

Water Wars

By:

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1,237 words excluding title

"I got you a pink dress to wear." George held up what at one time might actually have been a pink dress.

"Why can't I go like this?" Karen, the youngest of the group, pointed to her attire; a flour sack with holes cut for her head and arms, and tied around the waist with a rope.

"Because we are tapping into evolutionary imperatives; a little girl in a pink dress is less likely to get shot." George's tone and his deliberate use of big words left little room for arguing.

"Fine!" Karen grabbed the supposed dress and went behind a bush to change. She had been chosen because they had lost Julia. Julia now had a steady boyfriend who did not approve of their activities. Julia had been a great little actress; she would be missed.

Karen came out from behind the bush, pulling on the dress. "I feel silly!" Her tone worried George. He did not want to send her in if there was a chance she would piss off the guard and get herself shot.

"Are you going to let us down? Because we need this to work!" His tone was a bit harsher than he intended, and Karen's demeanor changed. Her eyes swelled with tears, and she looked like the little girl she was.

"I ... I did not mean ..." A sob broke through, interrupting her sentence. She brought up her hands, covering her face, and her small shoulders shook with suppressed sobs.

"Karen, I'm sorry," George reached out for her, feeling like a total jerk, and patted her shoulder, "I did not mean ... "

"Sucker!" Karen's head snapped up, a huge smile lighting up her face.

George gaped for a moment before also breaking out in a huge grin. "You little stinker!" He gently pulled her hair before continuing, "You'll do fine."

He turned to the others. "OK, you know how serious this is; we need that water. That means no one lets themselves be seen." He did not voice the obvious; to be seen meant getting shot, and moreover, meant Karen would also be put in danger.

They all nodded, each holding up a plastic gallon jug. Karen grabbed a beaten-up tin bucket. She too held it up, and without

another word, she headed to the spring. The others went the opposite way, taking the long way around.

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Peter adjusted his rifle. The approach to the spring had been modified to funnel people into a narrow passage; if need be, he could hold off a small army. From his cover, he would observe people stop and put payment into the designated benches; food, utensils, plastics, and anything that could be used for currency. Currency; people finally found no use for it, but not in the way the Trekkies had envisioned.

The four families who co-owned the spring did pretty well, considering. Considering the world had turned to crap, and most of the people had long ago succumbed to the Water Death.

No one knew how the contamination started or how it continued, but the entire water delivery infrastructure had been compromised, all over the world. Rivers and lakes were OK, and rainwater was OK, but millions who did not live near rivers and lakes perished in the first week. Even those who lived near fresh water fared poorly; they had long ago lost the ability to process the natural pathogens found in free-flowing water.

Peter looked up from his book, a motion catching the corner of his eye. A young girl, pre-teen, was making her way along the path. She carried a small pail; he could not see any payment.

Putting the book down, he put his eye to the telescopic sights and scanned the hillsides. Nothing else was moving. Peter focused back to the girl. Her eyes wide, she was watching him as she continued. She must have seen the rifle, but it did not deter her from making her way to him.

His finger hovered over the trigger guard. A reflex action; he would not have shot the little girl, even if there had been no rule against doing so.

She arrived at his position and stopped, looking up at him. Peter tried to maintain a stern visage.

"I don't see a payment," he said with a rough voice, "you can just turn around, and go back to wherever you came from."

The girl did not speak, but her eyes welled up with tears. Dropping her pail, she just sat down where she was, one leg folded under her and shaking her head slightly.

"I can't ... *sob* ... he'll beat me!"

"Who will beat you?" Peter's voice was a tad softer, but not much.

"My brother!" She looked up at Peter, her eyes big and rimmed with red from crying. "He ... he's taking care of our mom; she is very sick ... he said to bring back water, or else." Karen put her head down again, sobbing.

Peter looked around. His replacement was due in about 20 minutes, and she was usually late.

"OK, OK," he said, "one pail, and make it quick!"

The girl's face looked up at him. With the palm of her hand, she wiped a tear from her cheek. "Really? Thank you!"

Karen rose and grabbing her pail ran through the gate the guard held open.

Within a few minutes, she returned, carefully carrying the nearly full pail. She stopped outside the gate, waited for the guard to close it, and when he turned to her, she thanked him once again. Walking carefully, she headed back up the path. Peter watched her until she turned the corner, then shook his head and smiled.

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Back at their rendezvous point, the children each emptied their haul into a small cistern. It would be sealed when not in use so as to not lose any water to evaporation. Karen was the last one to empty her pail.

"Right!" George smiled at them all. Grabbing the sack from the side of the cistern, he continued. "This should last us at least a few weeks!"

He opened the sack and handed out small water pistols to each of the kids, who in turn dipped them in the cistern, filling them. When they were all done, George sealed the cistern, and then, breaking up into four teams, they headed off toward the nearby ruins of a barn; their water war playground.

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At the guard shack, Peter fired up the intercom.

"Yes?" The female voice at the other end sounded strong and capable, fitting the speaker to a "t".

"They made another raid." He said simply, not needing to explain further.

"How much did they get?" The woman's voice did not change in inflection, but he knew she was smiling.

"I counted 12 kids, each with a gallon. There may have been one or two more; I had to work hard at not looking."

"OK, put it on my account."

"Will do," Peter replied. "Oh, one more thing; they have a new decoy. This one is really good; probably a good candidate for your theater group."

"Really? Thanks, Peter, I'll look into it. Enjoy your evening." And with that she hung up.

Peter switched off the intercom and looked in the direction of the barn, hidden by the hill. He wished he could watch the kids play. He wished everyone could watch the kids play.