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A Degree in Communication

 The first day with the girl in the house is stranger than all other previous days since I began this nomadic lifestyle. I feel as though I can’t even leave the house, as though I’m shirking some great responsibility and that I’ll answer for it at some point. Frankly, I’m not sure if that’s something innate in me as a protective male or whether I feel that way just because I’m not used to being around people and having someone else’s life depend on me. Either way, I spend the day working around the house to make sure it’s as secure as it can be. I check all the doors and windows (there aren’t many of these to worry about) and I ensure that the basement is as suitable as it ought to be (I have no idea what it means for the basement to be ‘suitable’, but I should try and make it that way anyway). I’m not prepared to camp out in one location for too long, and I don’t have the resources to set up any kind of base. Perhaps it’s time to change that – I start thinking through ways I can add on to the structure, board up windows, add additional locking mechanisms to doors, etc.

 I try to make her as comfortable as I can. I’ve brought the mattress from upstairs down into the living room and put it next to the fireplace. Right away I transferred the bundle of blankets and starving woman onto it and I started a fire. I’ve kept the living room warm all day with the firewood from outside the door, and I’ve also taken the majority of the wood and brought it inside, into the living room, where I can easily access it without going too far. When I realized that just the two blankets and one pillow weren’t going to be enough, I hurried back to the house where I found her and returned with two more blankets and another pillow. Combined with the fireplace constantly lit, that seems to do the trick and allow her to sleep in warmth despite the increasingly cold nights outside. This goes on this way for about three days.

 During this time, I also cook some more of the venison. The smell and sound of it seem to grab her attention every so often, and I continue to give her sips of water from my thermos every couple hours, but I’m sure her body needs additional nutrients. As I sit down for dinner at the end of day three, I stuff a piece of juicy meat into my mouth and follow it with a handful of nuts. The girl is sleeping with her back to me, but I can tell by how she moves that she’s awake. I want so badly to give her some meat, but she isn’t ready yet. I can only give her liquids until she gets stronger.

Just then, I have an idea, and I reach into my backpack.

“Hey,” I say. I hear her take in a deep breath and see her move her head a little bit.

“I have something for you,” I tell her. She moves a little bit more and is able to turn and fully face me. Her tired eyes look even more sunken in with the dark circles beneath them. I smile at her and show her the can of oranges I have in my hands. Her eyes get wider and she subconsciously parts her lips just a little, and I notice that her tongue moves behind her teeth. I take the orange slices and put them into the empty nut can, and then I kneel beside her mattress with the can that contains only the juice.

“This will be a little sweet, but I want to see if you can keep it down,” I tell her. She stares at me with her big brown eyes, and I can’t quite place her expression. Maybe she’s still trying to decide what to think of me. I can live with that.

She’s wrapped in her nest of blankets, so I lift her head and help her take a sip, and she doesn’t resist. When the tangy liquid hits her tongue, she closes her eyes and moans with delight. Her hands snake out of the blanket and she reaches for the can to tip it further, but I see that she’s already taken half of the juice and so I pull it back.

“Nope, hold on,” I tell her, putting the can down, out of reach. Her hands freeze there, holding an imaginary object and she looks at me, visibly hurt and confused. At first, I say nothing. I’m not sure what to say, really…I have the concept, but not the approach. It takes a minute for me to consciously find the words and tone I want to use. I haven’t done this in a while.

“Sorry...um, you can’t have too much…not yet, anyway.”

Her brow, thin as it is, furrows just a little. She swallows, licking her dry lips (they already look more hydrated than when I first found her), and her voice startles me even though I know she’s about to speak.

“Save it?”

Definitely a French accent. But what does she mean, ‘save it’?

“The juice…save it?”

I look at the can beside me.

“Oh,” I grunt with realization. “Uh…yeah, sure. I’ll save it for you. For tomorrow. I mean, if you can keep that down.”

She sighs and sinks into her pillow, pulling her hands back into the folds of her blankets. “Thank-you.”

I sit there and watch her breathe deep and clear breaths with her eyes closed, not like the shallow ones she was barely subsisting on just days before. After a moment, I tell her, “You’re welcome.”

After I set the quarter-full can of juice aside, I use my food knife to cut the oranges into tiny slices, and then turn the flat side down to mash them up as best I can. If she does well with the juice, then I can feed her those, along with a tiny bit of meat, over the course of the next few days.

I curl up next to the fireplace and wrap my trench coat tightly around me, letting the heat from the fire warm me through the layers. Once I reach out and feel my sword lying next to me, as well as the reassuring lump of deadly metal in my back pocket, I’m able to join my new friend in a restful sleep.

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The next morning, she’s awake before I am. She’s sitting at the foot of her mattress, facing the fire, wrapped in one of the blankets, hugging her knees. I’m amazed that she’s strong enough to move around like that, and I look forward to finally getting her strong enough to stand and travel. Other than the exchange the night before, we haven’t spoken to one another (due to the fact that she’s usually asleep). Beside her, the can of orange juice is lying on its side, completely empty.

I stretch and yawn, and she turns her head toward me. Her brunette hair hangs on either side of her dark eyes like shredded curtains, dropping just below her shoulders. Her skin stretches over her teeth still, making her look a bit awkward, and whenever she opens her mouth it makes almost a hissing sound as she breathes in and the air rushes in. Her eyes are still the largest part of her face, but her cheekbones are very pronounced. I bet in a former life, she was extremely pleasant to look at, and hopefully may be again if I can help her restore her youth and vitality. It may not be easy, though – she wanted to die and protested my intervention, so I have no guarantee that she’ll allow this process to continue. Although, she *did* take the orange juice…

“How are you feeling?” I ask, sitting up.

She stares at me but doesn’t smile. Maybe she isn’t strong enough to smile just yet. “A little better,” she says, her eyes searching me warily. My gaze drifts toward the fire and toward the rocks where the latest round of venison strips have been cooking – two of them are missing.

I squint to make sure I’m seeing it correctly, then back at the girl. Her eyes grow wider and I see her swallow, her breath rate increasing.

“Did…did you eat some meat?”

She stares at me. Her mouth opens partway, but she doesn’t say anything.

I nod and try to reassure her that I’m not mad at her for eating my food. On the contrary, I’m glad she did, because it means she’s getting better even faster than I had hoped.

“Good,” I say quietly, not sure what else to say. “That’s good.”

She sighs, probably relieved, and looks back at the fire. We sit there, staring at the fire for a few moments.

“Um, you can…you can feel free to eat as much as you can stand,” I tell her. “I actually have more meat than I can probably store, so…well, just ask whenever you’re hungry.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I look around, giving my gear a visual check, and I spy my thermos. “Are you thirsty?”

She nods again. “A little.”

I get up and unclip my thermos from my backpack, handing it to her. She pops the lid and takes a swig – not too much, but more than just a sip.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Once she is satisfied, I take out my scrap paper from my coat pocket and run through my to-do list for today. I need to get back out there and resume scavenging for supplies. I have food, but I need to find more water, especially if I’m going to be looking after this girl for the foreseeable future. On my list, I have down that my next job is to search the nearby construction site, and then the military surplus store. That will be what I attempt to do today. As I move around, putting my utility belt on, checking my weapons, making sure everything is in my trench coat that should be there, and getting my backpack ready for salvaging, the girl watches me with those big brown eyes of hers, soaking in my every move, learning about me through observation.

“I’ll be back before dark,” I tell her. “And there’s some meat on the fire if you’re hungry, but be careful with it.” Her eyes get wide again.

“You’re leaving?” She sounds afraid.

I contemplate the proper response, but only for a moment. I’m getting better at this. “I have to look for supplies. I usually do it every day. Oh…and, uh, you need some clothes to wear. But I’ll be back.”

She looks around the room, eyeing the hallway and the front door.

“What if…someone finds me here?”

Oh. She has a point. Without me here, she’ll be vulnerable, with no way to signal me. I’m immediately struck once again by her fragility. She’s so much stronger than she was when I found her, but I have barely been able to scrape by out there, and I’m a young, healthy, strong male, all geared up with a katana of the highest-graded folded carbon steel, a steel short-sword, a .22 pistol, several different knives, a bow and several arrows, and a thick trench coat with a hood attached to it. She’s a young woman recovering from starvation, wrapped in blankets without any actual clothes to wear, and no weapons of any kind. My heart breaks at the thought of leaving her here by herself today, but I know I don’t really have a choice.

I contemplate something, and I know it’s a huge risk to take for myself, but in the end I know I need to do it anyway. My hand reaches around back, underneath my coat to my back pocket, and emerges with my .22 pistol. I walk over to her and flip it so that the handle is pointed in her direction, kneeling down in front of her. She stares at it hesitantly, not fearfully, and I hold it out to her.

“Here,” I tell her. “Just in case.”

She doesn’t reach for it, and I reconsider whether or not this is the best choice.

“Do you know how to use it?” I ask.

She looks up at me with a strange look, maybe one of indignation.

“It can’t be that hard,” she says condescendingly. Her accent becomes more pronounced when she speaks like this. I can’t help but smile and chuckle.

“It isn’t,” I assure her. I like her attitude – I hope I see more of that the healthier she gets. Still, she doesn’t reach out and take it from me, so I just leave it on the floor beside her mattress.

“It’s already loaded and chambered,” I tell her, standing. “So…there you go…just in case.”

She stares at the gun on the floor for a second, then gives a contemplative nod, staring back into the fire.

I turn to head out, but her voice stops me before I take a second step.

“Thank-you,” she tells me. I turn and lock eyes with her, and she is showing the faintest hint of a smile.

“For the food and water,” she clarifies. At first, I’m speechless. To hear the girl who half a week before was set on dying of starvation thank me for sustenance makes my spirit soar. I can’t help but smile, and it feels like it goes from one ear to the other.

“Absolutely,” I reply, more than thrilled, hoping it comes across in my tone. I wave goodbye to her, then step out the door and quietly close it behind me.

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Today is gray and chilly, more so than usual. I haven’t kept track of each of the days going by, but I know it must be sometime in late August or September. Of course, with the weather the way it’s been in the United States for the past few years, someone could tell me that it’s May or December and I’d probably believe them. Either way, I’m glad it’s getting colder and not hotter – I don’t do well in the heat, and I don’t want to have to travel around without the protection of my coat.

The first thing I make sure to do is to go back to the house where I found her and get some extra clothes. I’ve left all the food and extra supplies with her so that I can fit all these extra clothes into my backpack, which means I’m taking a huge risk by leaving some of my more valuable finds alone with her. Granted, they’re hidden away, but if someone comes looking for supplies and finds her there, they’re more likely to look for hidden goodies in the house. Or, she could turn on me and somehow leave me without all the extra food and water I’ve gathered over the past few weeks. But, on the off-chance that she does, at least I’ll have whatever I can find today while I’m out scavenging. I spend less than half an hour getting to the house and going through the drawers. I have no idea what sizes she wears, so I take at least three sets of everything in multiple sizes, thinking she can pick out whichever ones fit her best for now. Even so, I’m still careful to choose articles that would probably keep her warm, but won’t get in the way of traveling and running (i.e., no dresses or skirts, obviously). Plus, there are always abandoned department stores where we can find new clothes for both of us.

It’s quiet in the neighborhood – too quiet. I’m always on edge whenever the birds stop chirping and the wind stops blowing. It’s not when there’s noise that I get nervous – it’s when there’s no noise. The silence is the most frightening thing in this post-human supremacy world. Thankfully, it only takes me fifteen minutes to walk from the house to the construction site. The place is like everything else, an eerie place of shadows cast by the monoliths of human progress and invention. Construction equipment lies scattered about – hammers, power tools, boxes of nails, nuts, and bolts – but the effects that increase the tension are the hardhats, the safety glasses, and the disturbing number of steel-toed boots I see lying around (never in pairs, just each one to itself, none of them matching). Basically, anything that directly relates to another human being around here makes me uncomfortable. I can’t envision the mutants having any use for any of these things, but I can readily imagine them hedonistically indulging in the sorry souls who once did.

Whatever they were building here didn’t get very far along. The sign out front saying what it was going to be is long gone, and all that remains is the metal frame, or what’s left of it. This neighborhood feels like an old warzone, and the black scoring adds to that sense. Toward the interior of the site, I also start to find spend rounds from several kinds of weapons, including large-caliber ones like would be used with weapons that I’ve only ever seen used by military and SWAT, along with big puddles of dried blood. The site of a battle, like the one house I ran into earlier, only this battle happened a long while ago, perhaps toward the beginning of this whole mess. Thankfully, I don’t see any bodies, probably because they became food for scavengers (both animal and mutant) not long after they fell here.

I gather up a bunch of materials, including two hammers and as many of the nails scattered around as I can find, and I look around for some strong boards that I could use to reinforce my position in the living room by the fireplace. I could also potentially remove the basement door and use that to cover one of the windows, but I think I want to leave that as a last resort in case we need to retreat there and I need to seal the door behind us. Of course, none of this has anything to do with food and/or water, so I leave the hammers and nails on a workbench and continue to work through the site. I’m keeping my eyes peeled for a better firearm, and my hand feels my rump where the pistol usually is. It’s strange to not feel the weapon there, and my sense of vulnerability isn’t decreasing at all like I thought it would as I spend time out here. I remember the police station, all boarded up like a fortress, and I promise myself that I’ll search there either late today or first thing tomorrow, after I get through with this site and with the military surplus store. If it’s as secure as it appears, I may very well hold off boarding the house up and just move myself and the girl into the station when she is healthy enough to move somewhere less heated. The hammers and nails would be better put to use shoring up any gaps in the station’s defenses, which are likely more substantial than the house’s.

With my mind distracted with these thoughts, I almost don’t see the cylindrical shape sitting in between a boot and a circular saw, a thick, plastic shape in a construction-style bright lime green. It’s a water bottle! I hurry over to it, but my heart sinks when I see that it’s standing open with no lid. There’s water inside it, alright, but also countless tiny rotting bodies, most of them dead and floating in a thin layer on the surface. It’s a crushing disappointment. I’m almost tempted to drink it anyway, but instead I leave it alone and move on.

Lastly, I search the trailer, where the manager and others would have worked. It’s attached to some sort of hastily constructed outhouse, which surprisingly has rudimentary plumbing, including a toilet and sink I’m sure were once reasonably functional. I try the sink to see if I can get water from it, but I don’t even hear a gurgle. It doesn’t sound like it’s working at all now. For a moment, I stare at the only other potential source of water nearby, the toilet, and contemplate how willing I am to drink anything from there. The closest I’ve come to that sort of thing these past months has been to drink a liter of rain water that collected in an old concave toilet lid that I cleaned off beforehand, but drinking out of an actual toilet might be too much. For one thing, it isn’t remotely clean, and I’m not too thrilled about the possibility of trying to boil any liquid I find in there. In the end, the question is moot since I can’t find any water in here anyway.

I do, however, find documents in the manager’s office (or, the room I presume was once the manager’s office) that tell what this building was eventually meant to be: some sort of office complex. In my head, I sigh, and think that it’s too bad it couldn’t have been something to do with clean, drinkable water, or canned food, instead of something boring and useless in the post-modern world. I look through the papers and don’t find anything else too interesting, but a more detailed search of the office turns up two bottles of hydrogen peroxide, which I readily put into my backpack. These will be more than useful for treating any future injuries – just the thought brings back some of the ache to the wounds on my face, and I tenderly touch it with my gloved hands, feeling one of the particularly long grooves across my cheek that’s still healing. The hideous face of the mutant on top of me, his mouth full of my coat sleeve, the vice-like pressure of his jaws pressing together on either side of my forearm, the sheer terror of the moment, my scream…all of it flashes back across my field of vision, as if I’m actually there in the moment, and for a second my hand reaches instinctively for the handle of my katana on my back. I take in a deep breath and turn around, realizing that it’s probably just mild post-traumatic stress syndrome. Before exiting, I check the open doorway of the trailer, making sure that nothing is waiting for me before walking back outside. I breathe deeply again and sigh aloud, grateful that I made it past that terrible encounter.

I think of the starving girl, and what it must have been like to want to die like she did. Lord-willing, whatever happened to her to make her want to exit life is past, just like my trauma, and together we can keep things like that from happening in the future.

I wouldn’t bet on it, though.