

WATER SEEKERS

Caught in a trap.

BY KURT PANKAU

The light was clearly visible at night, even from a mile away. Light meant electricity, and that meant someone lived there, which meant there would be water to barter for. So we went to investigate. We'd left New Chicago three days earlier — said we were ranging for supplies, but in truth I had no intention of returning. There was rumour of water shortages and rationing, which inevitably leads to self-preservation panic. Polite society disappears altogether.

I swear, sometimes I wonder if civilization is even worth the effort of saving. And if you're a woman, wait too long to leave and you'll find out that they won't let you. I'd learnt that the hard way in New Pittsburgh, before I met Lizzie.

"Sheena! I found a door!" Lizzie shouted with the enthusiasm that comes from being nine years old. I followed her voice and sure enough, there was a hatch in the side of a rocky outcrop, standing wide open to let in the sand and dust. A halogen lamp just inside pointed out into the sky. Whoever lived here wanted to be found.

"Patience, girl," I said. Lizzie was too young to know how dangerous the world really was — she lacked what we used to call 'street smarts' back when streets were still a thing. But she cared about people, and that's why I'd grown fond of her.

We entered what was apparently a survivalist bunker. I'd seen them before, after the scavengers finished picking them apart, but this one looked untouched. "Hello!" I called out. "We're friendly!" I motioned to Lizzie to close the hatch behind us and pulled down my mask. Sand was piling up in the entrance tunnel — that door had been open for a few days — but the air smelled clean and fresh. *This place is climate controlled.* Fluorescent bulbs lined the ceiling, flickering, but still giving off good light. "Hello!" I shouted again. There was no reply.

The corridor ended and it felt like stepping into an alternate dimension. There was a living room — like from a real house! With a carpet and a TV with stacks of DVDs, shelves of books, board games, a sofa and recliner. It was perfect. Almost *too* perfect. Like it was a trap or something.

"I want to explore!" Lizzie ran off into a side door.

"Lizzie, don't..." but I trailed off when I noticed the aquarium. An *actual* aquarium.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I'd read about them, but I'd never seen one in person.

"There's a garden in here," Lizzie yelled. "It's huge." She scampered off into another room.

I stared at the aquarium. So much water. There had to be a couple dozen gallons in there at least, with machines to clean it and put bubbles in it, with rocks and little decorations. But where were the fish?

"I've never seen a bed so big!" Lizzie yelled. More scampering.

I leant over the top to smell if it was salt or freshwater, and that's when I found the fish. They were floating.

Then Lizzie shrieked.

I ran towards the noise and before I knew what was going on, Lizzie threw her arms around me. We were in a bathroom. She was sobbing.

"You're safe," I told her. "I won't let anyone hurt you." I looked over her shoulder and saw what had scared her. "Go to the living room," I breathed into her ear. She whimpered, but did as she was told.

There was a giant bathtub with a body in it. A naked man, maybe in his fifties. A little on the pudgy side — easily the biggest person I'd seen in decades. Salt-and-pepper hair.

Hard to make out his face because of the bullet hole in the middle of it.

The gun was still in his hand. Looked recent, but I don't know much about those things. He

didn't smell. Must have one hell of an air purifier.

I found Lizzie sitting on the couch, shivering. "Why'd he do it?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I think he was lonely."

"Why do you say that?"

"He left the door open so someone would find him." She stared blankly at me.

"You okay?"

"I don't like it," she said. "Let's fill up our jugs and go home."

I sat down beside her and rubbed her back. "We can't go home," I said.

"Why not?"

"Home's not safe anymore. There's not enough water."

"That's why we're taking it back. We'll let people know this place is here, so they can salvage it."

I sighed. "Yeah," I said. "We could do that. We ought to." Lizzie trembled

under my hands. Tears cut streaks in the dirt on her face. I wiped one away. "But what if we just stayed?"

She looked at me as though she didn't understand the words I'd said.

"What?" I asked. "It's not that crazy. There's plenty of food and water. We'd be safe. *You* would be safe."

Lizzie looked at the door to the bathroom. "Safe like he was?"

"That's different."

"Not really. Dead is dead."

"I'm looking out for you," I said. "We promised to look out for each other."

"I know. And we made the same promise to everyone back home."

"But this is different."

Lizzie nodded and then looked towards the bathroom. The dead man. "I bet he thought so too."

I started to object. I *wanted* to object. This place was amazing, but it *was* a trap. Some man built it thinking he didn't need anybody else, and now he was dead. People like that had burnt down the world in the first place, so maybe looking out for each other — for everyone, I mean — was how we were going to save it.

I started filling water jugs for the journey home. ■

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