

TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

**BY
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DEDICATION

Life is all about those who surround you, who make you want to improve yourself as a human being and persevere at it. Not an easy task by any means. So, this book is dedicated to those who have become such an immeasurable guiding force to my life.

My mother, father, and brother, who have always walked with me, held me tight to keep me from trailing off my path, and ensured I never lost sight of who I am and where I come from. No words can convey my gratitude.

My beautiful girlfriend, who has become a paramount motivation to do what I want to do and always feel supported, encouraged, accompanied, and loved. Additionally, her constant desire to steal a sneak peek at my book and urging to hurry up and finish pushed me on until it became a complete book. I love you.

My friends and family who have somehow, even unknowingly, supported me in this process. Their lives, their comments, their personalities, and their coexistence with me were a never-ending source of inspiration and motivation. Thank you.

Last, to my reader, whoever you may be. Your decision to spend time reading my work is an honor I don't take lightly. Thank you for being you, for loving to read, and for sharing this experience with me. Because of you, this exists.

Hope to see you soon,
Daniel Fernández Masís

PROLOGUE

FIRE

A GROUP OF ROAMERS CAME DANGEROUSLY close to our home yesterday while walking straight toward an old lady with a small child. We could not tell them to run, and they had not seen or heard the threat yet. The lady stumbled with every step, dehydrated almost to death. The child was small and frail, probably born after The Day and too young to realize in what type of world he lived. Their steps echoed on the cream-colored walls of the houses around them, their shadows dancing on the broken street. Vines slowed the lady's steps by tangling her bare feet, while the child played at stepping on dandelions. They were completely defenseless, and their luck had run out.

Oh, God, the roamers were merciless. They saw the lady and child and started running and shouting at them. The poor lady had a small supermarket cart with hardly any supplies; they were probably dead way before the roamers spotted her. What they did to her, I don't want to remember, ever. It was a bloodbath; it was...

I can't.

My brother was beside me, staring at the horrible scene. Before, during, and after the killing, he did not move. He just stared at the group of roamers with hatred in his eyes and his fists clenched at his sides. Maybe he wanted to save the old lady and the kid but suffered in silence because he couldn't. His eyes

did show suffering, but no words came from his mouth. My shocked mind must have been playing tricks on me as I even saw smoke coming out of his clenched fists and his eyes turned slightly yellow.

Without a word, my brother stood up, opened the hatch on our roof, and left me alone. The wind was rustling the leaves, giving me goose bumps. I heard him grab his equipment and leave our house. I knew he was going to kill them; he would not risk having those men so close to us. "A timebomb best exploded before its time is up," he'd said before when bad people got too close. I understand why he does it, and I hate that he must be the bad guy.

The roamers left the bodies in the middle of the street as if disposable. Those devils did not deserve to live. Even though my brother is not entitled to take someone's life, I know God will forgive him. In this world, someone must do justice by making the toughest decisions. Otherwise, we are all doomed to the most brutal death and the world will be for those unworthy of its beauty.

The devils started setting up a camp about a kilometer away from our house. They lifted a camping tent in a heartbeat, with a green camouflaged exterior on top of black metal bases surrounded by a playground. How sick to use such a joyful place, a child's haven. Two more built a fire using what seemed to be clothes they had stolen from their victims. I despised them. They seemed to be having the time of their lives, working together, joking, throwing water at each other, fake fighting and trying to burn each other with small, burning twigs. How could God allow them to enjoy life instants after they had taken away two innocent souls? Their laughs, even if inaudible from our rooftop, were darts to my heart.

I watched my brother walk toward their camp, silent and quick. One second, he was in my view; the next, he'd disappeared. He can blend with his surroundings and is the fastest, stealthiest runner I have ever seen. You will never hear or see him coming

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unless he wants you to. Trust me, I have received thousands of blows to my head for not being able to foresee him. Surprise attacks are inevitable when you live with an untrained fifteen-year-old scarecrow as a sidekick.

Ten minutes later, I saw one of their scouts thirty meters from the last place I'd seen my brother. I started panicking, my heart racing. Where could he be? Did he see the scout? Was he heard? My God, what would I do if he's caught? The scout was armed and staring straight at my brother's last location. The scout was standing still, trying hard to see through the night shadows. Moving side to side, confused, believing he'd heard something. His stance was rigid. He was afraid.

The scout turned around suddenly, then fell to his knees with an arrow straight through his throat. A quick shadow ran over him, taking the arrow too as he vanished into the night.

That was way too close. The scout must have heard or seen him. What if he'd alerted the others? What if my brother was defeated? It felt like being seat-belted into a car being pushed toward an abyss, and unable to do a thing about it. That is how I feel every night he goes out.

Fifty meters away from the dead man, I saw my brother again, creeping up to a tent. Close to the tent, he started to back away.

Where was he going? Why back away? Were there too many? Surprise attacks are invaluable. I wished I could hear what he heard to at least have an idea of what he was facing.

He stood completely still about ten meters away from the tent. He bowed his head for about twenty seconds. Why would he do that? Was he praying for the souls of the victims he was about to take? I really didn't think so as I have never heard him pray before. He should have attacked them before they saw him or come home if he was having doubts!

Abruptly, the tent burst into fire. A giant fireball consumed the tent, roaring toward the sky above, illuminating the playground where they had set up camp. We've suffered thirteen days of rain; how could a tent catch fire? I guessed they had a

gas leak and my brother was lucky. Maybe he backed away after hearing the gas leak and lit it up. Thank God for fire. It was burning fiercely as if fire could hate and shout in anger. The whole night sky was illuminated with the light coming from the torched-up tent.

Those men and their suffering were hard to take. But, at the same time, they were evil. They would have done to us what they did to that old lady and the child, massacred us without a doubt. How can something so important for survival be so deadly? Fire is amazing. Staring at the giant flames roaring from the tent, I'd felt in peace until the screams from the tent's occupants brought me back to reality. My brother, where was he! Was he caught in the fire? Did he get burnt? Did he die?

I looked around the flaming tent, down the road, to the houses nearby, straight to the surrounding trees. He was nowhere to be seen. He'd simply vanished again. Uncontrollable anxiety filled my body and mind. I felt my skin get cold, and my teeth started chattering. Trembles ran across my body, real fear of losing him, physical fear. Fuck me, where was my brother?

As swiftly as the fire had started, it turned into a tornado and collapsed in on itself. No more fire, no more screams, only silence. The only proof of it were the ashes where the tent used to stand. What happened? That was extremely weird, though the gas could have run out. What if he was caught up in the fire? He would be careful not to go close to it. I hoped he was coming back home.

Five meters to the right of the ashes stood my brother, holding his sword and staring into the night. He was waiting for something. Why didn't he run back home? Somehow, he knew the battle was not over. I needed him back. Standing there was way too dangerous. He was completely exposed, and at night especially, death lurks around every corner.

Then, out of the woods came four roamers running straight toward the tent. One was an almost two-meter-tall man, bearded, with an army shirt and destroyed cargo pants. He held a seventy-

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centimeter-long knife that shone with the moon's reflection on its blade. It sent a chill down my spine to see that blade heading toward my brother. And the man made my brother look small by comparison. On either side of him, two hooded figures held wooden sticks with nails sticking out of their tips. They were about the same size as my brother, and they were laughing at him. Their awful laugh echoed all the way to my rooftop, seeming to come straight from hell and filled with hate. The fourth was a small man holding a bow and arrow at the ready as he struggled to keep up with his cohorts. A single arrow he had. One miss and he'd be dead. But one hit, and he'd be...

What if they managed to defeat him? I struggled with whether to stay there or leave and try to save my brother.

He hadn't moved. He wasn't showing any reaction to these new foes. They stopped their run six meters away from my brother. Why was he so calm? All of them had a death grin on their faces. Predators staring at prey. How could one man stand a chance against four seasoned, armed men? He did not back off as they walked closer and closer, each step seeming to duplicate my heartbeat. Four meters away and they started circling around my brother, all flanks menaced.

They stopped three meters away, and the tall man approached him with his knife stuck out in front of him. My brother held his ground and stared right into the man's eyes. The man grabbed him by his forearm and started shouting at him, then held his knife right at my brother's throat and tried to grab his quiver. He stared at the man as if he were not there threatening him. It was weird how peaceful he looked, and this did nothing to calm my nerves.

Suddenly, the tall man screamed in agony, staring at the hand he'd just used to grab my brother. In the blink of an eye, the small bowman fell to the ground with an arrow splitting his forehead, and the tall man grabbed his throat, trying to stop a rush of blood from flowing out of a deep gash. The large blade fell to the playground's floor. No more reflection came from it

as its previous owner died on top of it, protecting it from the bright moon.

My brother still stood as if nothing had happened. I had not seen him move, yet he'd defeated two adult men in the blink of an eye. How? He does not have an ally, at least none I know of. He wouldn't trust anyone to help him. If he was alone, what had happened was impossible.

The twins started to circle him, talking to each other and yelling at my brother. Men always try to hide their fear behind useless threats and screams. They moved quicker and quicker circling him, trying to find a weak spot to attack. They were still two guys with weapons, but I felt they had no chance. Maybe my brother's peacefulness was a sign of what was about to happen. He is never thoughtless, so I knew he was measuring the perfect moment to end those men's lives. They did not stand a chance.

He turned his head and stared straight at me. Did he know I was watching?

1

THE ELDER *THE BEGINNING*

MAY OUR JOURNEY START AND *end the same way...together.*

It's been said that our world is beyond saving, but I believe this saying was conceived by a narrow mind. Our world was beautiful—mesmerizing views of waterfalls, forests, lakes, abiotic and biotic components of nature blended with cosmopolitan, man-made structures. That has been destroyed, but another type of beauty survives. After all, beauty is subjective. It is a state of mind bound to be distorted and changed by human experience. Some might argue that humanity destroyed the world, so this might be a recovery. I see beauty in this world, the beauty of surviving surrounded by the most adverse conditions imaginable. Beauty in perseverance.

Yes, our world, our lifestyle, our history was shaken by a force so devastating that no human can understand it, at least by what I have learned from the people I've met without killing them where they stood. Don't get me wrong—I am not a murderer, not by choice. Few people have opted for a greeting rather than the more common shot or arrow at my head. I have no choice but to protect what I value most. Those who greet instead of killing, scarce and uncommon, have traveled long distances, met terrible foes who enslave others and massacre entire villages for pillaging,

though none have brought any explanation as to what happened to our world. These visitors keep my faith in humanity alive, barely. Several years have gone by since the last time I spoke to a traveler.

Seven years ago, we lived inside houses with high-speed internet and drove internal combustion vehicles over potholed asphalt streets. Now, every centimeter of the planet has been invaded by the only other force known to be as powerful as the one that shook humanity back to its roots—nature. As soon as the world collapsed, nature stepped forward to reclaim it.

The shift was devastating. I still remember watching houses crumble, people running in fear, children searching for their families in the rubble, scavengers pillaging and even killing people who desperately sought to run away from the destruction. It truly saddens me to remember the early days of this new era.

That this world destroyed human decency and morals was bound to happen because of scarce resources. People started to feel the need to overpower others in order to survive at all costs. As soon as a stomach growled, or a throat withered, we fell back to our baser animal instincts and became either predator or prey. Nothing separates us from the animal kingdom.

My house is two stories high with a brick façade and a clay tile roof, so it is safe to assume my parents were—or are? —old school. A three-and-a-half-meter concrete wall separates our front yard from the sidewalk and the outside world. Back in the day, we used to feel safe inside our house. Nowadays, there is no safe place, no haven, no second of peace and tranquility. Security means living by defeating mentally, physically, and psychologically any foe. However, you never really feel safe. At night, sleep is no longer fulfilling, and you are always slightly fatigued. Alertness is key.

In the front yard, a U-shaped brick driveway leads to a mahogany front door with one of those huge bronze decorative doorknockers no one ever used. How could someone use a doorknocker on a door behind steel fences and electric wiring?

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A bench still sits beside the front door; no clue why it is there, though. Now it works as a watch station to our frontline defenses, so I cannot complain about it being there. In the middle of the U-shaped driveway stands a concrete fountain with three cylindrical basins at different levels, creating small waterfalls. I remember how peaceful it felt to stare at it while dusk crept down on the horizon. Mom used to go wild if moss grew it. Now the fountain is a moss sculpture; she would be so pissed. Water has not flowed from those basins in seven years. It is an ironic masterpiece to our naivete.

That sculpture reminds me every day of the reason why I must fight and never surrender. Underneath, away from plain view, rests a garden fountain. I am sure my family can be reunited. The fountain and sculpture are whole, so all we need to do is work for it, remove the moss, clean up, and persevere. My family was torn apart by forces beyond my comprehension, beyond my power, but not beyond my saving.

Once you enter the front door, you are met by a wonderful autumn painting by my grandmother. It captivates my attention with its uniqueness. Constantly I find myself staring at it silently, as if waiting for it to come to life. She was an amazing woman who taught me key lessons to confront this world's challenges. "Live life to the fullest, as you may not win at it, but you have to make it worth living," she used to say, and now I understand what she meant.

There is no other thing in that painting besides trees and dust. You could say it is a live representation of our current lifestyle. There is no civilization, only woods, only wind, only leaves blowing without direction. We are just like leaves at the end of the day; forces larger than us sway us toward destinations we don't know of. That feeling of being impotent is upsetting.

Underneath the painting, we used to have a wooden table with two orchids and a bowl filled with candy. Butterscotch candy...damn, I really miss candy. I should try to cook some candy, though it will probably be uneatable. The table is still

there, but now serving as the first storage point for defensive supplies. Any day, enemies could outrun us and overpower our defenses. During our retreat or last stand, those supplies could be crucial to survival.

Besides candy, I miss friends and that unnerving sensation you get when you know a girl likes you and you must make a move before it is too late. How many survived? Where are you now, my old friends? Will we ever see each other again? No clue, and trust me, no hint about it being possible. Hundreds migrated to “safe places” sold to us by liars when all this started. In seven years, I have never heard about a successful safe place. I miss the peacefulness felt at the beach. I miss the freedom felt while driving. I miss waking to the sweet scent of coffee being brewed. I miss the marvelous sound of laughter. But above all, I miss my parents.

How improbable that seven years ago, the day of... *The Day*, they were away from home. We haven't seen them since.

My name's Nathan, and I am not alone. “We” includes my younger brother James. Well, I call him Jay because James is excessively serious for him. I am a strong-willed young adult battered by adversity into a survivor. At least that should be the intro to a movie trailer based on my life. I think I would go watch it too. My life's all about wreaking havoc and adventures, so it would probably be a great action flick. Well, truthfully, my life is about suffering and survival. It is about fighting every single day with every bit of strength my body can muster to ensure one more minute for my brother. I would not have been able to survive this far if I had not felt the urge to ensure his safety. His life, not my own, is my most precious asset.

I cannot accept that Jay's youth is this torment. When I was fifteen, just as he is now, my biggest concern was how to speak to the girl I liked at school, closely followed by how to reach the next level in the latest survival horror game. We used to play about surviving and being the tough guy fighting against the infected. Trust me, it is not like the games we played. It is hell. Something

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that is reflected properly on those videogames is humanity and how it crumbles so quickly to nothing but survival of the fittest.

Jay's biggest concern is fucking survival. I have vowed to myself that he will survive and get the life he deserves, even if I must give my own in return. There is absolutely no possibility of failure in my mind when it comes to his safety. My strength grows every second, though I am not capable of controlling it thoroughly. Nonetheless, when needed, I do not fail and will not fail.

Right next to the beautiful painting is a long hallway leading to the kitchen and dining room. We have a cream-colored ceramic floor that is a pain in the ass to keep clean, especially because Jay seems to have butter for hands. Besides his constant spilling, dust and moss are a nightmare. It is not a matter of aesthetics, but of safety. If an enemy ever manages to go through our perimeter defenses and get into the house, moss and dust make you slip and leave footprints behind, risking exposure. Might as well lie down and wait for death. No, I will not risk it.

The kitchen is full of wooden compartments topped with a marble surface. How could it be possible that seven years ago every single compartment was full of food? I would simply head down to the first floor, open any drawer, and get a bite to eat. Now, we pile up all our food to have a mental picture of our inventory when I leave to find more. We are running so low on supplies, probably the lowest we have ever been, but not the lowest we will be. As time goes on after The Day, fewer and fewer neighboring houses have useful supplies. Venturing farther might be suicidal, but it is necessary.

I usually tell Jay I will eat after he does and work on house repairs or weapon repairs or something to keep my mind off the hunger. The truth is I cannot remember the last time I had three meals in one day. My dad is an agronomist, and a damn good one. Our backyard is one big vegetable garden with big, red, firm tomatoes; huge, leafy lettuces; small, orange carrots; rosemary bushes; basil leaves; and potatoes.

I finally understand how hard it was for my father. Every single larva, fly, wasp, disease, moss, and vine on the face of the Earth tries to attack our crops. There is never enough water, as we have none to spare. Jay works hard on our vegetable garden; he looks funny as hell wearing Mom's gardening hat, but skin cancer will not fuck all the work I've done to make him survive this far. Though the sun seems colder and duller since The Day.

Next to the kitchen, we have a round table working as a dining room. It is not so much a room, as a big space next to the kitchen. Here I sit, sharpening a couple of shivs and arrows and trying to find peace within before venturing to the outside world tonight. Jay calls it an adventure, but I call it a necessity. Going outside is a rush from the moment you step a foot outside our front wall. Imagine guerrilla warfare in the sense that every house, window, corner, stranded car, overgrown bush, cracked structure, nook, and cranny is a suitable hiding place for anyone waiting to kill me, to kill us.

However, we are running low on supplies, and I will not tolerate another grumble from Jay's stomach. That sound crushes me. So tonight, the steps ahead of me are beyond our home and into the wilderness. Jay knows he will not come, not today, not ever. Roamers, slavers, wild animals, venomous spores, and macabre assassins are out there just waiting to capture, torture, and kill with no warning, no mercy, and no second chance. I don't need a second chance. I will have no mercy, and I do not forgive. This world has made me ruthless; I cannot remember the last smile not caused by my brother.

Every day goes along similarly. We wake up at sunbreak and make an inventory of supplies, inspect and repair the scarce weapons we have, review our defenses, and then I get up on the roof and inspect everything around us with my mom's old birdwatching binoculars. If something has changed, even the slightest thing like a roof tile on any house, we strengthen our defenses.

The large wall around the house could be scaled, but we have

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a clever ploy. The east corner crumbled because of the intense tremors unleashed during The Day. I managed to create a large pile of rocks, construction rods, and soil blocking that breach. From the outside, it seems as if the wall collapsed and access is blocked. Contradictory to the past, an incomplete wall is safer now, so adversaries assume the house must have been looted long ago. On top of the wall and the pile of rubbish, and invisible from the outside, we have barbed wire, sharpened construction rods with snake and frog venom, and small bubbles filled up with acid waiting for anyone stupid enough to try to enter.

Under the rubble, there is a metal security blind I stole years ago from a store left behind by its owners. I moved the remains of our fallen front wall to open a path where I managed to place the blind within the rubble and cement rocks to its front face. This way, if you stand outside of our house you see a pile of rocks and fallen debris, and no one will be able to spot that under the rocks there is a metal blind.

This blind can be opened from the inside easily, since I worked on a small pulley system that we pull using a large chain. At first it was almost impossible to pull since the rocks weighed it down, but the pulleys have made it easy enough to pull. From the outside, we can open the blind by pulling a thin metallic wire attached to the same pulley system. However, this is far more difficult since a wire is much smaller than the chain we use inside the house, and this demands much more strength.

This system has saved us more than once. Enemies have come close to our house and discarded it as they assume a house without a front wall must have been scavenged long ago. Additionally, this way, the front garage doors are never opened. Both are cemented to the ground and our long dead cars are pushed against them, holding them closed. All this scheme may seem exaggerated or overly cautious to anyone who does not live in this world. Trust me, it is far more than necessary.

Through the years, I have set up numerous wire-activated bear trap lookalikes, venom-soaked barbed wire, unstable

rocks, sound alerts, and slippery surfaces around the property's perimeter. All of them are worsened by the small lookout I built on the highest point of our roof, which gives me and my arrows a 360-degree view from within. There is a way to leave our house through its west border, the one opposite the front yard, but only we know the intricate sequence of steps and trap deactivations.

Unfortunately, all of this is a consequence of what I have seen and lived. Our world is not what it once was. One of the most valuable assets nowadays is guns. It feels miserable to live in a world where knowledge, art, music, friendship, cooperation has stepped down, and survival and murder are the new normal.

Guns are very scarce nowadays since some people understood their value and took them by force right after The Day. Bullets and gunpowder are even harder to find because people used them in excess during the horrifying first days of this mess. People traveled ridiculous distances away from their homes, looking for armories. The first murders from humans falling to their baser animal instincts happened right outside of gun shops. When the world's end was still being discussed by some, others foresaw it was our reality for the long run and followed that path of no return, the path of killing.

My first decision when all hell broke loose was to work hard on our defenses, to keep people from entering our house. Cementing our gates closed and pushing our cars toward them to ensure they could not be opened. Even being only nineteen years old back then, something told me to tend to our defenses immediately. Human selfishness was soon to subdue those naive enough to think cooperation could last. Now I congratulate my past self, because the first month was all about human cooperation and support, and rare attacks and homicides.

The second month after The Day showed our true species' face. No more help from one another, no more friendly greetings and sharing supplies. Everyone soon understood no government, no police, no army was going to be able to revert the situation. Massive protests turned into massive massacres. People who

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dared exit their houses were soon shot to death. Those gunshots caused the current bullet shortage and defined the ambiance of our lifestyle. Outside is danger; each step away from the confines of your shelter is a step closer to death.

Once the bullets ran out, guns started to wither owing to misuse and lack of maintenance. That is why nowadays you barely see someone holding a functioning and loaded gun. On the other hand, that makes them drastically important as an advantage at the battlefield. Range, precision, and instant kills are the perks of being one of the lucky bastards holding a gun.

My brother is already asleep after having a great deer stew for dinner. Nothing pleases me more than knowing he is safe and well fed, sleeping in a world of dreams a thousand times better than the one we live in. I like to come to our rooftop at night and check our surroundings accompanied by the stars and moonlight. Here I am, sitting with outstretched legs, my left arm extended behind to hold me up and my right arm holding our binoculars to my face.

To my right, the north neighboring houses and the road's dead end are unchanged. Behind me, the wind rustles through the unconstructed lot. The pine tree sings the night away, and I imagine its smell as if it could reach me. A long time ago I enjoyed that same tree's shade accompanied by... No need to reminisce in pain. To my left and front, more than one hundred houses stand, all uninhabited, as I know because I have inspected them innumerable times. All of them are battered by nature, time, and humanity's collapse. Countless people have died on these streets since The Day; it's a real ghost town without ghosts.

I remember the chaos, the confrontations between old friends, the first murders over supplies, the harrowing screams and cries expanding across our city. Now, only desolation and memories are left. Small details remind me of the horror we endured. Mr.

Jefferson's old 1982 Mercedes is turned over about three hundred meters from our house. He was one of the last to have gasoline, and our neighbors did not allow him to leave, fearing that car was their only way out toward an imaginary haven in another city. In the end, they fucked up the car, and all had to leave on foot, probably to their deaths.

Before my thoughts wandered farther away, I continue inspecting our neighborhood. At a house maybe five hundred meters away, something atop a table on a garden terrace catches my attention. I cannot believe my eyes, so I clean the binocular lenses and look again. I'll be fucked...a rifle! We've survived the last seven years without a gun powdered weapon. Each enemy I've faced who had a weapon has been heart-stoppingly close to killing me. It's been a few years since I've seen a working gun.

Back in the day, diamonds, gold, and fashion were expensive. We paid so much money for useless shit. The funniest stupidity was money. We thought a piece of paper had value and power enough to make us happier, better, safer. Nowadays, value is whatever will give you a fighting chance against adversity. Value is measured by the seconds it will add to your painstaking life.

A rifle must be one of the most valuable material assets to have nowadays, no matter if it has no bullets. If it works, it gives you range of attack, bargaining power, and the possibility of surprising enemies. On the other hand, if it does not work, you at least get an intimidating weapon that might prevent a fight.

I must get it. My heart rushes, making me ponder between running now without a plan or waiting for tomorrow. The risk is extreme, as I have no idea how many enemies are surrounding it, if it is the only one they have, if it even works. Nonetheless, the opportunity outweighs the risk, and I have made my decision. Tomorrow I will retrieve that rifle. I cannot allow someone so close to our house with such a disruptive power. I will not tell my brother; he does not need to know.

May my senses be advertent, and my aim be unerring... I will write again if I come back.

2

THE YOUTH *MY BROTHER*

NATHAN FORCES ME TO DO stupid stuff every single day. He makes me stand on one leg for a long time. He makes me stand on my tiptoes and walk like a ballerina. We play this game where I must put my hands palms down on top of his palms up, then he hits my head hard if I fail to protect myself in time. He makes me stand on the patio and throws stuff at me that I must try to dodge while grabbing a ball he hid somewhere. We play hide and seek, and he shouts at me when I miss some clue he left for me. He forces me to wrestle with him even though I will never be able to defeat him. He jumps out of nowhere and starts hitting me, leaves wires tightened around corners to trip me, wakes me in the middle of the night and forces me to run around the house avoiding a ton of obstacles he has set up. I really don't get why he does it. I hate it, but I won't say a thing. The world is bad enough as it is; I don't get why he must make it hard for me inside our house too. Our parents would scold him for being so mean.

Despite that, I really hate when he leaves. I know how dangerous it is, why he does not allow me to go with him. Panic always fills me up the moment he steps outside and won't leave until he returns. Our supplies are very low and even our weapons

are running scarce. They don't last very long as much as we must use them. The reason why I put up with all he does is because he is a real hero and has suffered much to ensure my safety. Maybe what I resent is feeling useless here, all day playing stupid games and never helping.

I wish I could go with Nathan, fight with him, but he won't allow me. He says he needs to focus on the battlefield, and I will only distract him. I believe him, having seen him fight. He doesn't know, but during his hunts, I get up on the roof and watch him. Lying on my belly, on the cold roof tiles, I use our binoculars to follow him. At least if he is in my line of sight, I can be sure he is okay. I panic when I can't see him.

Our home is on a hilltop with a view of our entire neighborhood. To the north, seven houses separate us from a dead end where tall grass has covered the steps heading down to the Inter-American Highway. To the east, across the street, a vast unconstructed lot is an inner-city jungle now. Moss, grass, dandelions, and fallen leaves blend as a green ocean. At the center of the lot, a pine tree stands tall and strong with its trunk half covered by the creeping vines. To the south, the hilltop descends gradually and leads toward dozens of diverse houses long uninhabited. Last, to the west, our neighborhood's downtown seems an urban maze. Some old businesses mixed with houses, rusty playgrounds, electric poles, unoccupied lots, our church, and the dried-up riverway.

All clearly visible from our rooftop, from my spy spot, and all so different from the way I remember it when our parents were here. The streets are destroyed by overgrown tree roots, covered with trash and unkempt grass. Most houses have broken windows, destroyed fences, and shattered walls. Blood stains from the early days taint walls, useless cars are parked all over, and not a single man or woman lives here anymore. We are completely alone.

Nathan says when the world collapsed, so did humanity. People will kill before even questioning you. He says life expectancy is now determined by how quick you pull the trigger,

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if you even have a gun. We don't have a gun, or much else to help us survive, which is why I'm amazed by Nathan's skills and how long he's kept us alive.

I was not able to see him hunt today, since he forced me to work on all the supplies he retrieved yesterday from the roamers. He managed to retrieve one metallic arrow from the dead bowman that I had to sharpen, two bars of soap I had to clean thoroughly, the long, shiny knife whose grip needed to be slimmer for my brother's grasp, and a book. He loves reading and forces me to read every single night. Anything with words is valuable to him. I even believe he reads the ingredients on food cans, just for the fun of it as the interior is long expired.

I walk toward our front door and open it as I can hear him coming through our secret entrance under the rubble. He slowly pulls the metal blind down to enclose our home and starts walking toward me. He is pulling a small white-tailed deer, visibly exhausted from the hunt, and carrying his bow around his waist. The deer's legs leave two straight lines on our garden's grass, annoying me as I oversee landscaping here.

He gives me a knowing look that said he was aware I was not able to watch him hunt, unable to be on the roof because of my chores. He never talks about his adventures, and this was not an exception. Nathan comes inside our house and walks across our inner hallway, past our dining room to his left and our laundry room to his right. He sets the deer on our kitchen table for me to prepare as supper and goes across our glass doors onto the backyard terrace.

Upon his return he just sits on our terrace in silence, staring in silence at our backyard, at the small palm tree in the middle, at our vegetable orchard to the right and the back wall separating us from neighboring houses. Only wind accompanies him while he rests his chin on his fist, and his eyes dance around. I think he worries I'll think of him as a murderer if he shares more about what he does, but I know he became what he became to avoid

having me suffer, even if he had to be destroyed in the process. He is a good guy in a bad guy suit.

I work hard skinning the deer at the kitchen, removing his soft fur and sticky hide. By now I am accustomed to this bloody process. Carving the delicious meat, applying the few condiments we have left, and trying to store the pieces as hermetically as possible to avoid rot. As I start washing the blood off my arms, setting two perfectly cut pieces of meat for Nathan to cook, he finishes his silence and walks back toward me. He grabs the meat and heads back out to the terrace, where our rusty grill is waiting for his culinary skills. His mouth is lopsided after those silent meditations as usual, grieving.

I follow him and sit down on our terrace chairs and see how he cuts the meat into small pieces. Using some carbon and one of our last thirteen matches, he fires the grill, and sets a small cauldron with water on it. While the water boils, he inspects some vegetables I had prepped from our garden. Slowly, he starts adding the ingredients to the hot water and the sweet scent of hot food fills our house. He serves me a deep bowl, and I see joy in his eyes, not because he killed enemies, but because we will live another day.

He raises his bowl and says, "To the lady and the child. May they rest in peace, fortunate to have been spared this world's atrocities." His face darkens slightly with sadness at the memory of what happened to them, and probably about being unable to save them.

"Thanks to you, they shall rest in the peace of God, having been avenged," I say proudly so Nate knows I have no remorse about what he did, and he has my complete support.

A frown wrinkles his forehead and his mouth tenses into a slight line like he is angered. "Jay, vengeance is never an answer to our problems. Whatever I did, and whatever I will have to do, is done to ensure our safety, but it is not justified by any means. Death is not something that should be decided by men for other

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men. You believe in God, so you must understand that life is the most important thing we all have.”

He continues in a deep, gravely tone of voice he uses only when scolding me or teaching me a hard lesson. “Those men used their lives to do despicable things that I will never forget, and truth be told, it fueled the anger I used to defeat them. Nonetheless, it was their choice and destiny, or God’s, or whatever really is beyond life, if there even is something past our death. I only hope something will put them up for trial and punishment. Do you understand? Never encourage or use vengeance, little brother, or it will consume you, taking you down a road from which no one can return safely.”

My hot head makes me blurt out, “But they deserved to be burnt up, they deserved to be killed, they deserved to be dealt what you did. God would not and will not forgive them for their actions. They did things to the lady and child that no human being should have to endure, so what you did is only fair. What if you are the means God uses to do his justice?” My arm hair is rising from fear of having contradicted my brother with something I am slowly reconsidering before he answers back. *What a stupid comment.*

“I agree their crimes should be punished, but it was not my place to do what I did, not even in this world. You don’t understand because you have never faced a dying man, when all his courage, hatred, and evil fades away as he begs to live. It is truly heartbreaking to be the one causing their death, even if they deserve to die for the horrors they have forced upon others. Please, James, understand this world has collapsed, civilization has collapsed, but humanity must be saved within those who can still be honest, respectable, benevolent, and altruistic. I cannot be that type of man and survive, so I decided to do what was needed for us. But you don’t have to, so do not follow me down this road. That is why I won’t allow you to join me, I’d rather die in battle alone than expose you to that feeling where someone’s life

is ended by your hands.” He looks half angry and half miserable as he speaks, trying to convince me with all his will.

Maybe he is right. He is not evil...he is not the bad guy, at least from my point of view. Yet it seems as if he sees himself as the bad guy sometimes. I know God will forgive him since his intentions have always been for good, for the defenseless, for the betterment of our disintegrating world.

“I understand.” While nodding in approval, I stand up to clear the dishes and wash them with as little water as I can because they are the only ones we have.

Nathan stands up, walks over and hugs me, and says, “Good night, little brother.” His warm embrace makes me feel protected, sure about a tomorrow.

“Good night, BB,” I answer.

As I drift off to sleep that night, I can’t help but wonder how he became such a fantastically skilled hunter? How is he able to face death with a smile and defeat it every single day he goes outside? How am I worthy of his protection? How in God’s name did yesterday’s fire start in the roamer’s tent?