

Silence
Samuel Shellard (2020)

Silence. It was the only thing I heard. ‘Hello?’ I called again. ‘Is anyone there? Anyone?’ I peered into the smoke. I was standing in my backyard, or what *was* my backyard a long time ago. All that was left was a wreckage of metal, concrete and furniture. The house was torn apart and strewn around the scene. The truth hit me like a tonne of bricks: when I had journeyed to the Sevlor realm, time had slowed. I was there for a week, yet Earth had experienced decades. A red balloon floated past me; it was the only colour in the bleak, grey scene. I reached out and grabbed it. The string, faded and frayed, was rough in my hands. My favourite tree, which I had spent many hours in as a boy, was gone. Most likely, it was splintered and burnt like the house and fence, but that was the least of my worries.

I started running into the street, following the roads, and hoping, just hoping, that I would find other life. A poster for army enrolment was nailed to a split tree, half torn and shredded.

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The predicted had happened. For years, people had been expecting the breaking of the Nuclear Alliance, and now they had been proved right. I stumbled forward, half-blinded by my own tears. My heart ached as I thought about what had happened to my family. The wind echoed through the abandoned wreckage, taunting me with its constant whistling. I slowed to a jog. *If there are people out there, then why haven't they cleaned some of the wreckage up? What should I do now? Set up shelter? Try to find food?* Many more questions ran through my head—far too many for a space of three seconds. Adrenaline was the only thing that made me keep jogging; that and determination. I screamed, not from fear or pain, but from hopelessness: I couldn't have done anything, but my parents had died, as well as everyone else that I cared about, and now I was completely alone.

Once I calmed down, I decided that shelter was the first thing I needed. I tied my balloon to a pipe and searched around for hours, collecting scraps and sheets of metal, and attempted to build a small shelter. The best materials I found were a large hessian bag which I filled with whatever house insulation and foam I could find, and a small blanket which was, like the hessian, bearing a few holes. I mean, what can you expect post-nuclear war? Towards the end of the afternoon, it started raining very suddenly—I had to run for cover in the half-

finished shack. I only remembered food as I lay on my hessian sack that night. I had been too busy all afternoon to think of it. The shack was cold, dark, and wet. It seemed to let more rain in than it kept out, helped by the fact that the wind had started picking up.

The shack collapsed in the night—it was blown straight over by a strong gust of wind. I crawled out and managed to salvage my blanket and part of my bed, the rest of which was torn off by a falling roof sheet. As I sat, huddled under a pile of debris, I remembered my red balloon. I ran out into the street and found the pipe that it had been attached to. All that was left was a small, frayed piece of string. I trudged back to the pile of rubble. Everything I knew and cared about was gone.

The rain had slowed when I woke up. It was drizzling, and continued to do so all day, which made any construction and salvaging very difficult. My lips were dry and cracked, and my stomach was knotted with hunger. I decided to stay under the pile of rubble I had discovered after my shack collapsed. I dragged my blanket and “mattress” into one corner and sat down, shoulders slumped. I suddenly remembered the rain, and figured it would be a good idea to dig a trench in my doorway to prevent water from flowing in. I looked around for anything to use as a shovel and decided to settle for a metal anchor. I didn’t even bother to ask myself why it was there; I had seen so many strange things in the Sevlor realm and in this apocalyptic land.

The trench was easier to dig than I had anticipated, thanks to the recent rain. I had a sudden thought: *Why don't I line the inside of my hollow with mud? The mud would dry and create a strong wall. That would make it more comfortable, and better insulated.* I would have smiled if I was not in a deserted world with no food. This was something I had wanted to do all my life: survive on my own in a hand-built structure. I had always loved “Primitive Tool” and “Survival Craft” on YouTube and building structures was all they did. The only differences were that they had food, they did not need the structure to survive, and they were so good at primitive building that they could make a waterslide out of sticks and mud...

I set to work lining my floor and walls that afternoon, and with a sudden stroke of luck, I found a small bag of assorted items. Inside was a metal pocket-knife, with pliers, multiple knives and a bottle opener, along with a crushed bag of chips and a bottle of water. Without thinking, I devoured the chips, but found that, if anything, they just made me thirstier. I took small sips of the water, which my throat and stomach accepted gladly. Filled with new hope, I set the remainder of the water aside and went back to lining the walls. I worked all afternoon, and soon, the sun sank below the horizon. I sat back on my tattered mattress and

admired my work. It was quite rough, and the mud had not properly dried. I sighed. This was my life from now on.

I went for a walk the next morning, depression threatening to overwhelm me. I was completely alone, struggling to find food, and working so hard to survive with very little reward. *What is the point of living? Why do I have this instinctive desire to survive? Why am I trying to survive when there is no other life on Earth? What point is there in continuing?* I pondered these questions for the rest of the day, eventually giving up. I began the long walk back to my hollow with the few stale biscuits I had scavenged. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse a small, green shoot poking out of the ground. I dropped my food, ran over to it and fell to my knees to examine it closely. I sat back on my feet. In this wasteland, there was hope.