

He'd been alone his whole life. Today was no different.

His feet scraped the pavement as he trudged past a gas station, long since dried up and abandoned. A paper sign fluttered in the breeze that whistled through the broken glass of a window. "Good luck", it said. He grunted in derision. Such a thing had been scarce these past years.

A whimper stilled his movements. He was instantly alert, his knife in his hand before his pack hit the ground. Straining his ears for sound, he quickly glanced all around him. Across the road from the gas station was an overgrown field. Anyone could be hiding in there. He swore under his breath, cursing his stupidity.

There was the sound again. It came from under a car someone had left parked in the road. He stepped carefully toward it, his feet quiet on the pavement. Silently lowering himself, he looked under the car.

He jerked in surprise. A boy, no older than five or six, looked back at him. Big wet eyes widened in fear as tiny arms tightened around a large German Shepherd dog that lay next to him. The dog was injured, a wound on its side seeping blood slowly. Its head lolled as the boy hugged it, but he could see that it was breathing.

He stood up and looked around again, half expecting an ambush. Then, he looked under the car again. The boy was still looking at him, tears silently coursing down his face. He noticed the knife in the man's hand and cringed away, hiding partially behind the dog.

The man carefully placed the knife on the cracked pavement, still within reach, and held out his hands to show the boy that he wasn't a threat.

"Hello," He said. Might as well start simple. The boy just stared at him. "Are you okay?" Nothing. "Is that your dog?" Silence. He sighed.

He could leave. He didn't get involved. Ever. He stayed away from people, and he stayed alive. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he saw another human, let alone a kid. He cursed again, this time silently. He couldn't leave the kid here.

"Okay, kid," He said, hands still out. "I can see that you need help. Now, I might be able to help you, only I don't know what happened. Only way I can find that out is if you talk to me. Can you do that?" After a moment's hesitation, the boy gave a small nod. "Okay, nodding's fine for now. Is this your dog?" Another nod. "Did he get hurt?" Another nod, more urgent this time. "Okay, there we go. Do you think he's infected?" The boy thought for a minute, his arms loosening around the dog. He cleared his throat.

"Something fell down on him," The boy said, his voice small and wavering.

"Well, that's actually a good thing. Did you know that?" The boy nodded. "It means he's probably not infected, doesn't it?" Nod. "Wanna come out of there?"

After a few moment's thought and a lot of scuffling and pulling, the boy and dog managed to make it out from under the car. The man offered his last granola bar and asked questions while the boy chewed.

His name was Charlie. He lived with his mom and "a whole buncha other people" -at this, the man groaned internally- nearby. His dog had run after a rabbit and squeezed through a hole in the fence, and Charlie had run after him. When the dog jumped over the low fence behind the gas station, an old road sign had dislodged and landed on its side. By the time the boy had finished the bar, the tears had dried and he was becoming much more animate.

"Are you gonna take us home?" He inquired of the man.

"I think I probably should. It's real dangerous for you to be out here, you know."

"I know!" Charlie replied. "I was so scared I was gonna die, and then you came and I was scared you were gonna kill me!" The man allowed himself a small smile at that. He stood up, scooping up the dog in his arms.

"You know where you live?"

"I think so. We came from back there." He pointed behind the gas station. They began walking down the dirt road that snaked around and disappeared behind the station. A rusty gate stood to one side, and the boy clapped his forehead in exasperation that he hadn't seen it before, evoking another smile from the man.

"What's your name?" The boy inquired, squinting up at him.

"Harry."

"Thanks for saving us, Harry. Me 'n' Mustard really appreciate it. Harry snorted.

"Your dog's name is Mustard?"

"Yup! I named him myself!" Charlie was so proud. The man chuckled. Then, he paused in his steps, hearing someone yelling. Charlie perked up. "That's my mom!" He shouted, and took off running. A few seconds later, a woman appeared through an outcropping of trees. She spotted Charlie and screamed, running to catch him in her arms. She sobbed into his dark hair, clutching him tightly. Harry heard him say something, and she laughed through her tears. She was scolding him with relief when she noticed Harry. Immediately standing, she

pushed Charlie behind her. He came out and approached the man and dog, saying "It's okay, Mom. This is Harry. Mustard got hurt, and he helped us. He gave me a candy bar!" She looked curiously at him, then at Harry.

"It was a granola bar." She smiled cautiously at him.

"Thank you. I was terrified," She held out her arms to take the dog. He gently placed Mustard into her arms, and waved at Charlie.

"Bye Charlie. It was nice to meet you. I'm glad you're okay."

Charlie looked at his mother in disbelief. "You gotta invite him to eat dinner at least!" His mother looked at him helplessly.

"Nah, it's okay, pal." He said, waving his hand. Charlie's mother shook her head.

"No, he's right. I should've invited you first thing. You helped him, so I insist."

He stared at her, thinking. He didn't get involved with people. He was alone, and he liked it that way. It was safer. Cleaner. Easier. He should explain it to them, and be gone before the sun went down.

He looked down at the little boy's hopeful face. He nodded excitedly, and the man laughed.

He'd tell them tomorrow.