

# A Distant World

by Rachael Vella

He wakes to the foul, leathery smell of rotten boots. As he raises his head from his paws and sniffs, wind brushes through his fur and rustles the dried flora surrounding his dilapidated house.

The gust carries many bad smells – dirt, smoke and fire, petrol, spoiled food – and the echo of broken telephone pole cables whipping the ground and air. He rises on all fours, still sniffing. His ears twitch at the sound of quiet footsteps, barely heard below the whipping cables. Then, slowly, a humanoid silhouette, featureless and only slightly lighter than the pitch night, slinks in from behind the bushes.

He barks and shoots forward like a stone from a slingshot. The intruder cries out and darts to the nearest tree. Before he can reach them, his bark turns to a yelp. He'd forgotten about the chain and collar.

He strains against the collar as the intruder climbs the tree. He doesn't respond to the door banging off the wall, but the scent of gunpowder and Marcy's running footsteps make him stop. She's at his side, aiming the rifle at the intruder.

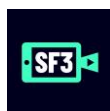
"What'd want?" she shouts over his barking.

"I just want food," the intruder whimpers.

Marcy's eyes narrow. "You'll leave and never come back if I give you some?" When the intruder hesitates, she reaches towards his collar. "Otherwise..."

"I swear I'll leave you alone! Just get your dog to stop barking!"

She gently tugs on his chain and orders him to follow, but he's slow to obey. She doesn't turn her back or lower the rifle as she retreats to the house. He stands guard at the door, growling as the silhouette climbs down. A minute later, Marcy rolls two unopened cans from the doorway to the intruder, who snatches them up and sprints away.

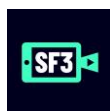


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He stops growling when Marcy kneels down and strokes his side. “We’re okay,” she murmurs. “He’s gone now. You did really good.”

He lies down, pressing his head against her leg. She smells of what their home used to be like. When their family was more than just the two of them. When she didn’t know how to use a gun and he didn’t need a chain. When humans were friendly and he wasn’t trained to be hostile except to those she deemed unsafe.

He falls back asleep into a world that is now just a dream.



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