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*Comfort*

## Mieke

The breeze was cool, the gray sky spoke of a calm day, though the exact day was uncertain; society had abandoned the Gregorian calendar the previous year and opted for a countdown instead. She rose from her bed, not a sound in the house. The wood-paneled walls were musty and quite old, but a well-kept old. Something that was built to last. The mudroom didn't have mud as much as layers of sand and dry seaweed, all swept into the corners. She had mapped out this location weeks ago. The residents had abandoned these summer homes, staying in the cities where they could be with family. No one had bothered to lock their doors, and it was now a luxury ghost town.

The ocean roared through the open window. Barefoot, she walked the five hundred yards through the small patch of woodland, emerging onto a colorless stretch of sand that extended left and right for miles. Mist on the beach was just beginning to burn away. Cracked seashells were scattered everywhere. With each turn of the tide the beach repeated its miniature devastation. This place didn't care that today was different.

Alone was how she had always imagined this. Ever the internal soul, assessing her own problems, accepting her own faults. Other people only caused confusion. They tended to give too many opinions when you laid your troubles on them. When she had tried to explain her divorce to each friend, it had become an unending series of repetitive questions. She didn't like being questioned. But that was quite a few years ago. One by one those friends had gotten married, had children, and moved away. A number of times she had attempted to expand her social world, but it always closed itself down again. There was no need for friends now.

Her clear eyes lifted to the sky, hair swinging behind her. The salty breeze barely troubled to ripple through the strands. Her feet were beginning to get cold, sinking into wet sand with each step, toenails showing remnants of navy blue nail polish, long ignored, left to grow out. She sat down on a log, bleached from years of sun and sand. The crash of surf was constant but dull, the whitecaps forming in a breath and disappearing just

as quickly. She inhaled the salt air. Her lungs had been with her, and now they would go with her. Her first friends.

A boom and a flash. The orange fire burned bright through the sky, a razor streak to meet the sea. Soon, the wave would appear on the horizon. They had all been expecting this. News outlets had been delivering updates as given to them by satellites and space agencies, but once NASA had disclosed the precise end day to the public, no one had bothered to continue watching the news. She had heard about it while sitting in her car. The car radio had become her only source of information after looters began to ransack homes the week after the initial announcement; her TV had been a victim. Humans started to plan. Some lived in denial. Many, many decided to take their own lives first.

The streak in the sky expanded to a billowy peach cloud. The rest of the world grew dark as a slow black bled from sky to sea. There was no wind now.

A flutter of wings and tussle of hair; something had lightly swooped her. A bird hovered and perched on the far end of the log, its large orange feet splayed underneath it, keeping balance on the various knots and divots. The white breast was shocking. It stood out against the darkening sky. She stared at the bird. It stared back and blinked a few times. It was content to share this log. They looked out toward the sea. A new friend.

She had prepared—though what was there truly to prepare for. Her chest sizzled; a bitter flame of anxiety she thought long gone. Fear had been her first instinct, those many months ago, and it had waned each day as reality drew nearer. Now it returned, an involuntary frigid grip ripping through her rib cage.

The beach grew longer as the dark wall grew taller. All sounds had stopped. She sat with the bird, and they waited. There was nothing more to do. The bird lowered itself onto the log and preened a few of its feathers. She was glad it wouldn't be on its own this last day. Perhaps it felt the same about her, and she smiled as it raised its head toward her again. She was glad to have it with her at the end. Her last friend.