

1. Cooling down

No one could sleep that night, not only because of the deafening hiss of the rain on the hot ground, but also because of the tension of what awaited Nino and the others tomorrow. No, instead of trying to sleep, Talia and Dorian were looking at the outside sky, Anne was filling several bottles of water from the stalactite, where it was now dripping almost every second, and Nino had found a small book in his jacket pocket.

It was his little logbook, where he used to write down ideas when he thought of something interesting and his phone wasn't handy. Before the atomic attacks, he had wanted to write stories. He had never finished a complete story, but his head was full of ideas: sketches of buildings, keywords for characters, even diagrams of who knew whom. The first twenty pages were full of them. The rest were blank. With a pen from his other pocket, he started writing.

Yesterday seemed like it would be a normal day. Just a school day with math, Dutch and history from teachers I don't like, or rather, liked. No, instead I'm now in a cave who-knows-where with classmates I hardly know, except Anne, there's a big chance my parents and little brother are dead, and the same goes for Liam, Diana, Kane, Paxton, Emira, Niora... everyone I knew, actually.

But it's not all hopeless. It's raining outside, so hopefully the scorching ground will have cooled down by tomorrow, and we can explore outside the cave. It looks like we have a good starting point. It's strange though that I just saw a ball of light in the sky. Maybe the spirits of the dead. Oh, what am I saying.

I want to say I hope we find others tomorrow, but that's just my brain wishing we find Liam or something. It's funny in a way... I never thought my life would change in The Last of Us...

Slowly the night passed, along with the hissing of the rain. When only the drops of the remaining water could be heard on branches and rocks, the group decided to venture a step outside the cave. Anne had filled all her PET bottles, once intended as a deposit, during the previous night and handed them out to her fellow survivors. They had no food, so that was their first concern.

“We should probably walk to that town as the crow flies, maybe we can find some food there that isn't completely charred,” Anne said, pointing to the town in the distance. Nino and the others nodded in agreement, and they began their journey.

It was a surreal experience for Nino. As they passed the road they had already seen last night, everyone looked wide-eyed at the landscape around them. The broken asphalt, the overturned cars, parts of which were scattered here and there on the road.

Cars. A lot of time is spent in them, right? Nino stopped in the middle of the road to look at a single car that was standing upright.

“Guys,” he began, looking at the car, “would it be a good idea to look for food in the cars here?”

The rest, who had already turned around, looked thoughtfully at Nino.

“I think so, to be honest,” Talia replied after a while.

Nino nodded, and said, “Okay, everyone, pick a car, and... see if there's anything to eat in it or something.”

The rest nodded too, even Dorian, although he clearly had difficulty being ordered by anyone.

Everyone walked towards a car that was parked on the road nearby, and Nino walked towards the only upright car, which he was already looking at. The side window was already broken, or melted, it seemed, because there was a hardened blob of glass at the bottom of where the window would normally be. Nino squeezed through the window, with some difficulty.

There was a jar of candies behind the gear stick, but that was about it, even after Nino broke open the glovebox. He took the jar outside and saw that the others were still busy, so he sat down on the guard rail.

Looking at the cave entrance they had just come out of was strange. These people Nino was with... even though they were out of the cave, the atmosphere hadn't improved. It was still tense and awkward, and no one knew what to say to each other.

First to come back from his car was Dorian. He had chosen one that was upside down, near Nino's chosen car.

“So, what can you find?” Nino asked Dorian, who glanced at him, growled, and showed him a box of peppermint gum. As much as Nino wanted to ask Dorian more, he didn't dare. Dorian still looked like the scary, big bully from school.

It took a while for everyone to return, but the loot they had inside was disappointing. In addition to Nino's chewing gum and sour candies, Anne and Talia had found a box of mint candies and an overripe pear, which they decided to throw away.

"Come on," Anne muttered, trying to gather her courage. "We... can probably find more in that town back there." Once again the four walked in silence, toward the town in the distance.

A few hours later, after a long walk through the forest full of dead trees, Nino and the rest came to a straight road that went into a town, the town they had seen lying in the distance all that time. As they got closer they saw a sign next to the road with the name and nickname of the town on it:

"Guldraan, Gulpen".

Everyone stood still for a moment, and Talia mumbled, "I used to come here with my parents."

Yeah, Nino thought. Moments like that would be their new future...

"Yeah, yeah. We're all sentimental. Come on, food is why we're here,"

Anne snapped, pushing between Talia and Nino and crossing the city line.

Talia wanted to yell something back at Anne, but she held back.

A little later they were in the city center of Guldraan, what was left of it.

There used to be a number of nice terraces and fry joints here, but now it was a shell of what it once was. Windows from the buildings, roofs that had been blown off, and the street was also badly damaged with a lot of stones that had disappeared.

Talia was the one who seemed to be the most affected. She walked quietly towards a café and sat down on a planter whose plants had been scorched. No one voluntarily went over to comfort her, it seemed. The uneasy atmosphere was still thick in the air. Nevertheless, Anne suddenly walked towards Talia, but just as it looked like she was going to sit down next to her, she walked towards the entrance of the café, probably to look for food.

"A bit too focused..." Nino muttered, starting to feel sorry for Talia sitting alone, and walked over to her. He looked at her, but she kept staring blankly at the terrace.

The terrace was on the corner of an intersection, next to a chip shop. Here and there were wooden tables and chairs and parasols, and a whole lot of ash, probably from the scorched furniture. The café itself was an old brick

building with a beer brand logo above it, which would normally provide light. The door Anne had just disappeared through was an oak door, painted green, with an opaque window in the middle.

Nino slowly sat down next to Talia, following her gaze towards the broken terrace. "Are you okay?" Nino asked slowly. Talia was silent.

"Sorry, stupid question," Nino apologized. "I..." no more words came to Nino. He only knew Talia a little through Daphne, and that little bit was just the name and the fact that she had a boyfriend named Mark.

"I'm fine," Talia said suddenly after a minute of silence, during which the only sound was the wind. "I just came here often. With Daphne too."

Nino nodded in understanding. "That sounds nice."

Talia nodded too, and both were silent again. Only the wind again, which now seemed to be stronger than before.

About five minutes later Anne suddenly came out with a lot of bottles of iced tea and soda, a big bag of cocktail nuts and suddenly a backpack on. The door of the café slammed shut behind her because of the wind, which seemed to be getting worse and worse.

Dorian now also came closer as he saw Anne walking outside, and she dropped the loot on the floor in front of Nino and Talia.

"Nuts are a great help in a situation like this, so I hope you don't have any allergies," Anne said, as she was putting the glass bottles in the backpack. Out of nowhere, she turned to Talia. "Sorry, by the way. Just now... at the entrance of the city."

Everyone looked at Anne in surprise for a moment, especially Talia.

"Uh... n-no problem." Talia mumbled bewildered.

"No... that... look, I was just...", Anne stammered. Tears slowly started to well up in her eyes. "I used to come here more often with Dad and Baukje... a-and... and..."

Talia hugged Anne when she saw her start to cry, while Nino stood awkwardly next to Dorian, both of them clueless about what to do in this situation.

"I-It's okay, Anne... don't worry," Talia comforted Anne, shifting slightly awkwardly.

Nino looked at Dorian, hoping he had an idea, but he was looking around quickly, randomly, it seemed. Suddenly, a few seconds later, he pulled Talia away from Anne, motioned for the others to follow, and suddenly

disappeared into one of the side streets. You could just hear Talia say angrily, "Dorian?! Are you insan-," before her voice was cut off.

Anne and Nino looked at each other in surprise and fear, but followed Dorian. He was hiding behind a big trash bin in the side street, and held one hand over Talia's mouth to shut her up. With his other hand he beckoned Nino and Anne to sit behind him. All the sadness of the previous situation had been replaced by fear and surprise towards Dorian, but his actions were not in vain.

Nino hadn't been hiding behind Anne for just a second when they saw two people walking into the city center. They looked like adults, weren't too tall, and wore strange beige masks that covered not only their faces but also the rest of their heads. They wore uniforms that looked like they had a high rank in an army, and on their backs hung strange weapons that emitted a faint red light.

"I knew it," Dorian whispered to himself. "I've been hearing them going down the street next to ours for a while now."

Everyone listened in complete silence to see if they could understand any exchanges between the people, but the increasing wind, coupled with the strange language they were speaking, did not help.

"What kind of language could that be?" Talia mumbled, looking back at Anne and Nino.

Anne, who had wiped away her tears by now, whispered in a broken voice: "I- I think it's something Asian... but I c-can't h-hear it very well."

The people stopped at the café where the group had been sitting a minute ago, and they saw something on the ground. Everyone's face immediately went white... did they leave something? Did something fall?

The two were now close enough to eavesdrop, but the difference in language did not help. The person on the left picked something up from the ground, to show it to his colleague, but no one could see what.

Dorian raised his head cautiously, to risk a look, but was immediately pulled back down by Talia. Unfortunately, it was too late, and a rapid babble in their native language was followed by footsteps rapidly coming closer.

The sudden reaction of the two men caused Nino, Anne, Talia and Dorian to panic, and the four of them split up. Nino immediately sprinted across the width of the alley and shot into another side street, narrowly avoiding a thrown weapon from the masked figures with a whistling sound. Nino

looked up, and saw that the thrown weapon was some kind of spear with a red, electric light coming from the tip, which was now stuck in the wall of the collapsed building.

The masked figures shouted all sorts of things to the now split group, but for Nino the sound slowly faded away as he climbed over a pile of bricks, which were probably once part of a residential building.

He was now standing in a small parking lot somewhere behind some houses and a small department store, it seemed. Nino quickly ran behind the corner of the department store, after which he pressed himself against the corner and looked around secretly. At that moment he saw one of the Masked Ones climb over the mountain of bricks. This one was not holding a spear, but a pistol, a real hand pistol, but again with the same red sparks coming from the front. He shouted another sentence in his native language, but the only thing Nino could make out was that he was angry. Slowly and as quietly as possible, Nino crept away from the corner he was peering around, toward the back of the department store, where the back door of a house was located. The house seemed relatively intact, except for the windows, so he climbed through the back window. As he landed on the floor of the living room of the house, he heard a buzzing sound, then a crash and a scream. The Masked One had found him and had fired a bullet. The impact point of the bullet was a large hole in the wall of the room, and the bricks around it were still glowing, along with little bits of electricity shooting off of them.

The Masked One fired another bullet, which Nino dodged just in time by diving behind the remains of the sofa, which melted away before his eyes like sugar in water. A door that probably led to the hallway was close to the sofa, so Nino jumped for it, threw the door open, which caught the Masked One's new bullet, and ran through the opening.

He was now indeed in the hallway, and climbed the stairs as quickly as he could, after which he ran into a random bedroom where there was a huge hole in the floor, into which Nino almost fell. It was now too late to turn back, because the Masked One opened the bedroom door at the moment that Nino wanted to pull it open.

He pointed his glowing pistol at Nino, who immediately threw up his hands. "Hello, child," the Masked One said menacingly, in a rickety English accent. "Jigeum! Now! Boss say talk you!"

Nino, too scared to say or do anything back, carefully shuffled out of the room, looking intently at the mask of his threatener. His mask looked like a skull, with black grids for eye holes and only an opening at his mouth so he could breathe. On his forehead was only a single red star.

“Go! Now!” he shouted angrily, as he shoved Nino in the back with the gun. The gun was still burning hot, and Nino fell flat on the landing floor, screaming.

“Stop complaining!” the Masked One hissed, circling Nino and kicking him in the side.

What happened? As Nino recovered from the pain and silently followed the Masked One's command, he wondered again who these people were. They wore crazy masks, spoke no Dutch *or* English, and they worked for a boss. But why were they targeting a few teenagers from a small town in the south of the Netherlands?

The Masked One quickly forced Nino out of the house. When they were back outside in the alley where Nino had first entered the house, he took a walkie-talkie from his pocket and began speaking into it in a language Nino could not understand, while still pointing the glowing gun at Nino with his free hand.

Suddenly, completely out of nowhere, there was a rushing sound, followed by a quick flash in the corner of Nino's eye, and the Masked One fell flat on the ground, completely unconscious. At first Nino didn't quite catch everything in the swiftness, but then he heard a voice calling his name.

“Nino, get away!” the voice of Dorian shouted as he pulled Nino away from the Masked One, who was still lying on the ground.

He holding a similar gun to the ones the Masked Ones had. After looking closely, it turned out that the weapon was the spear that the first Masked One had thrown. Nino looked around, and saw the Masked One who had just held him at gunpoint lying on the ground, and a thin cloud of smoke was coming from his chest. There was also a kind of squeaking sound, it seemed.

"Doria-" Nino managed to say, before the beeping quickly became faster, and the Masked One's corpse exploded in a fiery explosion, throwing both Nino and Dorian against the wall of the house.