

We The Fallen :
A Dark Age Resurgent

#1 The Brothers

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A Wakeup Call

Luke woke with a sigh and that familiar thought of 'time to go to work... already...'. He hadn't heard his alarm go off and hoped he hadn't slept through again. Reflecting on the things he'd need to do to begin the day, he stretched his limbs and found they were stiff and aching.

It occurred to him that it was still night, he could tell without even opening his eyes, perhaps this was one of those nights where he had woken up prematurely, one where he'll get to just stretch out and let the warmth of the covers push him back to sleep.

He had dreamed, But he couldn't recall what... nor did he recall turning in for the night, and there was that familiar sting of a headache, one which worsened with every strained thought. He felt a dry burning in his insides like he sometimes felt after a night of heavy drinking and concluded that he must have been hungover. He tried to retrace the logic that had made his half woken mind voice this, but the pain dulled his memory.

He vaguely recalled a dream...green fields and calm wind: and a beautiful sun.

Thunder in the distance thumped, and his head ached more, the accompanying lightning flash forced Luke to open his eyes...

And he woke into death.

He was lying outside of his home, oddly on the lawn in the front yard. There were bodies lying all around him. People he could vaguely recognize lay still all around him. He heard ragged breathing somewhere near him and looked around in a panic, waves of vertigo

came and went before realizing the rasping and uneven gasps of air were coming from him. He tried to make sense of it, tried to piece together what had happened, but he couldn't remember a thing. As he tried to rise, his headache screamed with the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

His skull felt too small for his brain, it stabbed, pulsed, burned and felt ice numb all at once. As he sat up, the pain only increased.

He lurched forward onto his knees and emptied the contents of his stomach on the ground before him, the pain in his skull flared, and he felt blackness creeping into his vision. Blood vessels struggled over whether to constrict or dilate to deliver needed blood and oxygen to his starving brain. His thoughts became slowed and singular as he tried to hold on to consciousness as his stomach ejected itself.

After he had heaved for possibly a lifetime, the pain in the head subsided and his awareness slowly began to recover, he was soon treated to the scent of stomach acid in his nostrils and mouth...

Familiar shapes lay still in various positions all around, some bodies looked as though they had collapsed directly over others, All exuded fluids from one orifice or another., the cars were parked bumper to bumper along the road in front of his home he saw a body slumped over the hood of one.

He tried to identify the person next to him but failed to do so, though he was sure the face was familiar, the best he could do was acknowledge the round shape of eyes, the nose and mouth. For some reason, he just couldn't recall a name. He reached to their neck and fumbled to feel for a pulse, but the tingling in his hands made it hard to feel anything else. He gave up as the nausea began to creep back into him.

He quickly began to wretch again, this time, there was nothing left in him, and he coughed up little more than a small bit of bloody saliva, mercifully it was only a momentary wave and passed as quickly as it came. The ground beneath him was sticky from the fluids mixing on the concrete beneath him.

It was the scent of used alcohol, stomach acid, urine and

uncontrolled feces from the bodies around him that finally motivated him to move.

He stood up, and his body fought him every inch of the way, but eventually he managed it. Looking around left him with a sense of vertigo, he heard the rumbling of thunder off in the distance, clouds raced by in the direction he assumed was up, and lightning thrust the view of his suburban front yard into full illumination for an occasional half-second. . Finally he recognized himself having a coherent thought, one which formed words... "What the hell happened?" he half belched, half whispered. But there was no one able to answer.

The lucidity was slowly growing, and his thoughts gained focus. He saw the bodies of friends across the yard and remembered something about a party. There was no sound from those around him, not even breathing, no motion of any kind. Faces were slack and expressionless, and eyes seemed to stare permanently in random directions. He flinched away from every body when his eyes made contact.

Time crawled slowly, the scene he witnessed seemed more like a badly exposed photograph as he tried to process it. Then he heard thunder, though far away, it echoed seemingly at random. The sounds registered from in front of him, then behind, to one side, and front again. He found his sense of balance was quite challenged because of it. Every time the vertigo eased, it came back in full with the next round of thunder. He looked to his house, a single-story ranch with a cheap rent that he paid his brother, he remembered that he was the host to the party.

Luke saw that there were no lights on in the house and assumed that the power had failed. He tried to look for anyone else who might be like him, confused, scared physically ill, but quickly he had to give up in the dark, he could only fill in ghastly images into the faces he saw in the dark outside.

A bolt of bright lightning rolled across the sky, it painted shadows across his home and the horrible visage outside. Shadows crawled over the bodies as the blue arc of electricity ran off into the clouds, he

needed a flashlight and they kept a few in the house.

He limped toward the house tripping over people and beer bottles. As he stumbled, he became more aware of an ear-piercing ringing sound that was nearly constant when there was no thunder. His body screamed with each step, he felt dehydrated, and every muscle in his body ached like he had just run a marathon. Every part of him was stiff and seemed to move in slow motion.

Luke was gripped with a panicked fear though he did not call out for help, he wanted to... he simply didn't have the strength. Also, he was unsure if he wanted to know the answer to his singular thought, "Am I the only one?" There was fear in him, this he knew, but he refused to acknowledge the thoughts that were piling in the back of his mind. Memories kept intruding into his haze, some from long ago and some from only moments before started taking form, but he pushed them all away to process the now. Something hurt inside, but he ignored it and tried to focus on one step after another.

Perfect Clouds

Clouds collided above, their forms converging to form new masses, which in turn crashed into others, those went on to crash with yet more. Behind those clouds were pulses of blue light that darted to and fro. Like a fireworks show, these glowing blue embers splintered and darted in spontaneous directions, lazy blue lightning arced across the sky haphazardly, almost as if they whimsically yet gracefully strolled about in a dance. And forming wisps of haze chased after the sparks.

David was staring at the sky, unable to fully grasp what he witnessed, his eyes were blurred, and his brain was stinging, but he was starting to process. He knew that he'd come to only a few minutes ago... but rather than thinking about the pain that racked his body or the needles on the back of his neck screaming, all he could do was admire the beauty in the sky above...

"Truth..."

He repeated this dozens of times after he had woken. He hadn't even tried to move, he simply let that one powerful word roll through his mind, again and again. There was an allure to it, so compelling- so comforting, it simply rolled off the brain so warmly he savored each time he said it.

"Is this Death? is this what it feels like?" He was young to die, but not so much as to not have made the most of it, or at least the most of some of his life... there was always more to pursue, but now he was content to die staring at the light in the clouds, in awe of something so much greater than he. *"How beautiful is the sky that bears death?"* The words gave him peace, and that let him accept his fate.

Only he wasn't dying.

When his vision had sharpened and the shock abated, his senses began to function cleanly, and a thought formed, "How long have I been laying here?" Those words finally broke the previous loop of thoughts.

His temples were pounding, and his ears were ringing. His nose was stuffed, and he found himself having to breathe through his mouth. *"Truth."*

He shook his head, which added ample amounts of pain, "I'm alive." he persuaded himself. There was the usual itch on his cheeks, chin and neck. *He needed to shave, he hated shaving,* he thought. His coat was all covered in dirt from being on the ground. *Why am I lying on the ground?* He vaguely knew the answer, but it just wouldn't form words.

No, he wasn't dying. He was relatively healthy compared to those that lay around him.

He climbed to his knees and took in the scene: bodies lay littered around his backyard, some were writhing around much like him, and others were completely motionless. It was unusually warm and humid, the pleasant spring breeze was now replaced with the feel of a sweatshop. He smelled an electrical tinge in the air, mixed with bodily fluids and remembered he had just been laughing with them not too long ago. Sometime during all this, he became aware that his crotch was wet.

David ran his fingers through short brown unkempt hair, he tried to replay the events... *What had happened? How did we come to this?*

He recalled a party, one he had gotten sick of. He agreed to have people over though he just wasn't in the mood. A friend of a friend's birthday, and a kid playing the part of DJ. How the DJ held up a vinyl record proudly like a treasure, the wide frequency base how the low pitched hums pounded. The music was a metronome that came through budget speakers and masked a backdrop of voices intermingling... The beat- a mechanical sound dotted with a bassy roar, An "in" Hybrid of Drum and Base/Dubstep/Electro from a band production whose names would likely be forgotten as fast as it became popular. The music hit in time and gave the party-goers help to forget their cardiac clocks ticking, each heartbeat and how many remained was lost somewhere in that tide of stimuli...

David's brother Luke had pushed for the gathering and was thoroughly enjoying it. David however, just wanted to spend his

weekend quiet and drunk.

A couch... he remembered.

David was then on a couch pondering what had brought this event of which he wanted no part to his home. There were many things he left up in the air that he really should have been doing instead. There was the Lizwato project which was an intricate job that promised a good fee. Or Cliff's demo mockups that were brainless but easy graphics to whip up, and then there was another freelance project that just hit his email a few hours ago that he hadn't even got to look at yet. The overwhelming tide of obligations of a young professional was constantly looming- and somehow, his brother managed to convince him it was a good idea to have a last-minute gathering... he had initially fought the idea, and he wasn't sure how but a social life managed to take priority this evening.

Despite his perpetual confusion and resistance to the events of the night, his was a mind that was very sharp, even in moments of inebriation like this. Though physically a bit frailer than his younger brother, he had a strong mind which was a force for any to contend with, this he knew ... at least when his insecurities didn't hold him back.

Bweeeoommmmmmmmm,, And the bass built back up from its most recent climax. He tried to block out the very loud music.

"So just stop," he said to console Luke over his latest attempt to stop smoking weed.

He was only half-listening to his brother's response, not because of disinterest, But simply because they've had this conversation about two dozen times through the years, and he could predict quite accurately the responses he'd hear next. It always degraded to the same old rhetoric, "It helps me be creative." "I need to relax." "I earned it after this shitty week."...

"Yeah Dave, but I need it to be creative." Luke said as predicted, "You know, Let me free my mind from the day you know, less stress." Dave laughed inwardly. He remembered last time they had spoken on the matter, that was nearly the exact thing that he had said to Luke,

and David would never judge someone for the same self-deceptions he practiced.

He tried a change of subject on the younger brother, "Your glasses have some crap on them." his brother was a wreck, slurring words and almost blinking in reverse. The glasses were the least troubles of his current condition, but either he's too inebriated to realize it, or he's too high to care.

David found himself wishing he was much more drunk.

He and his brother shared a significant likeness, a strong chin line, round nose, large balanced brown eyes and thin brows, David's hair was darker and shorter, he was older than his sibling but not by much, yet his hairline was starting to thin. Luke was only momentarily sidetracked by the glasses comment. "But I..."

"Enough! I don't care anymore." David cut him off. He had said it in a curt but not hostile way. Luke nodded in understanding and there was silence for a moment, but it didn't last much like all their previous conversations, "This is some good shit though... can't waste it."

Luke had no compunctions of downing a forty ounce of some random malt beer and smoking weed from some unidentifiable origin. David had done the same with just as much reckless abandon when he was younger, Nowadays however, he preferred to smoke away from prying eyes, he used it mostly for introspection. In tonight's social occasion, he'd rather choose to cast the illusion of sophistication with his vodka and ... Gatorade? Why did I let myself get talked into this again? He had a long list of things he needed to do for work. He knew that even if he worked through the weekend, he'd just be keeping stride. He thought about the people hiding behind cheap suits and subverting and misleading salespeople he had to deal with Monday. Fuck it, tomorrow ill worry about it. He suddenly decided he wished to be more drunk, and took several fast swigs.

He worked up the nerve to stand up and noted the ground was shaky. Apparently, he was somewhat drunk after all, he grabbed Luke's shoulder to steady himself and said, "Going outside."

Shrugging off the rude end of the conversation, Luke stood up too and managed, "Good idea." And headed out to the front yard to chat with some newly arrived guests. David took his time leaving for the backyard through the kitchen, mulling over the night he didn't want to be part of.

David was tall and usually stood up straight when he wasn't drunk, he slouched as he navigated through the crowd in his home. Even then, he'd be an inch or two taller than most others. He'd probably have an argument with his brother tomorrow about his sudden mood swing, but right now, he knew it was just one more thing to be drunk about.

The back yard swarmed with a vast assortment of people, some his own age, some much younger toward the back of his property were a collection of trees with a fire pit at its center, he gravitated toward it without urgency. He had catch-up conversations with random people as they passed by. Most were just filler conversations, the kind of thing one has to not appear rude, not necessarily because they wanted to. Occasionally someone would bring something new to the table, a new art style of art, a charity cause, or some idea for a book, a game or a film... something to pique his interest. Even so, David was just not there tonight and didn't really feel like engaging any more than needed.

That was the problem sharing a house with his brother, Luke was about communication and connection twenty-four seven. His sociability was unrelenting and vastly different than his own, David was very good in a crowd in his own ways. In fact, he could be a master of reading a crowd when he wanted to be... just not when one of his moods struck. Occasionally the younger brother would even draw David out of one of his moods with little adventures or gatherings like this one. David did usually appreciate his brother's efforts, but there were just some days he just wanted to be alone...

When he found himself in this kind of state, he was much more of an observer. He felt more like a camera floating over his own shoulder. Though he didn't want to interact, he found it very easy to withdraw and just watch. He was much more interested in observing all these people doing their songs and dances, how they all strutted their colors

and tried to make them stand out in the group, "Witnessing evolution at work." he muttered internally. The current in-term was people being alpha or beta. David was unsure if he was either.

The variety of people at this gathering was, as usual, unpredictable, David was only five years older than Luke, and since they had gone through the same school system, there was a lot of overlap in their social network upward and downward. Some of David's earlier girlfriends had little brothers that Luke became friends with, Luke may have pursued a few of David's friends younger siblings likewise, and it all intermeshed and became futile to track after a while.

He downed a huge gulp of his combination vodka it tasted horrible; He couldn't stop seeing the patterns. *We see through each others eyes, witnessing ourselves in the reflection.* He mused *I act, they respond and thus I witness myself accordingly. These encounters of one psyche upon another, they usually let him train and learn of himself. Alphas don't waste time with thoughts like this, and Betas don't have thoughts like that at all.* He pondered his own place among the crowd but soon gave up. He decided to be simple-minded just for a few hours, to feign ignorance of all these truths and simply exist on the face values that people try to represent, "We see ourselves through others' eyes." he said, the small jewel of wisdom stuck with him,

On second thought, David found Gatorade and vodka do not make such a bad combination after all.

Bweeeoommmmmmmmm, the base from the speakers, reminded him of where he was.

Bweeeoommmmmmmmm, The record screeched, and a sudden skip Ripped him out of his thoughts. Someone was crying for help nearby, But all David could do was look toward a beautiful sky.

Candles

Luke stumbled over unknown objects inside the house, bottles dropped and clattered as he navigated his way through the hall to the kitchen. He knew they kept a readily available flashlight there, the whole house was pitch black, and only slivers of light from the periodic flashes in the sky made it through the windows to aid him. His hand hit something he didn't expect, and something made of glass shattered by his foot.

He froze in place, Suddenly unnerved by the echoes of the glass. No, not so much from the sound itself, but from the realization that there was almost no other background noise at all. He was used to the typical suburban ambiance of cars passing by, music thumping from one of the rooms, the high-frequency pitch of television turned on, and even the airplanes overhead. It struck him as odd that he noticed these absences amid whatever was happening. There was too much quiet, deep down, there was something that told him he should be hearing cries for help.

He tried to push the thought away. He was still very weak and ignored the momentary flood of worry to focus on his footing. He took slightly exaggerated high steps to avoid tripping on anything else in the dark. His home was a 2 bedroom cottage house that he and his brother rented. From the living room, it had a central hallway that led to the bedrooms, a bathroom, and right at the mouth of the hall was the kitchen. He cursed for not keeping another light near the front door...

He eventually grabbed a heavy-duty flashlight from on top of the fridge and pressed the button. The room turned to daytime from the miniature sun that Luke now held, and he could see. He was about to pan around the kitchen, looking for anything that may offer advice on what he should do next, but his search was stopped short. Luke heard a popping sound and was again in darkness. He shook the flashlight and heard the broken glass where the bulb once was.

Again he was in the dark, but now he was thinking more clearly.

He couldn't think of where another flashlight was hidden, but he recalled another option, after fumbling for several moments, he eventually pulled his lighter from its usual pocket and began searching for a candle. A small stroke of fortune occurred when he recalled the little box of candles stored in the same place as the flashlight, his hands shook fiercely as they resisted his commands, but eventually, he managed to light a few wax sticks. The kitchen grew to a dim orange ambiance and he could see again.

The pleasant scents from the candles merely highlighted the nasty odors from the drying fluids he was covered in. He didn't know what to do, he felt like he had the worst hangover on the planet combined with several twisted organs. In the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the hallway mirror and felt drawn to it. Luke approached the blur of his reflection.

Candlelight flickered under his chin as he stared into the mirror. His face was covered in blood, most of it was congealed and sprinkled with fragments of dirt, he was not cut, but his glasses were cracked. The whites of his eyes were nearly red with broken blood vessels, practically indistinguishable from his dark brown Irises. His short spiked hair had long given way, and his chin stubble was matted in mucus-laden biomatter. He looked like some kind of zombie extra from the most generic of B-rated horror movies. He snorted in an attempt to clear congealed matter from his nostrils, then staggered his way to the bathroom to try cleaning himself with a soaked towel. It provided a minimal improvement at best, but the act helped him further recover from the stupor.

He became aware of noises coming from elsewhere, he took a quick left and ducked into his room. He set his candle down and made noise as he rummaged through his closet, eventually unearthing his trusty camping backpack. It was a medium-weight external frame pack. It was used for roughing it on many a hiking trip, he normally kept it in ready order as a casual to-go bag, its pockets always contained some basic tools & a first aid kit, it wasn't exactly a bug out bag, but It was the closest thing in the house to any sort of disaster gear, and his trusty and well-worn machete that was lashed to the pack made him feel more secure.

The sounds were less dull now and more obvious, he heard other people making moans and assorted groans of pain, one was particularly close. "Hang in there, I'm coming!!" he assured whomever it was, he brought his gear back to the kitchen, where he tried to unfasten the snaps to open up the main compartment where he kept the first aid kit.

His hands were still very numb, and it was difficult to effectively manipulate small things. In fact, his entire body seemed to resist every movement. The kit came out with a small bit of protest, and Luke realized there was probably very little in it that would be immediately useful.

He took the candle and followed the sounds to the living room, where he saw a girl weakly attempting to pick herself up off the floor. He didn't know her, she had come with his friend James, but he only vaguely recalled her name, perhaps Lisa, or Ali, he wasn't sure. "Stay still, I'm getting help." He urged yet was unsure of how exactly he could do that.

Luke tried to support her by helping her frame sit upright, but she would immediately pitch to the side the moment he stopped aiding her. She was making a bubbling wheeze as she breathed. Periodically she tried to cough something up, and all the while, she seemed completely unaware of Luke's attempts at help. He had no idea what he could do for her, ultimately all he helped do was safely guide her back to the ground each time she gave up an attempt at sitting up.

His eyes had somewhat adjusted to the candlelight and he could see a bit better in the house now. Besides from this girl, there were two other people who were motionless in the room. One was Billy, and the other was Thomas, two high school friends of his, Luke tried to wake them, but they were both ice cold to the touch, and neither of them had even made the weakest attempt at breathing... He was pretty sure they were dead.

Luke had never seen a dead person before, and he knew that registered somewhere inside, but he tried to freeze the emotion for later... part of him needed to be functional now. The girl coughed, and Luke noticed faint tremors in her arms and legs. *Did She have some kind*

of seizure? Did I?! He didn't really know much about that sort of thing. He didn't know if seizure was even the right word, he had never seen one of those before either, and he was pretty sure they did not occur en masse.

The rumble of thunder caused the house to rattle, and then he heard other voices outside. Other people were awake.

Danger

David had just vomited. It was with enough pressure even come out his nose the lingering scent now assaulted his nostrils, but his head was clearing... He fumbled for his cell phone, but he couldn't make it work... his hands just wouldn't listen. How long had he been knocked out? He looked around, wondering if anyone else was doing any better, his head still pounded but he was putting it back together moment by moment. His vision of the sky, replaying itself over and over. It alone cut right through the haze in his mind like a fever dream, replaying the same thought again and again. Truth.

He replayed what he saw again. The DJ sighed at the temporary embarrassment of the record skip then quickly proceeded with his art. David was drinking heavily and already again lost in thought as the crowd partied the night away.

He remembered a thought "We're all so incomplete, and reaching out to fill those gaps.". David thought as he walked through the crowd in a haze. He watched two of Luke's friends try to fit a large forked log onto the fire pit. Probably too large for the pit, he thought to say something but just couldn't muster the energy.

Bweeeoommmmmmmmm,- and then the record scratched again. The lights flickered as the music restarted and then again ground to a halt. The power went out, and in the sudden darkness and silence of the backyard, the crowd began to mumble. The music did not return.

Someone shouted how the power went out, and the crowd threw taunts at the DJ for it, but no one truly cared, the laughs continued, the jibes continued, the self-promotion, the sarcastic one-liners and flirtatious retorts all continued over the sudden darkness. Some people gathered closer to the fire pit.

Despite the dark and the silent music, the booming sounds continued, then grew. At first, only a few noticed. The ground trembled for just a second, this time without the help of the large speakers, and more took notice. The booming came closer, got louder,

and the ground shook more. Conversations ceased, and commotion began in the crowd, then the festiveness was replaced by a sudden panic.

David felt a herd-like instinct rising in the crowd. They felt the sudden hint of genuine danger, like the sudden, sharp and rude smack in the face. It dispelled any other thought process...

The rising panic threw the crowd further into confusion, others in the crowd sensed that sudden panic and transmitted the sensation to others.

David saw a feedback loop, the amplifying genesis of terror with no method of diffusion, it collected, peaked, and boiled over; overriding conscious action and spilling over into others. David studied the effect and was amazed at the clarity he could see it unfold, Yet he too was part of this herd and was held in thrall. He could only watch the synchronized reactions welling in those around him, he felt the amplifying fear and watched as all logic and awareness in that moment was lost in a torrent from the unknown assault on their senses. He felt all of this, the rising fear and reflex, yet a part of him stayed in reserve simply to observe the hysteria overflow into realization.

And in that moment, when small blue streaks appeared across the sky - The terror was confirmed, and a realization was unanimous '*We are in danger.*' David thought, as did the rest of the crowd. *Something needed to be done*, he screamed internally, but what was it? Everyone else seemed frozen too, *were they all so overcome with awe to be able to think?* The streaks made hisses and burning sounds as they forked and descended toward the ground. The terror in the crowd was a flash flood. It was palpable, yet David saw no one move, there was no time for panicked escape, no time to understand, there was no time to do anything. A small dot hovered past the clouds, and David stared, knowing he should run but was unable to take his eyes off it.

All became horror and pain. His thoughts gave way to the highest pitch sound, a hum that overrode everything. Pupils strained, trying to constrict to protect against the light but instead dilated as small

countless more dots turned into a firestorm of brilliant blue miles wide far up in the sky. His body locked up, and he felt himself hit the ground.

The dot exploded in a nova of light and the ground started to shake.

Now David was covered in vomit and trying to make sense of it. He had replayed the memory over and over, and was lost somewhere between then and the now, unsure how long ago it was, It might have happened ages ago, and he'd have not noticed. Such was the sheer power of the image that he replayed, It completely overruled the rest of his mind.

Every time he relived the explosion, his head began to violently ache, but the image was so precious to him he didn't care. He noted that he was in pain all over, and some part of him managed to deduce the event could not have been too long ago. He took a weak breath of air in.

His body screamed for more. He forced himself to breathe in ragged heaves as he desperately tried to think about anything else. The appeal to not move again, to not attempt another breath and just drift back to sleep dreaming of that beautiful sky and the truth it offered was tempting, but a sudden fear struck him that if he drifted off, he might not be able to breathe again.

David heard sobbing, someone was nearby, but he couldn't see them. He needed to move. Hairs on his neck spiked like needles as he tried to stand... The world spun as an added treat.

He also felt some kind of tearing in his back, it screamed as he forced himself to stand upright.

He made a note of the fire pit, the large forked log was still burning though had half melted away into charcoal and ember. It couldn't have been out for too long, half an hour, maybe? An hour at most?

"Hello!!!?" he choked on the words and was too busy coughing up bile to hear any response.

He was still trapped in that half awake daze. Like a fever that keeps replaying a half-formed thought as one futilely tried to regain sleep.

He finally stood fully upright, and his back screamed in agony. He definitely had torn something. Aside from that very vivid pain, the rest of him was almost numb. All about him were people... most were doubled over, still unconscious. He heard groans of pain in different directions.

Lightning hissed above, and David found himself staring up to the skies' whispering again, he felt a trickle of blood dripping down his nose but just didn't care to wipe it... He found it odd that things were so visible in the dark of the night, The fire cast a red glow, but that did not explain why suddenly everything had such clarity to it, Like the difference between an old Television from the seventies and the modern-day Ultra High Definition brands. He felt the rolling bolts of blue above, and the redundant thoughts returned... *"It was truth."*

He paused for a moment and realized he had spoken aloud and that his words were slurred.

I must be dreaming... yes, that's the only answer. Red beams darted across the sky every few moments, it crisscrossed the blue lightning as it seared across the clouds. These bursts of light were nothing like the first explosion that was so burned into his mind. By comparison, they seemed synthetic. The pinpoint of red and the dots of blue lightning would originate somewhere high up in the heavens and then race off to some unknown destination far away, he had never seen true chain lightning, but he would describe it very much the same. Knowing how to describe it did nothing to help understand what was going on though, all he knew was just how at home it felt.

He took in a huge gasp of foul-smelling air and stood upright again. This time there was significantly less pain involved. A somber thought occurred, Where are the sirens? Why is it so quiet? He took a long clear breath, the first that wasn't a ragged jumble of necessity. Then he had the first and only logical thought to yet come to his mind, "Holy shit." he slurred this aloud too.

It was then something caught his eye, an orange glow in the windows of his home, candlelight. David looked to the windows and cursed as his thrown-out back began to spasm in pain, but he managed to begin the slow and painful hobble to the back door.

Not Alone

She didn't get any better. Her breathing had slowed, also it had become shallow, irregular and Luke could only watch it worsen. He tried in vain to keep her head up, but the futility of it was growing more obvious with every passing moment. He heard others moaning and crying outside, but he couldn't bear to abandon the girl. Someone else had to be around who could do more. "Anyone out there!?" He cried out. The girl stopped breathing a moment later.

In the moments after he felt a wave of selfishness building, he was trying to fend off the fear that he might very well be alone... That it began to overtake him the moment the girl died added more guilt. He began to dwell there in the dark, his mind ran frightful scenarios of him wandering through cityscapes and wastelands, starving, rotting from infection and disease and time passed.

Eventually, There was the sound of a door creaking toward the kitchen, dragging footsteps slowly echoed down the hall toward him. Luke tried to stand, but his weakness caused his legs to give out, and he found himself sitting on the floor next to the dead girl. "In... here." he managed.

Whoever had heard him, and the footsteps now moved at a ragged pace. Luke gulped hard to catch his breath and recover from whatever fatigue had overtaken him. His eyes rolled from ceiling to dead girl and back. The footsteps were closer now,

"Luke." a weak voice grumbled somewhere beyond the candlelight. He struggled to focus, and a familiar figure took form. David stood above him, though he wore a great congealing nosebleed and was covered in other bodily stains, Luke instantly recognized his elder brother. "Bro. Are you hearing me?" David part asked part croaked.

"Yeah. I hear you." He managed. Luke's voice rasped, his own voice wasn't much better. He looked to the girl who no longer moved. "L. whats? Going on?" He tried to stand, and this time his feet

remained strong beneath him. "I don't know," David said as he helped him stay steady & and the two walked back to the kitchen.

"Are you hurt?" Luke asked and immediately felt foolish. "Yes, but not like the others." His brother said, he hobbled toward the kitchen table, Luke joined him and splayed his hiking pack across the table. "I saw people moving around... but all look bad..." His brother replied, "I came inside to see if I could find any help... but you're the only other one I've seen so far."

David squinted out the door, scanning for any signs of movement. Luke observed the wreckage that was his brother, his paleness was apparent even in the candlelight, the crust matted on his face, and clothes seemed much worse than the mess Luke wore himself. It looked like he strained to even stand upright.

"Sit for a second, man," Luke said as he began to rummage through his backpack. David shook his head and kept looking outside. Luke managed to pull his cellphone from his pocket with the intent to call 911 but noted immediately the phone somehow had no power. How such a thing could happen, he could only speculate, he pocketed the phone in the hopes it might be more useful later.

Luke asked, "What happened?" "I don't know..." his brother looked lost in thought for a moment, "I remember an explosion," but he said nothing more. Luke drew some hand wipes from his pack and tried to wipe down his brother's face. He made a bit of progress on clearing the muck, but David flinched away.

His brother rose to his feet, "I can't see anyone from here. Let's go outside." Luke painfully shouldered his backpack and followed his David out of the cottage, equally as much to keep an eye on him as to find anyone else.

There were groans of pain and other sounds all over now. The brothers walked among the bodies in the yard, trying to find anyone alive, they eventually came across a girl curled up into a ball sobbing. Luke approached her softly as he was unsure who it was.

He gently touched her shoulder and said, "It's okay, we're here." at first, she recoiled from him, but she loosened. He then tried to ease her

out of her fetal position into sitting upright. She too was covered in grime, but he finally recognized her as his friend Dina. She was filled with tears and cried hysterically. "You're okay... You're okay." He tried to say as calmly as his voice would. But she wouldn't even make eye contact with him, she kept them tightly sealed with an occasional moment to swipe at tears. He continued trying to console her until he noticed Dave had found another survivor, "Hey, I'll be right back, okay?". The girl made no reaction to him and continued her crying.

Luke approached his brother and froze in disbelief, David tried to hide the shock on his face when he noticed Luke's approach.

"No Rob.." "Don't Rob." Dave pleaded to their friend. He was a shorter boy with a little puff of hair on top. His smaller but muscular limbs wore bite marks from their owner. Rob was chewing his left forearm in large, ambitious bites, blood seeped from where the layers of skin had already come away. Fatty tissue and the string of muscle were visible even in the relative dark. "Rob!" Luke barked and immediately regretted doing so. Rob momentarily gave up gnawing on himself to fix eyes with Luke, the blank confusion upon the other boy's face changed to a look of curiosity and Luke felt a sudden dread. The look his friend gave no hint of the comical and good-hearted nature that he had known in him, all that was gone from the boy and was replaced with something else. Both Luke and his brother backed away for fear of being next.

There was a loud pop in the distance, like a firecracker exploding a few blocks away, followed by another. Luke barely paid it any mind, he was fixated on finding anyone he could. He heard a few more pops and wondered who'd be lighting off fireworks at a time like this. The brothers sorted through the crowd, trying to wake those who showed any signs of life. Most of their party guests remained motionless, but a few were at least partially rousable. Luke and Dave earnestly tried to fully wake them, but most would not, and those that did were in no better shape than Dina or Rob. They dragged each one to the patio furniture by the house's back door... All but Rob, who still looked threatening.

"No." said Benny B. repeatedly, Luke tried to make sense of the boy's condition, Since Luke had attempted to rouse him, he would do

nothing but repeatedly stammer “No.” while rocking his head and body meekly. He didn't know him well, he was another friend who was known for usually hosting his own gatherings around a fire pit, he remembered the guy's sarcastic wit. He fanned the boy's face trying to fully wake him to no avail. Luke looked around, it was hard to remember what he was even doing, his mind was still in a fog as well. He remembered Benny's name but the other four people he found in similar states he simply couldn't recall. “Hang in there, man,” Luke said as he looked around for others.

His friend just kept saying, “no... no.. no..” while other survivors stared blankly... either staring blankly into the sky or into some other unknown abyss that only they could see.

Others

David saw Dina stumble toward him. Exhausted as he was, he felt a glimmer of hope... She had broken her hysteria and come to her senses. *At least someone else was okay, maybe more would recover like her, he hoped, perhaps the immediate shock would wear off...* He smiled meekly and opened his arms wide to console the tear-eyed girl. And found himself on the ground in a daze.

He heard a fuzzy screaming somewhere nearby, but for some reason, he couldn't see details, all things were a blur. He wondered why he was suddenly grabbing for his neck and why he couldn't get any air.

Quickly the shock wore off, and he became aware of the gravity of his situation, she had lunged at him, hands clamped around his throat and squeezed, the pressure alone almost made his vision dim, he staggered and fell backward, and she fell with him, the sudden fall may have been the only thing that kept him awake, her grasp shifted just enough to let a bit of blood make it to his brain and a little more air into his lungs.

In the girl's savagery, she was quickly reasserting her grasp.

David still had no idea how to react, his only thought was "*Why?*" but as consciousness began to lapse, he threw his hands up in desperation, this broke the girl's hold. She screamed in outrage, and fluids sprayed from her mouth. The scent of digested beer and stomach acid assaulted him as she started flailing brutally with her arms. David kept his arms up to defend his head. He regained his breath and tried to keep his senses in the moment, but he just couldn't keep up. She was swinging so wildly and rapidly he was taking many hits... Each one made his world become that much more fuzzy.

She lunged at his arms as he tried to push her away, snapping with teeth in between flurries of hands. An excess of saliva steadily streamed from her as she howled like a rabid animal.

He felt things go blurry again. She was faster and stronger than

him somehow, and his muscles argued with him at every movement. David knew there was a good chance he was about to blackout and die any moment.

Then the pressure was gone, and oxygen rushed into his lungs. He heard a thump and the smashing of lawn furniture and beer bottles. A hand grabbed at him, and he meekly tried to swat it aside, but instead, it grabbed hold of him, and David found himself being pulled to his feet.

Luke was there, and he stood between him and the girl, Dina. She was trying to get back to her feet and screaming all the while. "What's wrong with you!? Why would you do that!?" He screamed at her. She started to tear and sob, Luke stood anticipating some kind of counter-attack, but instead, David felt sympathy for her and tried to form words, "It's... Okay..." The girl hissed at the words and looked like she was about to attack again.

Somewhere above, more lightning pulsed and the backyard grew bright for a moment, this shook all the hostility from the girl, she shuddered for a moment before running away from the firelight and into the dark beyond. Her shrieks continued to echo from somewhere in the woods behind the home.

The lightning had an effect on the other survivors as well, as David looked around, he saw them jerk and flinch at its happening. It even seemed to help rouse the unconscious, albeit slightly. He started to try to tend to them, though he wasn't sure how. He settled on ensuring they remained breathing and then resorted to poking them in an attempt to wake them. He counted the living.., five, six, seven, eight. Counting himself and brother made ten that survived... Whatever had happened. He looked among the bodies in the yard and tried to count, but David found himself having trouble focusing.

His own head was still cloudy, and he felt weak. Perhaps he needed to sit and rest. His head hurt, and his spinal column screamed like something had torn, he felt his heartbeat way faster than it should. He improvised a chair out of a log and tried to gather his thoughts... but all he could think of was the sheer magnificence of the shapes that arced overhead.

Luke stood at the edge of the flames looking over the survivors, David made eye contact with his brother, but neither said a thing. It hit him that he had no idea of what to do with the friends whom they looked over. The immediate thought was to call the police... but he had no phone, no phones meant no emergency service even then there was no telling how widespread the damage was, there may not even be a place to bring them.

Then, as quickly as it had come before, David felt the hairs on his neck stand, he forgot all the aches and pains as the backyard lit up in full daylight. He felt a tinge of euphoria as he saw Luke duck and shield his eyes. David Looked upward, just as another electric blue arc of lightning collected above and splashed down nearly on top of them, the strange bolt of lightning struck something metal attached to the side of his home. All became white, and all conscious thought scattered.