bark of a dead tree. He blinks, so I know he's alive, but it's like his life has moved on and left him just sitting there.

Mama grabs my arm and pulls me close. 'Stay near me,' she says. 'I don't want to lose you. I don't know how people find their way through here, every row looks the same.' She asks the man leading us how many people there are in this camp and he tells her eight hundred thousand. At first we think he's got it wrong, or we haven't heard right, but when we ask again he repeats it.

'There are people here from every tribe in South Sudan,' he says. 'This war . . .' He shakes his head. Then he tells us there are just under a thousand aid workers here, from twenty-two different organisations.

Mama holds my hand tightly and I can feel her thinking the same thing. How can there be enough food and water for so many people? I wonder whether they will place us in different tents, and what will happen with Thiko and the others.

Finally we stop at the end of a row of tents. 'Here we are,' says the UN man. 'Zone D.' Then he tells us they've run out of tents and will bring us one when they get more. 'In the meantime,' he says, 'if you could build yourselves a shelter just here.' He points to a bare patch of ground.

'But where will we sleep?' Thiko's mother asks.

'Don't worry,' he says, 'we're working on getting more tents as soon as possible. We'll have them to you as soon as they come in. Just hang tight for now.'

'What about food?' I ask. 'And water?'

He scratches his chin as if he's not sure what to tell us. 'We're working on the food too. There are two wells in this zone. You need to be prepared to wait a while for water.'

Later we discover that waiting a while often means hours at a time.

It will soon be dark. We start work immediately on a shelter. Chieng and I go to ask our neighbours if anyone has tools and eventually we have four machetes. We set off with some others to look for support sticks. About a hundred yards from where we've been told to make our shelter there are shrubs, and beyond that, jungle. The trees close in have been stripped of suitable branches and we must walk further in.

By the time we find what we need we're all exhausted, but we manage to construct a basic shelter. It's thin and surely won't keep out rain, but it's something over our heads and it isn't raining now.

We drag our meagre belongings under it, Chieng, Majok, Mama, Nyanbuot and I, along with Thiko and her mother and the rest of our little group, and fall immediately asleep.

Early next morning, Mama, Thiko's mother and some other adults are taken to the office to collect emergency rations, while Thiko and I go to look for teeth-brushing sticks. We bring handfuls back and distribute them to our group. Mama returns carrying a bundle on her head and another in her arms. When she puts them down I see that she has a scoop of maize flour, some salt and split lentils. Also a jerry can for water, a bucket and basin for washing, a solar lamp, a saucepan, some soap and sanitary pads. These are the things with which we're to start building our new life.

Thiko and Nyanbuot set off to the well and Mama and the other women look for firewood. They don't need a lot because there's