

REYES DE LA MONTAÑA
(Mountain Kings)

By Daniel Hernández Chambers

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For my mother in whom I always trust.

The end of the world began shortly before midnight on a Wednesday, Central European Time.

PART ONE

The End

Living together creates bonds of affection that can be built and strengthened. Ramón had said this to the group so many times, that in fact the phrase, instead of becoming some sort of motto—as he had been hoping—it had lost some of its impact and meaning. But this was still his main objective, to create bonds between a bunch of kids that had none. As Ramón saw it, the problem they all had in common and the reason they had ended up in this situation was a lack of affection. Or perhaps it was misunderstood affection, which was the same thing as far as he was concerned. The speed with which society had evolved over the last few years—especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century—meant that a great number of people lived without of any kind of affection. There were some adults who struggled to survive without it, but for young people, the situation was even worse. Much worse. Without a doubt, adolescence was the most important stage in life for friendship building, and Ramón knew all too well that a single friendship counted for much, much more than thousands of followers on social media. One individual friend was more worthwhile than a wardrobe stuffed full of designer clothing, more valuable than piles of money, more important than one hundred thousand *likes* and better than the latest generation phone. Ramón had grown up at a time when the only social network had been the kids you went to school with and the ones who lived nearby. Mobile phones did exist back then, but they were more of a novelty or an extravagance. Ramón had been young when boredom was a thing, or so he liked to say.

He had made this same journey with lots of similar groups, and often came away feeling hugely satisfied. The combination of nature and living together usually worked very well. The stars of the show were solidarity and effort. Little by little, comradeship would emerge, friendship even. And that's what left Ramón feeling so satisfied.

The high levels of positivity had a lot to do with the work carried out before the trip to evaluate the kids. Ramón and the rest of the team studied them carefully, selecting the chosen few. Not all of the interns at the Young Offenders' Unit were suitable candidates for an excursion to the mountain lasting several days. Some were too violent; some had tried to escape simply too many times; and neither Ramón nor his bosses wanted to run the risk of losing any of the interns in the middle of nowhere.

The group supervisor was convinced that this new group would be a roaring success. It wouldn't be easy, but then again, it never was. If it were easy, there would be little point in making the journey. Ten youngsters, six boys and four girls, all of them with their individual challenges and each with a list of brushes and run-ins with the authorities which was already considerably long for their young ages. But they were ten youngsters in whom Ramón had spotted a ray of hope. They were still young, and it was clear that they were caught between a childhood they had only recently left and a maturity that still lay some way off. Despite this, Ramón knew they were not angels. And while some of the behaviour they exhibited—their body language, looks and expressions—may have suggested otherwise, neither were they demons. Of that Ramón was convinced.

According to the law, the ten youngsters had been found guilty, but their supervisor (and his team) knew that it wasn't entirely their fault. It wasn't enough to simply blame society; it needed a more specific explanation, and that's where in more than just one or two cases, the parents came into things, the ones who confused signs of affection with twenty- or fifty-euro notes. Along with them also came abject loneliness, broken families, a lack of foundations, an inability to empathise and a belief that everything is legal when you're young. Thefts, robberies, drugs, the crimes that littered the records of each and every one of these youngsters. Ramón and his team would add a date to each record, evaluating their progress from their first arrival at the unit. The idea was not that the young people in their care would simply complete a sentence of however many months' incarceration, but that by the time they regained their freedom, they would be people capable of developing bonds of affection that would serve as lifelines throughout their futures. After all, there was a chance that anyone could float adrift at some point in their lives.

There was room for fifteen passengers in the vehicle, not including the driver, but with such a small luggage space, their rucksacks and tents had spilled out across an entire row of empty seats.

They had left the surfaced roads almost two hours ago and were now following a series of dirt tracks that zigzagged up and down the hillsides as if they had been drawn by a madman on a bad day. Some of the kids had fallen asleep or were at least trying to; others kept themselves to themselves, aloof. Ramón was driving, but no one paid him any attention as he kept up a running commentary, pointing out features of the landscape, telling them not only the "proper" names for them, but also the names the locals used, sharing a short legend, or reliving an anecdote about something that had happened with a previous group.

They went around a bend in the road and there, finally, was the hut: a stone building with a pitched roof, standing next to a cluster of pine trees. This was not their final destination. This was simply where they would leave the minibus and set off on foot.

Parked off to one side was a green car.

Ramón sounded the minibus horn.

A few moments later, the door of the hut opened and a couple came out to meet them, two thirty-somethings, Claudia and Miguel. They were employed to keep an eye on the hut and its upkeep, and Ramón had arranged to meet them there, waiting for the group with a surprise.

“Great,” announced Ramón after he had turned off the engine. “This is basecamp, kids. This is where we leave civilisation behind us and delve deep into nature. That is why, thanks to Miguel and Claudia, we are going to enjoy a farewell lunch. This will be the last time for the next two weeks that you will eat something that you haven’t prepared yourselves, so make the most of it, and don’t upset the chefs by leaving food on your plates!”

Inside the building they discovered that Claudia and her boyfriend had set a long wooden table with places for twelve, laden with salad, cheese, paté and some enormous pork chops that they had cooked on a grill.

“Look at that picture,” said the monitor, pointing to a still-life on the wall at the far end of the room that served as their dining room. “It’s so ugly, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t want to say anything in case you’d painted it,” said Germán.

“I’ve no idea who made it. But anyway, the good stuff is what’s behind it.” Ramón stood up and removed the picture to reveal a simple safe embedded in the wall. “As I said before, all electronic or mobile devices that you may have brought with you need to stay here until we return.”

There was a zero tolerance approach to mobile phones in the Unit. The interns were not allowed their own phones, but they were granted access to them every so often as a reward for good behaviour. They had very strict hours when they were allowed to use them and even then, only under supervision. As well as the restrictions, they had also installed a signal interrupter, just in case anyone tried to flout the rules.

“This is the last point where we will be under cover,” continued Ramón, “so it makes no sense to bring anything with you that you will not use. I also suggest you leave behind any rings, bracelets, necklaces, anything you might lose, but that is up to you. As for the electronics, there is no option; they are staying here, just as I told you before. Two weeks without any communication with the outside world. I’ll tell you something: when we return, I bet none of you race to turn your phones on again. And if anyone manages a few extra days without turning them on, I’ll give that person a prize. I’ll think of something.”

When they finished eating, Ramón instructed the youngsters to clear the table and wash the dishes while he went over the plan with Claudia and Miguel.

“I guess we’ll be arriving back here on the 15th around mid afternoon, but it would be great if you could be here from about midday, just in case we’re ahead of time.”

“No problem,” said Miguel.

“Are you taking the minibus?”

“Yes, Claudia will take the car, and I’ll drive the minibus. I’ll refill the tank ready for the 15th.”

“Perfect.” Ramón unfolded an enormous map on the now clean table and he called the youngsters over. “So, we are here,” he said resting his index finger on one of the corners of the map. “Your universe, *our* universe will cover a lot of this area here,” he waved his hand over the broad central section of the map and started discussing the area’s characteristics. “Woods, predominantly pine trees but also chestnuts and walnuts, we’ll be learning how to identify them. As you can see, the river Erza has several tributaries—these lines here—but they don’t all have names. They all lead to the Erza or simply peter out. The important thing to note is that we will not be short of water; we’ll be using it to drink, to wash clothes and of course, ourselves. Here’s the lake, and the abandoned village of Grandesa. This,” he said, pointing to another point on the map, “is where we will pitch our camp,”

“How long with it take to get there?” asked Paula.

“That will depend a little on how quickly you all move, so we ought to get going so we can get there before it gets dark. Let’s go!”

They looked at one another, and in dribs and drabs, they left the hut. The last outpost of civilisation.

“Living together builds and strengthens bonds of affection,” said Ramón.

“Or the exact opposite,” thought Eva who was the first to hoist her rucksack onto her back.

She had been among the small group destined for the mountain right from the very first moment.

* * *

All it took was to walk a few short metres into the trees for the hut to disappear among the pines, and along with that isolated building went that last bridge that united them with the human world.

The kids with Ramón at the lead plunged into that wild and distant land. As they walked, the column was not an even line; the youngsters walked in pairs, or in small groups of three or sometimes four, always with Ramón at the front. There were no footpaths for them to follow. The vegetation was becoming ever greener and lusher and covered everything, so they had to forge their own paths. Ramón did not miss the opportunity to highlight the subtle parallels with their own lived experiences: *It's alright to strike out on new paths! Don't limit yourselves to walking where others have gone before! Or, don't let others guide your footsteps.*

They reached the spot the supervisor had chosen to pitch camp just as the daylight was starting to fade. They hurried to put up their tents. There were five in total, one for Ramón, two for the girls and another two for the boys. They pitched them in a semicircle then set to work collecting wood for a fire.

The chosen point was located on a plateau in the very heart of the forest, a few metres away from a stream in which they could wash themselves, their clothes and the pots and pans.

They would spend the next two weeks hiking, trying out canyoning and caving, swimming in the lake and exploring the ruins at Grandesa, the abandoned village a few miles from the campsite, of which just a few brick walls remained. Ramón showed them how to fish and to prepare their catch for the fire. He taught them to hunt rabbits and to skin them ready for the spit, to search for nests and to recognise edible roots. They also played games that focused on orientation and teamwork, and as night fell, they told stories around the campfire. Ramón set the rules: each night, three of them were to tell a story, either one different story each or a longer one between them. It didn't matter if it was a made-up story or something that had happened to them. For the first few days, Ramón chose the speakers, —there weren't any volunteers—but after the first few sessions, the desired effect took hold and they all willingly took part, even Nando who was the quietest and Paula, the most easily embarrassed.

As almost always happened, despite the differences in their characters and the obvious tensions between them, little by little the group became something like a team in which everyone—

to a greater or lesser extent— participated. From the seventh day onwards, Ramón granted them a degree of freedom that they had not experienced for many months.

And so, as the moment arrived to return to the city, the ten youngsters' reluctance was clearly visible.

It was at this point that Ramón gave them the speech that he had written many years earlier and that he repeated at the end of every trip: he asked them not to lose their spirit; not to forget the benefits of working together as a team; not to be scared to seek out new paths once they left the Young Offenders' Unit.

They packed away their camp, ensured they had left no rubbish behind and set off in a silence that was already bathed in nostalgia.

The end of the world began a shortly before midnight on a Wednesday, Central European Time. But Ramón and the youngsters did not know; they were busy setting up camp. They were deep in the woods, in such a high, isolated part of civilisation it would have been impossible for them to begin to imagine what was happening. None of them had any idea.

All of them at some time or other had believed themselves invincible. They had believed their youth to be eternal and that this fact would protect them. This, however, was not to be.

FRANCISCO MOLINA REYES, TICO: his high ability with IT coupled with his low ability in social situations and his relaxed approach to learning led him to hack the school IT system to falsify his grades. They caught him, but instead of teaching him a lesson, it simply pushed him to try harder and harder things. It did not take him long to discover the access codes for the bank accounts belonging to several neighbours and friends of his parents, and not long after that he tried to infiltrate the database at the local bank. He thought it was too soon and too risky to try one of the bigger branches, but they still managed to catch him. A speedy investigation brought to light the existence of a bank account containing many thousands of euros. It was less than he had been aiming to collect but much more than could be justified by his weekly pay.

His poor physical condition (he weighed some 175 pounds in a body that measured little more than five foot two) meant that he had enjoyed the activities and the trip less than the others. It also meant that he was the last to emerge back to basecamp.

* * *

He was also the last to see that nobody was there.

Ramón found it strange that there were no vehicles parked outside the building. He decided something unforeseen must have held up Claudia and Miguel, but he had absolute confidence in them; they had never failed him before. He'd never had to wait for them at all— they'd always been there as he arrived with the group, ready with a *welcome home* meal on the table. Perhaps one of the vehicles had a flat tyre or they had been involved in an accident. The thought that the couple could have got the wrong pick-up date or have somehow forgotten them never crossed his mind. Knowing them as he did, it was simply impossible. He sped up, ignoring the protests behind him, mainly coming from Tico and Paula who were straggling at the back.

The door to the hut was never locked; it was there to offer shelter to anyone who needed it. But there was no one there, no food and no signs that suggested anyone had been there for at least a week. Everything was clean and tidy which led Ramón to believe that nobody had been in there since the day they had left.

Strange.

His annoyance was tinged with alarm. He took down the picture frame and opened the safe where they had left their phones. He laid them all out on the table and turned his on.

Meanwhile, the others had also walked in, and each now picked up their own phones with a certain longing. Only Eva, Nando and Yasser did not collect their phones, remembering the challenge set by Ramón, but he seemed to have forgotten his promise of a prize for anyone who resisted turning on their phone. At the moment, the supervisor's full attention and that of the kids who had turned on their phones was focused on the series of beeps notifying them about missed calls and messages that were waiting for them.

"Seven calls from my mother?!" cried Alicia. "She never calls me."

"I've got missed calls from my dad, my mum and my brother," said Luke in surprise. He also had missed calls from several friends and his aunt Carmen.

Ramón felt a knot forming in his stomach. Alarm was now very much overtaking any previous feelings of irritation. Like the others, the list of missed calls to his phone was endless. Family members, colleagues from the Unit, friends... He had at least a dozen calls from his girlfriend. What on earth did it all mean?

He opened his messaging app and saw he had hundreds of messages.

"Oh my God!" yelled Germán. "Look at this video. My sister sent it me on WhatsApp."

Nando, Yasser and Eva couldn't hold off any longer and they picked up their phones.

Germán held out his phone so everyone could see the video. It showed an image taken from a high apartment, which Germán recognised as his own home. In the streets below was an enormous queue of vehicles almost at a standstill. They could hear the worried voice of Germán's sister above the sound of the klaxons outside:

They're all going...

All of them...

But there's nowhere to go....

"I've got loads of videos, too," said Alicia.

"Me too," added Luke.

Everyone had them.

Videos and messages about a state of emergency.

In another one—received by Tico—they could also see an infinite column of cars. Perhaps it was the same one, but now, seeing as nothing was moving, many people had decided to give up and get away on foot. Some people were arguing while others were even running...

"What *is* this?"

“What’s happening?”

A video on Alicia’s phone showed a huge fire. Another showed the arrival of military vehicles filled with soldiers. Yet another seemed to show a brawl at a hypermarket, people shouting, fighting, racing to get in.

They all sounded like scenes taken from some apocalyptic show, like *The Walking Dead*, just without the zombies.

Ramón stepped away from the others and quickly read what he could of the messages he had been sent by his girlfriend, his parents, his closest friends. It was difficult to make any sense of it. The people sending the messages had written them quickly, without checking for typos made by their nervous, trembling fingers on the tiny keyboard. Thanks to autocorrect, some of the messages were absolute nonsense, complete enigmas. Others would have been funny, if not for the situation.

A virus.

It seemed the news had been confused at first, and as it had happened at night, most people only found out about it the following day. Thousands of people had got up in the morning and went to work completely unaware that the world had begun to collapse. Nobody knew anything about where the virus had come from. Perhaps it was an unexpected natural mutation, or something that had escaped from a lab, produced by human error, or maybe it was a terrorist attack. It spread in lots of different ways and attacked with a vertiginous speed that made it impossible to be treated with any known cure. People died on the same day they were infected. It was transmitted by human breath, in saliva, in sweat, and the death rates were rising hour by hour without slowing.

We’re going, we have to get out of here, said Ramón’s girlfriend Silvia in a voice message she had sent eleven days before he turned on his phone. At times, her voice was overcome with grief. *Save yourself, Ramón.*

Eleven days ago.

Eleven!

More videos. Some taken from the TV or YouTube. It seemed other corners of the world were also suffering from the impact of the virus. It was unstoppable. There wasn’t enough space for so many dead people. They had set fire to a whole building where the only thing inside was corpses, or they had piled the bodies up in town squares and doused them in petrol. And yet the virus survived, even in fire, or so the most alarmist reports confirmed.

Another video showed the distant image of an airport runway. Several military vehicles were surrounding a plane. According to the scrolling news bar, it was the Josep Tarradellas Airport in

Barcelona and there were several infected people on board the plane. As soon as the doors opened, some people jumped, ignoring the considerable height from the door to the ground.

Paula started to cry.

“Oh, my God! Look at this!”

On the screen was rows of bodies covered with sheets and blankets. At the bottom read:

París, 12 o'clock today

“It says, *today*,” said Nando. “When was ‘today’?”

Paula stopped the video and checked when she had been sent the file.

“Friday, but... not last Friday, the one before that. Five days after we got here.”

Ramón came out of his messages and opened his contact list. He picked the top one—his girlfriend Silvia—and pressed call.

The number you have dialled is currently unavailable

Next, he tried his father.

The number you have dialled is currently unavailable

His mother.

The number you have dialled is currently unavailable

He tried others, friends and colleagues. He kept getting the same message, that same mechanical message which began to sound like some macabre joke.

It occurred to him to try the emergency services. He dialled and held his breath.

This time it wasn't an automated message, just a non-stop beeping.

“Call,” he urged the kids. “Call someone, anyone, come on!”

They looked at him. It was hard to tear their eyes away from the videos and messages, but they all did what their leader asked.

The number you have dialled is currently unavailable

Nobody answered.

They all turned to look at Ramón, stunned by incredulity and a growing fear. But so far, the fear was too weak to overpower them. They were still in shock, struggling with the idea that they might be the potential victims of some prank.

Ramón went outside. The signal there wasn't very strong, but it was enough to call and receive messages, just not to surf the internet very quickly. He tried it and after a frustrating wait, the screen showed the icons of his favourite websites. He tapped on a national newspaper. He waited again, a slow and agonising wait, while the images loaded. Eventually, the headlines and photos appeared. They were all about the same thing, as if all other newsworthy items had somehow stopped. As though all that now mattered was the virus and its effects.

Government officials order army to block exit routes out of major cities.

Number of fatalities in Madrid doubles in hours.

Images taken from helicopter show no signs of life in Valencia.

Origin of the virus still unknown.

Ramón felt a sudden foreboding. He swiped up on his screen, back to the top of the page. His fears were confirmed: the date was not today, but the Tuesday just gone, five days ago. Five days had passed without the newspaper updating its website. This newspaper and the others Ramón usually looked at updated their information at least twice a day with the morning headlines replaced by others as the day went on, sharing the most current information, breaking news, that sort of thing. But this website had been showing the same thing for five whole days.

He tried another, a different newspaper but another national outlet, but this one didn't even load. He tried a third, this time with a British daily, *The Guardian*. It took an age to load, and when it did, the date displayed was Wednesday, just one day after the Spanish paper. Its lead headline, written in capital letters, read:

GOD BLESS US ALL

Further down, he read:

London is a tomb

Both headlines were four days old.

Ramón closed the internet and went back to WhatsApp. The last messages he had received were from several days ago. Nobody had written to him for a week!

From inside the hut, he heard sounds of grief. He turned and went back in.

Several of the youngsters were crying. As he saw Ramón walk in, Luke gestured to his phone.

"My brother says my parents have got it. It's the last message I received."

"When did he send it?" asked Ramón.

"Saturday. Over a week ago."

They all checked back over their missed calls and messages. The dates were all the same: the first few days of their journey. There had been no calls or messages in the last six days.

Ramón rubbed his hand over his face and in doing so, he realised he was trembling.

"Put your phones down, please," he said. "Put them on the table or put them away. We need to sit down and have a chat."

ALICIA BONAVIDES SERRAT: reported by her own father when he discovered she had stolen several works of art from a private collection that she was planning to sell so she could buy an electric guitar and sound system. Her angelic face hid an antisocial character, sometimes verging on the vulgar. She stood out because she was strikingly pretty, receiving particular attention because of her unusual hairstyle: the left-hand side of her head was shaved, while on the right, her straight hair flowed down to her shoulder with upright spikes dyed black and blue running down the middle.

In his conversations with her, Ramón had come to understand that only two things came close to competing with the hatred she felt for her parents: her love of rock music and her desire to one day make a living from it. Her parents, who were rolling in money, had not hesitated before reporting her and they had not even said goodbye to her as the judge in the juvenile court had passed sentence.

AMADOR RIVAS SAAVEDRA: guilty of theft and assault, sometimes involving knives. An immigrant from El Salvador. Back in his city of birth he had been a gang member and on his arrival in Spain, he had sought out a similar group.

Despite the constant threatening and challenging front, Ramón was convinced that a noble heart beat in his chest, an honest spirit that required only favourable surroundings to help it bubble to the surface.

Alicia and Rivas were the only two that ignored Ramón's request to put the phones down. Perhaps they hadn't even heard him, engrossed as they were in the images on their screens.

* * *

"We have no transport to get back," said Ramón. "Claudia and Miguel haven't come for us, so..."

"What's happened to them?" interrupted Paula.

Ramón placed his open hands on the table and raised his eyebrows. The answer to that question seemed clear, but it was understandable that someone had asked. The kids needed to know, needed some sort of confirmation, and Ramón was the only adult there. He had shown them so many things during the two weeks they had spent together and yet now, he had no answers for them.

“I don’t know, Paula. I don’t know what’s happened to them. Perhaps... Well, looking at some of those videos we’ve all been sent... It’s possible this virus has prevented them from coming... Something has prevented them from coming. Otherwise they’d be here.” He looked at the time on his screen, it was almost two hours since they had arrived back at basecamp. Was that really all?

“The videos...?” whispered Tico. “They’re not real, are they?”

Again, Ramón felt the uncomfortable sensation of having no definite answer to give them.

“I know as much as you do. Nothing more. I had a look on the internet but there have been no updates for days.”

“No updates on any websites?” asked Nando.

“None that I looked at. And my battery’s running low.”

“Damn!” exclaimed Nando also noticing that his battery was almost empty. “Did anyone bring a charger?”

Nobody had brought one. Before they had left, Ramón had explained that they would be leaving all their phone and any other devices in the hut so it had made little sense to bring one. They’d turned their devices off as they put them into the safe, so they still had some battery, but watching all the videos had almost drained them.

“Do just one thing for me,” requested Ramón. “With the battery you still have left, make some calls. Perhaps someone will answer.”

Finally, Alicia reacted and tore her eyes away from her screen.

“But someone’s going to come, right? They won’t just leave us here.”

The silence that followed was disheartening.

“I think ... well ... um ... I think if someone was coming to get us, they would be here by now. They know we are here, they know the precise location. I don’t mean just Miguel and Claudia, but the whole team back at Unit. The issue right now is that no one has come to fetch us. I don’t know why and there’s really no way to find out.”

Yasser pointed to the phones.

“I can tell you why, it’s because of what we saw in those videos.”

All Ramón could do was nod in agreement. He didn't want to admit it, but it was obvious that was the reason.

The videos were real.

The deaths were real.

The virus was real.

Once again, silence fell over the group.

Some of them looked at each other, others kept their eyes glued to their phones, hoping they might ring. Ramón was the supervisor and he knew it was up to him to keep calm and make the decisions. But the thoughts in his head, wouldn't come together properly. He kept hearing his girlfriend's voice in the message, upset and shaking:

We have to get out of here...

Save yourself.

He looked again at the time and checked how much battery he had left. Late, and not much.

"You all stay here," he said.

"What?"

"We have to do something. We're hours from the nearest village, hours on foot, I mean. We've been walking since daybreak and we're all very tired. So what we're going to do is this: you all wait for me here, while I head to the village. I'll see if I can get a minibus for us all, or several cars. If there are people, I'll bring someone to help us. And food. Are you hungry?"

"God yeah!" muttered Germán.

Ramón ignored him and continued to speak.

"It's not worth us all going, especially when we don't know what we're going to find. And it's a long walk. So you all stay here and wait for me."

"I'd prefer to come with you," said Paula.

"No. I'll be quicker on my own. I have my phone so I'll call you to tell you where I'm going and what I've found."

"Hold on, Ramón," Tico cut in. "You're telling us you're going to leave us here on our own?"

"It's the best solution I've come up with."

"But why don't we all go together?" asked Nando.

"I just told you, it's not a good idea when we don't know what we're going to find."

"What if we run away?" asked Rivas.

Ramón gave him a piercing look, and then did the same to each of the others.

"You won't. You won't go anywhere. You'll wait for me here."

Ramón stood up and walked over to the corner where they had left their rucksacks, but then he thought better of it. He would be quicker and tire less easily without it.

“You’re going now?” Eva asked him.

“Yes, as soon as possible... why wait?”

“I’m not sure about this,” Eva said.

“What are you usure about?”

“About you busting a move and leaving us all here.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have a better idea. So take this as an instruction: stay here until I get back. Look, on the other side of the hut there are two dorms with bunks. There are enough beds for everyone. Seeing as it’s late already, I won’t have time to get back before... Well, if I manage to get a vehicle, I could be back by midnight. Grab your sleeping bags and get the beds ready. There are candles and matches in one of the drawers in the kitchen for when it gets dark.”

“We should keep just one phone on,” suggested Tico the tech whizz. “When that battery’s dead, we can turn on the next. That way they’ll last longer all together.”

“Good idea, Tico. Very good,” Ramón praised him. “Do that then. Sort out the order, or however you want to do it. I’ll call as soon as I have any information.”

He turned back to his rucksack, took out his water bottle and refilled it from the tap. He hung it from his belt and picked out a torch as well. Then he went over to the door.

“At the very latest, I’ll be back tomorrow morning, alright?”

None of the youngsters said anything. Some of them were waiting for someone else to speak, or for Ramón to give them more precise instructions, not expecting that they would just be left in the hut to wait for him. But that’s exactly how the supervisor bade them farewell, with the promise that he would return the following day.

Ramón exited and closed the door behind him. It was already late afternoon but he still had several hours of daylight. The air was beginning to cool down. He set off, hoping that the movement in his limbs would help to keep his nerves under control.

Silvia’s voice echoed in his mind. *Save yourself.*

But what he planned to do was taking him in the complete opposite direction to safety.

Putting one foot in front of the other, he headed downhill along the dirt track they had driven along fourteen days before.

FERNANDO SUBIRATS SEGURA, NANDO: He stole his own grandmother's savings to buy cocaine. They arrested him during the same dawn raid as Eva. It was him she was buying from.

Dark, always unkempt and unconcerned about his appearance, or what others might think of him. Skinny to the point of looking almost ill. His quiet and reserved character often led other people to think he was ignoring them. Ramón however, had started to get Nando to open up to him, a little at least, and he had discovered an intelligent and educated young man whose main problem was that he didn't know how to integrate into society.

If Ramón had had the opportunity to write his post-trip report, he would have noted that it was probably Nando who had come the furthest and benefitted the most from their experiences of living together over those two weeks.

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Nando, like the rest of his companions, didn't sleep a wink that night. The luckiest ones managed a few short minutes, worn out by sheer exhaustion, but Nando's eyes remained open all night long, watching the hours tick by. They all stayed up as night fell, but one by one, they crept away to the dorms and climbed into their sleeping bags. Nando stayed sitting at the table until midnight. Ramón had said that with any luck he'd be back by then. But he wasn't.

"Shall we call him?" suggested Yasser.

"He said he would call us," replied Paula.

"Well, yeah, but he hasn't."

"He will. Or he'll come."

They had agreed a rota for the phones, and once Rivas' battery had died, Nando turned his on again. Nothing, no new messages, no new calls. Everything here was a week old.

"He'll be back in the morning," he said. "And then we can get out of here."

"But where to?" challenged Yasser. "Where will we go? Because it doesn't seem to me like there are a whole lot of options."

"I think it's all a lie," said Paula.

“That’s a pile of crap,” shot back Yasser. “How can it all be a lie? Are all those messages from your family faked? Are they all just pranking you? Are those videos faked? The dead bodies? In one of the videos, they’re burning buildings in my neighbourhood. They’re burning everything to try and stop this virus.”

“No,” said Paula.

“What do you mean, no? No, what?”

“They’re not *burning* them. They *burned* them, past tense. They burned them days ago.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Yasser stood up and announced he was going to bed, and asked them to wake him up if anything happened.

Paula and Nando were left alone in the dim candlelight.

Paula moved to sit next to the boy.

“What if he doesn’t come?”

Nando unlocked his phone and opened his contacts list, scrolling through to find Ramón, but he didn’t press call.

“He said he’d come.”

“Yeah, but what if he doesn’t?”

“He’s sound. If he said he’ll come, he’ll come.”

“If he can. I mean, what if...?”

Nando sat up and moved away from her.

“You can shut your face right now.”

“Oh piss off!” spat Paula.

Nando stormed outside. He instantly regretted it; it was cold. The temperature had dropped like a stone as soon as the sun had set, but he stayed out there a moment on his own to avoid going back and sitting back down again with Paula’s fears. He had the same fears. They all did. How could they not?

It all seemed incredible, impossible.

He sat down on the doorstep to the hut and looked up. One of the few things he had loved during those two weeks on the mountain was the night sky. The countless stars that couldn’t been seen at night in the city. All those distant planets. Several times, he had taken his sleeping bag out from the tent he shared with Tico and Rivas and he had lain awake watching the glimmering specks of light that perhaps illuminated unknown worlds.

He had always wanted a telescope, although he doubted very much if the sort he saw in sale in the shops would really show him anything. The craters on the moon and some of the planets in the solar system at most. He wanted to see beyond that, as far as he possibly could.

He closed his eyes and told himself he wasn't cold. It worked sometimes.

LUCAS CASTAN ZUVIRÍA, LUKE: since he was very young, he had displayed very little consideration for the idea of other people's property. From the age of eleven, he had been the protagonist in a number of thefts and robberies. If he liked something, he took it. If it was something small, he slipped it into his pocket, and if it was large, like a bicycle or a motorbike, he climbed on board and took off. He owned a knife that had been a gift from his grandfather and he had become an expert at using it, although generally, all he had to do was flash it about for it to do its job. In his bedroom at his parents' house, he had gathered an enormous collection of comics and items relating to *Star Wars*, his favourite film series. That's where he got the nickname Luke. Some of his friends had started calling him that and he liked it more than his actual name. Other people called him Elf because of his straight, blond hair that he sometimes tied back in a sort of ponytail on the top of his head, but they usually called him that behind his back.

* * *

Luke had spent most of the night in the dormitory. When he saw the edges of the shutters begin to lighten, he left the bedroom. He knew at once that Ramón had not returned.

He found Nando washing his face in the sink and Paula still sitting at the table.

"Is there any coffee?" he asked.

"Did you bring any with you?" replied the girl.

"I thought you might have some stashed away in those saddle bags you've got for hips."

"Go to hell."

"I take it that's a no, then." Luke spent a couple of minutes rummaging around the cupboards and drawers in the kitchen but found nothing at all that was edible. "Has Ramón called?"

"No," replied Nando.

"We should call him, then. It's getting light. Has anyone got anything to eat? I can't function if I don't have breakfast."

The sound of their voices began to rouse the others and they gathered in the dining room, the only sort of spacious area in the hut.

“We need to think about what we’re going to do,” said Alicia.

“Wait. That’s what we have to do,” replied Rivas.

Alicia sat down in front of him.

“Great, but how long are we waiting?”

“Til Ramón gets back.”

“I repeat, how long are we waiting? Because yesterday, Ramón said he’d be back by this morning at the latest. And it’s now this morning.”

“For God’s sake, it was just a rough idea. He went on foot, how could he know how long it would actually take?”

“Fine,” Alicia stood up again. “Fine, we’ll wait for him. Without any food or anything for breakfast.”

“How about we come up with a plan,” suggested Eva. “Just in case.”

“Just in case?” asked Paula.

“In case Ramón doesn’t turn up,” explained Eva. “I mean, we’re all hungry. I think we should start thinking what we’re going to do if we have to keep waiting.”

“I’m not planning to keep waiting,” interrupted Luke. “I’ll give him ‘til midday, tops. If he’s not here by twelve, I’m off.”

“Where to?”

“Home.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” said Rivas.

“Don’t you now. And why would that be?”

“Luke, your house is in the city, bro. So’s the virus.”

“And if Ramón doesn’t come back, there’ll be a good reason why not,” added Tico.

Luke sat down in one of the empty chairs and crossed his arms across his chest.

“Tell me one thing. What do you all think has happened?” said Saray.

“To Ramón?” asked Eva.

“No, just generally. What’s happened? The stuff in those videos. Oh yeah, and how many phones have we still got with battery left?”

“Mine’s only got about ten more minutes,” said Alicia.

“When yours is gone, I’ll turn mine on,” said Germán. “I’ve probably got about three hours, four max.”

“So, we’ve got phone communication until midday,” said Luke.

“No,” corrected Tico. “We have phones until midday. At the moment we don’t have any communication with anyone.”

“True,” agreed Luke.

“Come on, guys,” insisted Saray, “What do you think happened?”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Alicia. “We all saw the videos. A virus is killing people. The whole world’s gone crazy. The government sent in the army. Did you see Barcelona airport? The passengers were jumping from the plane and slamming into the ground! They hadn’t even put the stairs up and they started jumping.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But, what?” urged Rivas as Saray’s voice trailed off.

“It can’t be true, can it? Not if we’ve only been here for two weeks. How can there be some mortal virus? Where’s it come from.”

“How should I know?” said Luke, raising his voice. “What does it matter where it came from?”

“Come on, let’s all try and calm down,” said Yasser. “I think Luke’s right. It doesn’t matter where this horrible virus came from, the point is it’s here. Why are all the calls and messages we got from a week ago? Why aren’t there any more recent ones?”

“You’re saying they’re all dead?” asked Paula.

“Well...” babbled Yasser. “There’s still signal, otherwise we wouldn’t have got all those messages. That suggests the phone masts are still working, but I’ve not found a single website that’s been updated since last week.”

“You think the whole world has died?” insisted Paula.

They all looked at Yasser, who did not dare to reply.

“So, let’s do something,” said Germán a moment later. “Ramón told us to wait here, so that’s what we’re gonna do. But while we’re waiting, we can come up with a plan, like Eva suggested. It’s worth having one to cover what might happen. We’ve got water,” he said pointing to the tap, “but we need food.”

“How about we split into two groups?” suggested Rivas. “One group can stay here in case Ramón comes back, the other can try and hunt a rabbit.”

“Three groups,” said Luke. “One here, one hunting and a third to start walking. If Ramón’s coming back, he’s coming that way, if he’s not coming, the third group can head to some village and ask for help.”

“I think it’s best if we just split into two groups,” said Eva. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to try and get to a village.”

“Come on then, clever clogs, why not?” grumbled Luke.

“Because if everything’s alright, Ramón will come and find us. And if it’s not alright and there’s a good reason why he hasn’t come back, we don’t gain anything by going there. If there’s a wolf lying in wait, we don’t want to walk straight into its lair.”

“You really think this virus thing is strong enough to have got Ramón already?” enquired Luke.

“I dunno,” answered Germán. “What do you think?”

“That’s what I mean,” said Tico. “We don’t know anything!”

“So?” asked Luke.

“One group in the hut, one group out to hunt,” decided Rivas. “Five and five.”

“I agree,” said Paula.

“Me too,” said Saray. “Any volunteers to go look for food?”

They decided that Alicia, Eva, Luke, Rivas and Yasser would go hunting, while the rest would stay in the hut.

SARAY VILLEGAS BARCÍN: guilty of violent robbery, although she alleges that the violence was unintentional. She tried to take a lady's handbag, but the victim held on to the strap. Saray yanked the strap causing the woman to fall and hit her head on the ground. Her path was blocked by some passers-by, and they held her until the police arrived. Saray was already on their radar due to a long list of similar incidents.

* * *

Saray had never been good at waiting and her impatience had caused her no end of problems. Sometimes when she had had enough of waiting for the bell to ring at the end of class, she would simply stand up and walk out. When she was fed up of waiting to turn eighteen, she ran away. When she was fed up of waiting for her meagre savings to grow, she grabbed some lady's handbag on the street.

She was the first to get fed up of waiting for Ramón and the hunting group to return. She kicked one of the dining chairs and then threw it across the room. Then she went outside, slamming the door behind her.

"What's up with her, crazy bitch?" she heard Germán say to her back.

She could have spun around and faced up to him, but she managed to keep her cool. Her control over her violent attacks towards people had greatly improved since arriving at the Young Offender's Unit. She took a few steps and let her eyes drift towards the dirt track that disappeared behind a curve. She saw it reappear further on, only to disappear again.

There was nothing to see on the track. Just earth. And above that, the blue sky, almost completely cloudless. The few that were floating above her were white, moving northwards.

She was overcome with worry, but she didn't want to admit it. She disliked anything to do with her feelings; she viewed them as a sign of weakness and hated the idea the others might think her fragile. But above all, it annoyed her that she couldn't control this anxiety or stop it taking hold of her insides like invisible, frozen claws, because there, in the deepest part of her being, the anxiety was beginning to turn to fear.

She had seen the videos, she'd heard the voicemails and read the text messages, but she still didn't fully believe it. It couldn't be real, simple as. There was no way a lethal virus had spread so quickly, wiping out so many people while they had been off playing at boy scouts. There was something ridiculous about the whole thing. Ridiculous and perhaps ironic, too. And sad. Ramón had taken them up the mountain to teach them how to integrate better into society, better than they had been doing so far, but in the meantime, it looked like society had stopped existing.

They were still on the mountain, but what about everyone else? Where were they?