

SURVIVORS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Voor iedereen die *Survivors of the Apocalypse*
al sinds het begin volgen:

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Prologue

The strange thing was that everything that morning made it seem like it would be a normal school day. Nothing could be further from the truth, unfortunately. Nino sat quietly against a rock in the cave where he had been taken. The cave was necessary, since an atomic bomb can change the temperatures drastically. Nino was a sixteen-year-old boy from the town of Havenrode, the Netherlands. He was of average height, had dark blond hair, normally quite neat, but due to recent events his hair was completely messed up.

It was that afternoon that all the political pressure that the world had been building up over the past few years exploded. Russia and the United States, who had been threatening with nuclear weapons since the previous year, attacked each other, and as far as Nino knew, the whole world had been blown up. Every mobile device got a distress message that afternoon, and everyone was asked to evacuate. But as you would expect in a high school, chaos broke out. Nino, who was chasing his best friend Liam, who in turn was looking for Daphne, Liam's girlfriend. Eventually, Nino lost his friend, and then the first bomb hit. It was a miracle that he had survived, but he owed it all to the people he was in the cave with at that moment.

About a meter from Nino, a girl named Talia was sleeping against the rock wall. Nino had been in Talia's class two years ago, but didn't know her that well. Despite the mutilated state of everyone from running away, Talia was a pretty girl, which was also the case at school. Dark blonde, straight hair, bright green eyes, and somehow, always perfect skin.

In the middle of the cave, a large boy sat on a rock, cutting a branch with a pocket knife. Many people at school were afraid of Dorian, or avoided him, not only because of his size, but also because of his behavior. He would fit the stereotype of a bully almost perfectly. He didn't pay attention in class, always wore the sports uniform of his favorite football team, and was always seeking up trouble. Yet he was somehow friends with Talia, but that was probably because of Dorian's friendship with Mark, Talia's boyfriend.

Finally, there was a girl, a little further back in the cave. She was busy catching water from a stalactite in a plastic bottle, to what extent that worked. That was Anne. Of all three people Nino was now sitting with in the cave, he knew Anne best, because they had been in the same class for three years. Anne was a small girl with straight brown hair and blue eyes. She was

a good student, and got at least a seven on practically every test. That's why she was bullied by Dorian more often, but she didn't care. She just always ignored him.

Nino stood up carefully. Everything hurt him, and looking at his arms, there were scrapes everywhere.

The atmosphere in the cave was tense. Very tense. No one spoke to each other, so Nino decided to walk up to the front of the cave, for the fourth time today. He just thought that maybe there had been a sudden change, that would allow them to get outside.

"Nothing has changed, boy," Dorian growled, shooting a quick glance at Nino before continuing to cut into his branch.

"I just went to have a look," Nino replied softly, to which Dorian's only response was another quick glance.

Nino continued walking towards the exit of the cave. It was strange. Although there was light coming from outside, it wasn't normal sunlight. It was far too bright for that. No, this light was the glow coming from the ground, which had become so incredibly hot from the explosion. This was the reason they couldn't go outside.

Nino stumbled back and collapsed against the wall. Were his friends, parents and family still alive? That chance seemed to grow smaller by the second.

Slowly Nino looked around the cave, and he realized a dark thought. Everyone Nino was here with, had lost everyone. Anne had no idea if her sister, father and mother were still alive, Dorian had also lost his parents, but Nino did not know Dorian well enough to determine what his connection was to his parents. Talia had also lost everything, and not only her family, but from what Nino knew, also her best friend Daphne and her boyfriend Mark. She only had Dorian left, to the extent that Talia considered him a friend.

Nino closed his eyes and tried to get himself into a good position to get some sleep. The rock wall wasn't exactly comfortable, but he somehow managed to get into a good position. Since no one was saying anything, there was hardly any background noise. The only sounds were the drip, drip, drip of Anne catching water, and the scraping of Dorian's knife, which was once again piercing a piece of branch. It didn't bother Nino that much, and

he slowly began to drift away from consciousness, until suddenly a sound was missing.

Dorian's scratching had died away, and a second later the sound of wood on stone could be heard, a sign that Dorian had dropped his branch.

Suddenly, a scream like a bang rang out through the cave, startling both Nino and Talia awake. They looked up to see Dorian had stomped on his branch and was glaring at Anne.

"Can that noise stop?!" he shouted. "What do you expect? That we'll survive for long on that little bit of water!?"

Anne gave a frightened look for a moment, but almost immediately she collected herself and stood up. "Long enough for the temperature to cool down, maybe!" she snapped.

Dorian, who had not expected Anne to contradict him, showed a startled look, but immediately became furious again.

"And then what?! The world is broken, girl!" he shouted to Anne.

"I'm sorry then, that you've given up hope, dude. But I haven't. I still see a chance, no matter how... hopeless it seems," Anne's voice faded, and her gaze wandered to the ground.

Dorian looked at Anne with satisfaction, and sat down again, while Nino and Talia looked at each other in fright.

For the rest of the day, the cave remained silent again, and slowly everyone began to prepare for sleep, if that was possible. Nino drifted off with a jumble of thoughts about the little fight that had just started, and he hoped that this would not happen again, for the rest of their lives.

Suddenly everyone in the cave woke up at the same time, due to a loud noise that echoed through the cave. Nino and Anne looked around in confusion, while Dorian and Talia stood up. They managed to follow the sound to its source, and it seemed to come from outside the cave.

At their fastest pace, everyone headed for the exit of the cave, where Nino had paced the day before, hoping for a change. That change had come now, and not a small one either.

The glow of the hot terrain had faded, and now that everyone was awake enough, they could place the sound. It was a hiss. A hiss, like pouring water over a boiling pan. It was rain, a downpour, pelting down on the dead terrain.

Even though it was night and the rain made visibility poor, Nino got his first good look at the area around them. A grassy area, with a road in the distance with a few cars lying on their sides or upside down, and beyond the road a town or village was visible. But what caught Nino's attention the most was a strange ball of light hanging in the sky, which certainly couldn't be the moon. It was a yellowish ball of light, which seemed to float through the air around the town in the distance.

Nino looked at Anne, beaming, who was looking at the outside world with big, serious eyes. She seemed to be in a trance. Nino wanted to say something, but he had no words for it. The only thing he could think of was that they had been given a second chance at life.

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.

2. Echoes in the Storm

For both Nino and Dorian, everything was blurry and numb for a moment, thanks to the explosion, but that went away after a minute or two. When they both regained their vision, they slowly stood up, and saw that the body of the Masked One was completely gone, no ashes, no... guts, nothing at all. The only thing left around the explosion site was the gun and a burn mark.

"Nino," Dorian said weakly, as he walked toward the gun and tossed it toward Nino, "here. Now we both have a weapon."

Nino caught the gun as he looked at Dorian in surprise. Dorian? Dorian, who was genuinely nice to Nino?! He had saved his life, how could he ever repay him? And where were the other two?

As if reading Nino's mind, Dorian answered his question. "I still have no idea where the others are. You were the first one I found, after I... disarmed that first guy." Dorian looked uncomfortably to the side as he said that last thing. Was Dorian really so heartless that he could just kill two people?

"W-Why... Was that really your first instinct?" Nino asked when he got his voice back.

Dorian looked at him in fear and anger. "I'm not a monster, of course that wasn't my original intention! I was giving you time to escape."

Nino, startled by Dorian's angry tone, immediately tried to apologize, but his voice was still partly broken. "No, no... Sor...y."

Dorian crossed his arms. "Yeah, yeah. I get it, you know. Come on. We gotta go find the rest, before any more of these bastards show up."

Nino simply nodded, and they walked together towards the exit of the alley, where Nino remembered one last thing.

"Hey... Hey, Dorian?" he muttered, checking the Masked One's walkie-talkie, which had been thrown against another wall by the explosion.

Dorian turned and looked at the device. "Take it. It can't hurt, right?"

Nino thought about some of the disadvantages, and immediately the idea of a tracker came to mind. Still, it seemed wiser to follow Dorian's word for now, Nino thought, so a moment later the two walked out of the alley, both with the Masked Ones' weapons and the walkie-talkie.

"One thing I haven't figured out yet, I must say," Dorian said suddenly, breaking the silence as they walked back through the market, which was now completely deserted. Even the body of the other soldier Dorian had

killed was gone. “Why do these guys explode when they die? Or at least, like, badly injured or something.”

They thought for a moment, then Nino said, “I think... to hide their identities or something? If they die, we could remove their masks.”

Dorian nodded. “That’s possible... but then it doesn’t make sense that there’s no... blood and bits of body—”

“YES, yes. I understand,” Nino interrupted, not wanting the conversation to go any further in that direction. “And I don’t need more details, thanks.”

Dorian nodded and they walked on in silence. Nino’s brain started to work at full speed because of this. They were now looking for Talia and Anne. Girls often stay together. And they both came to Guldraan more often. But where. Given that Talia was hanging out with Daphne, I thought that terraces, but if Liam also went with Daphne-

“Nino... Look!” Nino’s train of thought was interrupted by Dorian who tapped him and pointed to an object on the ground. A little further away from Nino’s feet lay a transparent bag filled with cocktail nuts on the ground, with at least half of the contents scattered around it. “They were here... They must have been.”

Nino nodded, and crouched down by the bag, tying it shut so that the only contents that were left could be saved. “Where could they have gone?”

“No idea. I never came to Guldraan in the first place,” Dorian replied.

“Guldraan is indeed a kind of dead city... or rather... it was...”

Dorian nodded. “Yeah... The only landmark here was...”

Suddenly, both of their eyes lit up. They had both realized that the only thing Guldraan was known for was the public swimming pool Go-Aqua.

“Go-Aqua! Of course!” Nino shouted in good spirits. Dorian beamed for a moment, but returned to his serious expression a few seconds later.

“Do you know how we get there?” he asked.

Nino nodded. “We’re near the main road. It’s not far from here.”

Together they walked as fast as they could towards the pool, clambering over the piles of rubble from the demolished houses and streets. Fifteen minutes later they managed to reach the outer corner of Guldraan, a place that was important to Nino. Go-Aqua was the pool where he met Liam and Daphne, during a school trip.

That was two years ago now, Nino thought to himself, as he looked at the swimming pool building, which lay silent and dead. The glass front doors

and windows that reached down to the floor were completely broken, and there were only small shards and glass splinters on the mat that lay in the hall. The swimming pool logo had also started to hang crooked, and the letter Q had even fallen to the floor. For the first time, Nino saw a strange emotion on Dorian's face. Sadness? Or fear? Just as he was about to ask, Dorian pulled himself together and stepped through the frame of one of the broken windows, into the building.

The smell of chlorine still hung vaguely in the air, although it was already far away. Here too, everything was in ruins. Not only had the tiles been blown off the wall by the force of the atom bombs, but also the candy and drink machines, and the small cash register area had been completely blown off its place and was now lying against the right wall of the building. On the left there were normally windows through which you could see the pool directly, but these had given way, and the ceiling had partly collapsed. The only access to the pool itself was probably through the changing room, where they had to crawl under the fallen ceiling to get there.

"It's been a while..." Nino muttered to himself as he took in the space.

Dorian nodded. "I've only been here once in my life. That was with school, back then."

Nino remembered that day. He arrived here, still friends with... him.

The sudden thought of that particular boy made Nino freeze for a moment. Would he have survived? Nino's thoughts immediately went to hate, hoping he had been crushed by the explosion, but then it immediately returned... everyone deserved a chance... right? Maybe even a second one...

"Nino? Are you okay?" Dorian's sudden voice pulled Nino out of his thoughts, and he saw that Dorian was already sitting by a passageway under the fallen ceiling.

"Huh? Sorry. Just in..." Nino was immediately interrupted by Dorian.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. Come on. We're here for a purpose, right?"

Nino nodded quickly and crouched next to Dorian at the passageway.

"Come on. You first," he said, motioning toward the doorway.

"Me? Why is that?" Nino replied agitatedly. "Who knows what's in there?!"

"Yes, exactly," Dorian said coldly. "But not really. If there's anything, just... like, scream or something. I'll try to come as soon as I can."

Nino accepted his fate, and began to crawl under the ceiling. After about three minutes of crawling through the claustrophobic-inducing tunnel, Nino