8

Ines

In any other context, this situation would be all kinds of awkward and inappropriate, but this is beyond any of that. The fact that she’s almost naked doesn’t even register with me, except that I can see just how emaciated she is. In fact, she’s currently more clothed than half of the mutants I’ve encountered.

She stares back at me, her mouth still partly open. Her expression is blank, as if she sees me but mentally doesn’t chronicle my presence as anything significant. She is simply noting that I exist, a response identical to mine.

Being this close to another living being in humanoid form is unnerving. I have to catch myself, because my first instinct is to draw my weapons and eradicate something that my adrenaline tells me is a threat. I’m still frozen in place, locking eyes with this girl, and then I detect slight rhythmic movement from her torso. I see her ribs barely rising and falling – she’s breathing, but it’s so shallow that she’s barely moving and it makes no sound.

The moment is so strange that it takes about thirty seconds of uninterrupted staring for me to realize why this is so significant. This is another human being. She isn’t one of the dismembered corpses a few houses down; she isn’t covered in blood; she isn’t just a piece of dead flesh I have to make sure I don’t trip over on my way past. She isn’t a mutant cannibal – she’s actually another living, breathing, human.

I have no idea how to respond to this. If I had my wits about myself, I might speak to her, but I’ve almost completely forgotten what that’s supposed to sound like. The only communication I have from her to respond to is the fact that she sees me. Her expression gives me absolutely no indication of what she’s thinking, if she’s thinking anything at all. She seems too weak to do much of anything, much less carry on any sort of verbal or non-verbal conversation.

Her stare and her presence quickly become too uncomfortable to bear. I allow my muscles to thaw and I hastily withdraw from the bedroom. The house no longer feels like it did before I arrived. The hallways seem foreign, as if I’m not supposed to be there. I haven’t been invited into this house, and so I shouldn’t have entered in the first place. I take the stairs two at a time as I descend, not stopping whatsoever to look in any other direction as I fling the door wide open and leap out.

I walk very quickly away, right into the street, but the further away from the house I get, the slower my feet move until finally I’ve come to a complete standstill. It takes a moment of introspection for me to realize just why I’m no longer moving forward. At first, I can’t consciously explain exactly what it is, but I am convinced that this doesn’t feel right…I’m convinced that I’m doing something wrong. Slowly, my mind begins to exercise itself in a way it hasn’t had to in many months, and I realize that the simple act of walking into that room with that starving girl lying on the bed has put me into a moral position. Can I really just leave her there?

I’d be a fool to waste my time on her. She’s clearly not long for this world, so if I were to spend resources and energy in unsuccessfully trying to revive her, I would be losing those vital things for myself. It would be giving up something with absolutely no benefit, a true sacrifice.

I’ve spent so long taking care only of myself that just making the decision is difficult. I know what I want to do, what my instincts are telling me to do, but…this could change everything. To be responsible for another person, especially such a fragile one during a fragile time...can I handle it? Can I handle the effect this might have on my life? I doubt it. Then again, was I not made to sacrifice? Isn’t that my role as a human being? Practically, it makes no sense, but my conscience is trying to override my realism. I have to make a choice.

I’m not sure how long I stand there, wrestling with myself over this. Eventually, though, a cold wind blows against my face and reaches inside my hood, gently lapping the back of my neck and sending a shiver through me. I take a deep breath, sigh in frustration, roll my eyes at my own folly, and then turn around and walk back into the house.

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The sight of her on the bed is not as shocking to me the second time, but it still is unnerving. I don’t know if she’s ignoring me or doesn’t hear me, but she doesn’t open her eyes to look at me this time. As I was making my way up the stairs and into the room, my mind was slowly moving to accept the fact that I am going to now invest my time and resources into trying to help this girl. I spent so much time trying to convince myself that I can make a difference that I didn’t really think about exactly how to do it, but once I am standing there again, looking at her gaunt limbs, my mental processes speed up and I start to form a plan.

I can’t give her food right away – I know that trying to give starving people food is a mistake because their body can’t handle it. The best thing I can do is give her some water and keep her hydrated until she can get her strength back, until I can get some food in her. In my head, I curse myself for not bothering to learn more about how to treat starvation when I had the chance. Even if it was just me, I should have learned about it for myself, and now that data would be even more helpful. I was in a library shortly after leaving my hometown and I had the chance to access the sum of society’s understanding one last time, but I chose to simply take one or two books and then leave instead of trying to gather valuable knowledge – just one of many things I wish I had the chance to do over again.

I have a little water with me in my thermos. I kneel down and remove my backpack, unclipping my thermos from the side of it as I watched the girl to see her reaction. Her eyes flutter at the noise and open slowly, and once she sees me I make sure she can see the thermos in my hands.

I can see her heartbeat through her skin as I approach. It remains steady and does not increase, and when I arrive at the bedside, I stare into her eyes. The brown irises have a washed-out look to them, and her gaze is an endless wilderness, as if she’s long grown tired of feeling. For the first time, her eyes move from my face to my hands and she shows a bit of a reaction. Her breathing increases and her arms begin to move, though she doesn’t appear to know what to do with them just yet, as though she’s forgotten how they work.

I clear my throat and open the thermos.

“It’s okay,” I say, surprised and frightened a little by the sound of my own voice. Aside from the occasional exclamation, these are likely the first words I’ve spoken in over a month. It is definitely the first sentence to emerge from my lips in at least that long.

“It’s okay,” I repeat, trying to get use to communicating verbally with another human being. I take a drink to show her that it’s not dangerous, and then I sit down beside her on the bed.

“I have water,” I tell her. I’m not sure what I expected to see from her, but I didn’t expect her to close her eyes and turn her head away. I pause, waiting for further interaction, but she doesn’t present any.

“Ummm…I have water…” I repeat. “…and…you can have some.”

She turns her head back to me, her lips trying to form words, but only breath coming out. For a moment, I try to listen, but the hopelessness in her eyes is too loud for me to hear anything else.

“Shhhh…” I say to her, struggling to inject a note of compassion rather than the cold, flat tone that I perceive instead. “Don’t try to talk just yet…”

Scooting closer to her on the bed, I reach out to her head to hold it up so that I can pour some of the water into her mouth. The moment my hand touches her scalp, the warmth of it gives me goosebumps. Her pulse, however faint, thunders against my fingers and palm, and I struggle to keep myself contained. The joy at making contact with another living human being is indescribable, and at that moment every other need ceases to be. I have to help this girl.

However, my joy is tempered when she begins to move. She’s clearly weak, but not too weak to struggle. I try to lift her head and she manages to pull away. Again, she turns her head away from me, and I’m left holding the air.

“I’m trying to give you a drink,” I say rather sharply, not sure how else to explain my intentions.

A hoarse noise reaches my ears, and after a moment, I recognize it as her voice. It’s distorted and scratchy, but the word is clearly delivered with intent.

“No…”

I sit there, my mouth open, trying to argue with her but also trying to comprehend the message. She doesn’t *want* water? Doesn’t she want to live?

“No…” She says it again, as if answering my thoughts. Her breathing is labored, or at least as labored as her body is able to be in her deficient state. Just getting those two words out and evading my grasp has exhausted her. My mind refuses to accept it.

“Don’t be silly,” I say, reaching for her again. She summons her meager strength to move once more, this time turning her angular, lanky body on its side, her back toward me. Her hip bone protrudes into the air and matches the line of her shoulder like the two middle pillars of a suspension bridge, with her bony spine sagging beneath.

My throat wells up in terror, and I’m unable to explain my sorrow at being rebuffed this way. How is it possible for her to not want to survive? Having never known that desire myself, I can’t fathom her mindset or how to combat it.

I stand up, my heart broken as I watch her breathing return to its normal shallowness, and I realize what’s going on. She came up here to lay down and die. Is this actually her room? Does she know anyone who was in that massacre three houses down? Either way, she’s completely given up and is willing to wait for the end.

The effect that this has on me is totally unexpected. I’m shattered, and I want to cry. There is nothing I want more in this moment than for her to accept my help and my attention, to help her survive. Have I really been this lonely before now just to be completely attached to this other person simply by knowing that they’re alive? How on earth have I endured for this long without some form of human contact? And most importantly, what will happen if I allow this girl to die? How much longer can I go on not knowing some kind of companionship and interaction? It’s one thing to be distant from society – it’s another to be cut off from it entirely, and I’m not at all ready to go back to that now that I’ve experienced it again.

I need to clear my head. My pulse has ratcheted up by now, so I control my breathing as I go back downstairs and stand in the front doorway. The sun is still hidden behind the clouds, causing the sky to match my inner gray. I let out a long sigh and shake my head. This is going to be even harder than I thought.

Forcing the doubt from my heart and replacing it with resolve is the hard part. The easy part comes next. With newfound courage, I march back up the stairs. This time, I know she hears me on my way up. When I come back into the bedroom, she is still laying on her side, facing away from me, but now she has brought her knees up to her chest and is hugging them. I also remember my backpack, which I have left lying on the floor when I first took it off, so I make sure that I have it on and have clipped my thermos back onto the back of it. Quickly, hopefully before she even notices what I’m doing, I go to the side of the bed and lift up the edge of the thick quilt on which her small form lies, pulling it up over the side of the bed. There must be at least five blankets on this bed, and I’m acutely reminded that I have spent over half of a year sleeping without any form of covers or sheets (my trench coat and hoodie have worked well enough before now). But it’s getting cold outside now, and she’s going to need to keep warm, especially if I’m going to be moving her.

As I move around the back, pulling up the top two layers of blankets (one of them appears to be what’s left of an electric blanket), I can tell she realizes that something’s going on. She barely lifts her head up and catches my eye.

“Wh…wh…wha…” Her attempt at a question comes out as panting breaths.

“Just sit tight,” I tell her. “You’re gonna be fine.”

By the look on her thin face, even as pinched as it is, I can tell she’s not pleased. It doesn’t matter, though. I’ve made up my mind. I don’t have the resources to watch over her here, and there’s no fireplace in this building like the one back at my current residence, so I have to take her back there. I’ll put her on the mattress, and I’ll sleep on the floor until I can find another mattress or a cot or something. Oh, and she’ll need a pillow, too. I grab one from the head of the bed, the fluffier of the two, and with one of my pocket knives I stab a small slit into the edge of the pillowcase so that I can slip it over one of my backpack carabiners, which only takes a moment.

By this point, she’s figured out what I’m doing, and she seems to be making an attempt to move off the bed, her body jerking haplessly like a newborn foal trying to learn to walk. She appears to be in pain, which is likely a symptom of her starvation. Gently, I reach over and put my hand on her shoulder, keeping her from getting up.

“Nope. Nope, lay down.”

She struggles for maybe a moment more, but I could keep her down with one finger and after a few moments her body gives up even though her mind doesn’t. She goes limp on the bed with a long sigh, which is more breath than I thought she had in her. She tilts her head back and closes her eyes, her mouth and face contorting. As I carefully and gingerly pull her into position on the middle of the bed, her face looks strange to me and her stomach is heaving, like she’s going to throw up, but then I realize that she’s crying. There just isn’t enough water in her body to form tears. I don’t know what to say. I want to reassure her that everything’s going to be okay (I can’t imagine what she thinks I might do to her after I get her out of here), but I also know that she wants to die and so any reassurance I might give her isn’t what she wants to hear anyway. I decide instead to let my actions speak for me, and I bundle her up in the two blankets like a caterpillar in a cocoon. By the end of the process, I’m not sure if she has resigned herself to her fate, but she isn’t in any condition to fight any further and so she has just laid her head back and is keeping her eyes closed.

I slip my arms underneath her shoulders and knees and lift her off the bed. She’s so light! Even with the blankets, I’m pretty sure my backpack weighs more than she does! I settle her so that her head, entombed in the blankets so that her face and hair are still visible but sheltered from the wind, is resting against my shoulder.

I move as slowly as I possibly can out of the room, careful not to bang her head against the doorframe or the wall. As I maneuver cautiously, I flash back in my mind to a time when my little sister and I would be on the couch watching TV together, and she would fall asleep. Our parents would also be in bed by then, and so I would pick up the eight-, nine-, and ten-year old girl and carry her to her bedroom to tuck her in, careful not to bump into anything that might jar her awake with a nasty bump on the head. The same care and concern I exercise now, except even more so with someone as fragile as this girl. I have a terrible vision of accidentally dropping her as I descend the stairs for the third time today, shattering every bone in her delicate, weakened body.

When we reach the bottom of the steps, I check to make sure she’s still…well, comfortable, I guess. I’m not sure why I hope she’s comfortable, seeing as how she doesn’t want me to save her in the first place, but maybe she cares about that at least a little. She was lying on a made bed, so at least she wanted to die comfortably. As I look down, she catches my eye, her head resting on my shoulder and her face staring directly into mine. Now that we’re so close, I can hear her voice very clearly, and she doesn’t have to spend so much energy projecting to me.

“If you…respect me…you…let me…die…” Her voice comes across with an accent, possibly French, definitely European. The hollowness in her face is eerie, as though Death is speaking to me, trying to convince me of its merits. I stare back for a few moments, thinking about what she just said, but I can’t bring myself to agree.

“If you respect yourself, you won’t let that happen,” I tell her. Without waiting for her to respond, I turn sideways to get out of the door with my despondent bundle of hope in my arms.