

## *Zapata*

(or, An Incredibly Rushed Account of Something That Might Happen if There's Ever Some Kind of Plague)

(or, Thanks for the Fast Deadline during My Last Week of Preparation in Mexico before Christmas Travel,  
Mike/Bob)

### Preface

I'm not sure if short stories are supposed to have chapters, but this one does. I find they make reading seem faster and less irritating. If reading bugs you as much as it does me, then you may find it to your liking. If you don't, then it was someone else's idea and I just said, "Huh? Yeah, okay. Hey, is there anything to eat around here?" Also, the title, chapter titles, preface and post preface will all count toward the final word count of this story. Thanks for reading. Really, thank you. I know you didn't have to do it and it's just free time that you selflessly volunteered out of your day during a dauntingly busy season. So, from the very, very, very, very, very, most profoundly deep regions of my heart, thank you so, so, so, so, so, so much.

### Post Preface

I tryd my best to stay away from rules, correct grammar & spleling & punctumunation and a consististent plot lin. I hope this enhances your reeding experience, because its surtinly teached me a lot. This story is best read with the accompaniment of Christmas music in minor chords.

### 1

#### The Beginning

(but only sort of)

The law was simple and everyone understood it; do your designated duty, help where it's needed, don't eat more than your share and stay away from Falcon. These were the orders of the elders and since the founding of the Zapata survivor camp, there had been no breach from young or old.

Since the influenza outbreak a year and a half ago, theirs had been a community of comradery and peace. Everyone knew his or her part and did it without question. Lennon, the head of the elders, had set up a system to make sure that all the proper measures were taken, down to the last and most diminutive detail, so that everyone was fed and cared for to the best of the small community's ability. No one was left behind, no one received special treatment and everyone worked as a unit.

It was a Monday, so the morning consisted of scavenging for food for the week. Of course there were closets full of supplies in case of emergency, but that remained untouched as there had yet been no emergencies. And so the teams were sent out in groups of three or four as usual to search predetermined locations for the listed items that they needed.

"We're going to run out soon, y'know." said Thomas to his team.

They were on their way to the supermarket at the edge of town. It was a long walk that was almost unbearable in the summer, but with fall coming on it wasn't so bad. The leaves crunched under their boots as they walked and they noted their suits were now a little cooler when the wind pressed them against their skin.

"Whaddaya mean 'run out'? This town was almost five-thousand people and there was plenty of food for everyone. Now there are only sixteen of us....eating the food supply of five-thousand! We won't run out for..." Doug scratched his head and tried to remember the little math he'd been taught before the outbreak; he was twelve and school had effectively ended right when the plague began.

"That sounds about right." Said Valerie, sarcastically

"Doesn't matter," Thomas saved Doug the embarrassment of completing the calculation. "That was when the food supplies were being renewed on a weekly basis. Remember those big trucks always coming into town? They were taking food to the places that we keep going back to and looting. So now we continue to go back on a weekly basis, only nowadays there's no one replacing what we've taken. It's just logic, kid."

Doug searched for pockets to put his hands in, but couldn't find any like he could in the days of wearing regular pants instead of a plastic suit. "These suits are dumb." Doug conceded. He looked out through his streaky mask on the vacant city. Doug had never been out of Zapata, save for a few neighboring towns of roughly the same size to visit family. He looked up to Thomas as someone who had traveled the world, although he'd never left Texas, and had years more experience than the other soldiers there. They kept on walking until they came to the gas station where Thomas had been discovered.

## 2

### Thomas

Thomas had found his way to Zapata by accident. He was originally from Laredo, about fifty miles north of Zapata. He was born to a Texan bar owner/father (more the former than the latter) and a Mexican immigrant mother. She was from just across the border in Nuevo Laredo and crossed seeking work. After her illegal passage, she stumbled into the bar and Thomas's father immediately took to her. He gave her a job and within the year Thomas was born. The relationship turned out to be about as successful as expected; she was obedient to him because of the promises that he'd marry her when the bar really took off and he had enough money, but more than that, she was obedient because of the constant threats to report her to customs.

When Thomas was nine, there was a big fight that he remembered well. Thomas ran from the house, as he usually did during the fights, and when he came back later that night, his mother was gone. She was never seen or heard from again and his dad was never asked to explain the freshly churned, mama-sized patch of dirt a few dozen feet behind his trailer. Thomas grew up mostly on his own then as his father began drinking more and attending church regularly, usually drunk. But he no longer yelled in anger during his inebriated rants. He had taken to shouting about God's forgiveness for anything that the devil makes us do and roughly patting Thomas's head while staring out the window of the trailer into the back yard with an unnerving smile on his face.

When the head-pats became a little rougher, Thomas ran away. He was twelve by then and found work as a hired hand on several ranches around Southern Texas. Of course he had to lie and forge letters from parents that he swore existed to get permission to work, but he turned out to be a natural conniver. No report was ever filed on a missing child and Thomas was glad. He never heard what happened to his dad and never wondered, either. He worked hard and all the farmers liked him and his work ethic, which he had developed mostly to keep his mind off of his past. He did most anything he could to keep his thoughts busy and fell into reading books after working hours, a trance from

which he could not easily be pulled back to reality. He would stay up reading all night and in the morning be as refreshed as if he'd slept the night through.

When he turned seventeen he decided he'd had enough of the farm life and moved to San Antonio. He'd saved enough money to rent an apartment until he found a job as a waiter. He loathed the work, saw it as 'serving turds to turds' and despised the monotony. However, it allowed him to make a few friends and figure out the people of the city he'd adopted. After several months of surveying the way things worked, he had learned enough to successfully assume the life of a scam artist. He'd learned many neat tricks in the books he'd read, tricks that authors normally use to fill space between plot points while showing how clever they are; but Thomas applied to real life. They worked. A few close brushes with the law were all he suffered, and everything seemed to be moving along swimmingly until the outbreak.

### 3

#### Still About Thomas

(but I'm not sure how to split chapters up because I've never read a book)

It came suddenly and things turned ugly fast; one sick kid somewhere in New England and it snowballed from there. Within the next week, thousands had died and entire cities in the Northeast were quarantined. That did no good, though. Scientists never had enough time to figure out if the virus could be spread only from contact or if it went airborne. All they knew was that it existed and it was killing people at a rate far more rapid than anyone thought possible. In the next couple of months it was everywhere. Contact outside of the United States and Canada was completely cut off. No one in the North America knew if it had spread anywhere else in the world. The massive wall along the northern border of Mexico was effectively turned around; now it was used to keep Americans out of Mexico. Mexicans proved to be much more successful at this task as it turned out. It had happened too fast to worry about anything else outside of what was at your front door. Once the virus had entered a body, that body ceased to function within twelve hours. No one questioned where it came from. They just locked their doors and sealed every hole and crack in their homes with plastic and duct tape.

Thomas was in a panic when it happened, of course, as he had begun to see profit in his new life. However, he wasn't used to staying in one place and decided to head south, away from where they said the virus had originated. He stole a car, which went unnoticed in the chaos, and for some reason headed back toward Laredo. It was one of the only cities he knew with any intimacy and due to his acute ability to read maps he knew it was farther away from the origin of the sickness than San Antonio. He also had ideas of escaping to Mexico, being that he was half Mexican anyway, although it was said that it was nearly impossible to do and seemed to result in a swift death. His thought was that death by bullets was more of a blessing than being destroyed from the inside out by some ravenous, unstoppable virus.

Thomas arrived in Laredo not knowing what to expect. What he had stepped into was roughly the same level of chaos as in San Antonio, but with more guns and fewer people trying to help. He parked the car on the edge of town and slept there during the day while sneaking into the city at night to loot gas stations and small grocery stores, which were already in shambles anyway. He was almost caught once, but the store owner had the virus and was only able to breathe heavily and threateningly at Thomas from a chair. The town soon grew far too dangerous to stay. He had witnessed gangs of thieves and murderers checking each and every car parked around the city and killing any living beings they found, accusing them of having the virus and not accepting any answers. Thomas wasn't sure if they had any guns, but they didn't seem to want to waste the bullets on the people they were slaughtering.

So Thomas decided to flee and find a smaller town. He stayed close to the border, taking Highway 83 to the south. He hoped to find a weak spot in the wall and even scouted a few out, but only witnessed more murders. The wall

was well-guarded and the hopeful escapees were too desperate to plan well. He continued south and the highways were fairly clear as most people had decided to ride out the storm in their own homes. There were abandoned cars all along the shoulders and ditches by highway, which he assumed belonged to those who had tried to scale the wall to freedom and inevitably failed.

The sun was setting as he drove on south until he passed a huge lake. *Falcon Reservoir* said a sign near the highway. He decided it would be best to stop and see what was around. He was getting pretty far south and Texas had to end soon. He drove along the edge of the water until the sign for the town of Zapata appeared. He exited the highway and drove through the town slowly, checking in all the windows he could see through, but saw no sign of life. It seemed deserted and it was so small and clean that it seemed like it had never hosted any residents at all. He finally stopped at a gas station. He got out of his car cautiously and peeked inside through a window. It had been looted, but at second glance he noticed there was some kind of order to the way things were left. Only certain amounts of certain products were gone. He estimated that about seventy percent of the products inside remained untouched. As strange as he thought it was, he was hungry and decided it was his best bet. He got out and walked to the door, which was unlocked. This is where he met the Zapata survivors.

He heard the door slam shut behind him and turned around as the door was barred from the outside. There were six people on the other side of the window, two of which appeared to be in their fifties or so.

“Don’t approach the door! We have some questions we’d like to ask you and we wanna get through this process as quickly as possible!”

Thomas was fearful for a moment as he’d seen brutal murders take place quite often in the past few months, but there was something in their eyes that calmed him; something innocent and unthreatening.

“All right,” Thomas said loudly enough to be heard through the glass doors, “I’m not going anywhere.”

The oldest-looking man in the group glanced at the others and moved his gaze back to Thomas.

“Are you infected? Lift up your shirt and pull up your pants so we can see your skin.”

Thomas did as he was told and turned in a slow circle to show that he remained unmarked by the virus.

“Now, spit on the door. I need to see its color.”

Thomas looked at the old man quizzically, but the look didn’t move him. Thomas spit. The second older man closely examined the loogie through the glass for about a minute. Thomas got bored and grabbed for a bag of mini-donuts on the shelf.

“NO!” yelled the first old man. “Put it back! Look, you check out fine, but we’ve got rules here.”

Thomas glared at the old man.

“Rules? I’ve seen nothing but death and fear since this thing exploded and you’ve got rules?”

The old man sighed.

“That’s right. There’s been nothing but death and fear where you’ve been. It’s an ugly, ugly time right now just about anywhere that we know of; but now you’re in Zapata. What do you see? Death and fear? No, my son. You see order. You see a group of people calmly and collectively examining a problem and, subsequently, solving said problem.

That problem is that a stranger is in town and we have no idea of where he comes from or what he's bringing. So far, it appears you're not infected. Now we just need to wait it out a while and learn a bit about you."

He turned to one of the boys, a strong-looking kid that looked to be a few years younger than Thomas.

"Abbot, go fetch me a piece of straw to chew on. We're gonna be here a while."

And so began the all-night interrogation, shortly after the sun had completely set. The old man explained that they had to keep Thomas isolated for at least 10 hours to make sure no signs of the virus appeared. As far as interrogations generally go, it was all pretty easy. It seemed the old man was probing Thomas to figure out what personality type he was and what made him that way. Thomas thought it was strange, but liked the idea of someone taking an interest in his life. The old man seemed genuinely concerned, too. He sighed where appropriate and offered his condolences where Thomas's story consisted of some sort of atrocity or injustice. It was like an interview, but also like a visit to the psychiatrist. Only every now and then did one of the others interject with a question of their own, and they seemed about as nice as the old man talking to him.

At the end of it all, sometime before the sun began to rise on the new day, Thomas was released from inside the gas station. The old man introduced himself as Lennon. The other older man with him was called William. The younger ones were two boys, Abbot and Mike, and two girls, Mel and Valerie. The four of them seemed to range between early and late teens, which struck Thomas as odd as the other two men seemed much older.

They led Thomas through the dark of the early morning down neighborhood streets, which still boggled Thomas's mind with how clean and untouched they all seemed, until they came to a large metal building. Lennon knocked on the door and identified himself. The large door was slid open and they filed in. The lights were off, so Thomas couldn't see much, but he was led to a bunk bed and promised that everything would be explained to him tomorrow. He was exhausted, so it was all the same to him. He got into his bunk and slept heavily.

#### 4

#### Back to the Future

(or back to where you were left at the end of chapter 1)

(I won't let you get lost)

The three entered into the gas station. It brought back memories for Thomas and Valerie who had met there; memories of the days when they didn't have to wear plastic suits. It seemed that Lennon had aged a decade since only a year ago. Now he seemed stricter and less compassionate than he had at the beginning. One of the elders had come across the suits they wore in a tiny laboratory that had been found in town about six months before. Suits were now required to be worn anytime someone exited the Zapata Survivor Camp, the large metal building that Thomas had been introduced to on his first night in Zapata.

As they gathered the list of predetermined supplies from the station's nearly-extinct selection, Thomas thought about the way the last year had gone.

"What's on your mind, Thomas?" asked Doug.

Doug was the youngest of the survivors and always looking for some conversation, but it seemed to be scarcer and scarcer in the last few months.

"I don't know, kid." Thomas said, "I'm tired of these rules piling up when we should be thinking of new methods to live. The few places with supplies in this town are about to run dry, but they won't let any non-elders in on the decision-making. I've been around, ya' know? I have some ideas. But every time I go to any of those old folks to offer some help, they just tell me that I've already got my own work load and that I shouldn't be thinking of things outside of my job. It's getting ridiculous."

"Thomas, you shouldn't talk like that about the elders. They've made sure we've all survived this long. I'm sure they've got ideas for what's next. Just trust them; they'll keep it under control as long as we do our jobs."

Valerie didn't talk much, but when she did it was usually something about how well the elders take care of the rest and how much everyone owed them for what they do.

"They never ask for anything special in return, only that we do our jobs." She would always say.

Thomas just groaned and walked down another aisle.

The team soon left, bags full, and headed back toward the camp. On their way, they passed the town library, which they always passed but Thomas never seemed to notice.

He had expressed an interest in reading since he arrived and the elders seemed more than happy to pass over any books they had that they'd already read. This was about the only form of education the elders had yet passed down. It seemed to be on a backburner with food and supplies always far, far in front. Because of this, Thomas was never without a book and never felt interested in entering the library and looking around. Also, entering any structure except for the camp and the assigned supply stores was forbidden. There was always the fear that there could be a body that was still lingering with disease.

Thomas veered off toward the library.

"What do you think you're doing?" cried Valerie.

"I'm just going in for a second. I finished the book I was reading last night and I want something new." Thomas answered, annoyed.

"You know we're not supposed to go into buildings without permission from the elders! You'll get us all sick!" came Valerie's response.

Thomas turned toward her.

"Hey, relax! We've got these suits now and they're completely sealed off. If I'm going to have to wear this stupid thing, I'm going to use it to its full potential. Obviously there's nothing in the air out here, we walked around without suits without problems for plenty of time to realize that. So I'm going to make this suit work for me."

Thomas turned toward the library and started walking.

"Thomas, don't!" yelled Doug this time.

"Calm down, kid. I'll be back before you know it."

Thomas walked up the stairs and into the building. He pushed the doors open. So far, no monsters.

The library was small and didn't have too much to offer, but it was to be expected with the size of the town. The only books he had read since arriving to Zapata were fictions and novels that the elders had already finished, so he walked by the circulation desk and into the non-fiction aisle. He scanned the shelves quickly, knowing that he didn't have much time before his team would start to freak out, and something caught his eye.

He saw a book called *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. He picked it up and examined the portrait on the cover. He had always wanted to visit Mexico since half of his blood was from there. He was also interested to know something about the town he was in, Zapata. He had no knowledge of Emiliano Zapata, and so assumed the book was just some mix of historical accounts about the town of Zapata and some revolution that happened sometime, somewhere in Mexico.

He walked back by the circulation desk and dropped the book there.

"This is gonna be all today I think." He smiled at his own wit.

But now that he was this close, he noticed a tuft of curly hair sticking up from the seat of the chair, which was too low to see. He leaned over to get a better look and immediately turned and sat down, his back against the desk. He was careful not to vomit, for he'd seen sights like this before. A librarian with a dreadfully painful and incurable disease who decided to send a bullet up under her chin in the place she loved the most was no worse of a sight than what he'd seen before. But there was something far more tragic about this. Sitting there, his back against the desk, he felt what she had felt right before she pulled the trigger. He had experienced the loneliness and hopelessness that she had in those several hours after she found out she was infected. However, he had experienced them for far longer in a home with a psychotic, murderous father who could've delivered Thomas the same fate that his mother had faced at any moment. The difference was that he had a way out. He had run away. *There was only one place to run for the old librarian*, he thought. *Well, she could've been old, it's tough to tell with the only bits of the face still left intact just sitting there rotting.*

Thomas got to his feet. He felt a sudden sense of pride for the decision he had made all those years ago. He felt a little more alive than he had before he'd entered the library. He realized that he had been given a second chance, whereas others, like the woman on the other side of the desk, had not been shown that same mercy.

He exited the library and walked swiftly past the two waiting for him. They quickly followed behind, questioning him about what was in there and what book he got. He just kept walking and told them not to worry about it.

"It's a library just like any other."

The two teams sent out for food supplies arrived back at the camp within the hour. It was early afternoon and the water team still wasn't back yet. The way the system worked was as follows: Of the sixteen inhabitants of the camp, six were elders, all aged between forty-five and sixty-something (they never really told their ages) and the ten remaining were what the elders referred to as 'soldiers', all between the ages of twelve and twenty, with Thomas being the oldest. The elders were in charge of water supply. Two of them had been geologists before the outbreak and had knowledge of what they said were 'very, very complex scientific methods of cleaning the water'. The other four elders split their time

between delegating duties and helping the geologists build and purify the water supply. The soldiers did as they were told. Their duties ranged from scavenging for food, fixing broken things around the camp under close supervision of the elders, and cleaning. The cleaning was what bothered them the most. Given that they were only sixteen people and the limited amount of food they were each allowed daily, it seemed quite an oddity how much human waste was accumulated on a daily basis. Their diet, which consisted mostly of snacks, made the texture of said waste *almost* unbearable to handle. But that *almost* was what the elders brought up to keep them motivated.

“Well the lot of us *almost* didn’t survive this outbreak, but we did and now we’re thriving. Surely a little poopoo on your hands won’t let you forget that,” was commonly heard from whatever elder happened to be supervising the cleaning duties. “Now get it taken care of before it infects us all even worse than this plague.”

The age gap between elders and soldiers confused Thomas more than anything. He had run through countless theories in his head, most of which consisted of plots that the elders had to sit around and give orders and relax while the younger survivors did all the hard work. Thomas didn’t say much to the other soldiers about this for fear that they’d tell the elders. Punishment for questioning, or ‘spreading lies about the elders’ usually resulted in cleaning duty by oneself for a week or so or spending a few nights in an isolated room without a mattress. These punishments were not given very often due to the soldiers’ faith in the plan of the elders. However, Thomas didn’t buy into this mystical plan too much. Nothing was ever revealed to the soldiers regarding what the plan for the future was. He didn’t understand why they weren’t working to contact other survivors and check on the status of the rest of the country, or the world as it were. He also didn’t understand why they had not begun farming as a means of sustaining themselves as the supply food in the few stores around town neared their end.

The ‘camp’ was another thing he thought seemed a little silly. If this group of survivors had been living without suits and masks for a year after the outbreak, why did they suddenly need them when they left the camp? It wasn’t even as if the building they were in was sealed up to keep any airborne particles carrying the virus from entering. He hated the bunk beds and the lack of privacy they all suffered and thought the community could run just as well if they moved to houses with modern comforts and normal beds in one of the nearby neighborhoods. The way Thomas figured, this group of survivors had some sort of genetic deficiency or immunity that didn’t allow the virus to enter into their systems. But the one time he brought this up to Lennon, it was quickly shrugged aside with a, “Well why don’t you go take a long drink of water from the Falcon and let me know if you’re immune about twelve hours after.”

That night after work ended, Thomas went to his bunk to read as usual and remembered his new acquisition. He pulled the book from his pocket and immediately became enthralled with what he was reading. It turned out that the book was not a historical account of the town of Zapata at all. It was the true story of a Mexican Revolutionary. Thomas immediately connected with the fact that Emiliano Zapata was a farm hand as a young man, but it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. The ideas, convictions and criticisms that Zapata had of the Mexican government seemed to be the same that Thomas felt about this group of survivors.

Over the next two evenings, Thomas finished the biography. After he finished reading at night, he had dreams of revolution, of toppling the power that was and then taking that power for oneself to do right by the people it represented. In all of the reading he had done throughout his life, he had finally found someone he could identify with more completely than Harry Potter. He began to idolize Zapata, think of him as a hero. He liked the idea of a man who saw that things needed to change and put himself in charge of bringing that change. *This is what separates men from sheep*, he went to sleep thinking. *This is how leaders save the world.*

## Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Heroin

Over the next several days, Thomas's need to have questions answered grew stronger and stronger. He began testing the waters with the elders. They had always proved to be kind people, especially when they were all sitting around and speaking of the old days, but when questions of the future and the plans they had were asked, the answers seemed to become shorter and less inspired; more uncertain and less accessible. Thomas started with the elders that were not Lennon and didn't seem to be around him as much. He would ask questions about the water supply and their processes for curing it. They always answered that it was far too complicated to explain.

"Truth be told, I'm not even completely sure how it all works. I just do my part in the curing, and at the end it's drinkable." came the answer from Tim, one of the quieter elders.

Thomas began to watch the elders' nightly rituals. They slept in a separate part of the camp, in several large rooms. None of the soldiers had ever seen inside the rooms before as they were in a separate section of the building on an elevated platform, but there was talk that they slept on normal beds, each elder with his or her own room. Thomas noted that they seemed to have meetings every night before lights out, and often heard the soft tones of discussion coming from the faint glow of their section of the camp even after the soldiers' quarters became dark. He felt conflicted about this. On the one hand, they *should* be making important decisions amongst themselves as they were in charge of the survival of the group as a whole. On the other hand, it seemed to him that they should be sharing their decisions with the soldiers so the group could more efficiently do their part as a whole. Nothing was ever announced from these meetings, however.

Over the next few weeks, Thomas found himself hanging around the elders more and more. He was searching for something, but he didn't know exactly what. In his mind, all he wanted were answers to how everything worked. So he set out to convene with the elders and ask more serious questions. In one instance, he approached Lennon and asked to accompany the water team to the lake to collect for the curing. He argued that since he was the oldest of the soldiers, he should start taking on more responsibility. Lennon told him that it was far too dangerous for a soldier and simply out of the question.

"The Falcon is dangerous, my boy. The suits we use are far more advanced in technology than those the soldiers use, and we only have a few of them. Also, the lake still holds many mysteries. Shortly after the outbreak, it was used as a dumping ground for those poor souls who had succumbed to the evils of the virus. Who knows what became of the bodies. It's important that we solve these mysteries before we send soldiers anywhere near the reservoir."

He always spoke of the virus as a living being that ravaged the Earth as an evil spirit. There was always some reference to the battle between right and wrong, good and evil, when Lennon spoke of it. Maybe that was why they always toted the two shotguns the camp had when they went down to the lake.

"We still don't have enough information about this plague to risk the invaluable lives of our soldiers. Who knows what could be out there. Our caution ensures the safety of our community as a whole. So for now, we will continue chores as usual; us elders collecting and curing the water. Now, go fetch me a piece of straw to chew on. I've got some thinking to do."

Thomas began to voice his concerns to the other soldiers on their routes to the stores and at night in the bunks. He was met with blank stares and protests, but no one dared tell the elders of this talk. They had all been punished at one time or another and didn't wish it upon anyone else by their own hand. It was Doug that listened most closely when Thomas raised his doubts.

"Look. Surely we've all wondered about how they cure the water from Falcon. Well I asked and you know what they told me? Nothin'. The elders are old! Who knows what could happen to them on any given day? So why wouldn't they tell us how to do these processes just in case. Maybe they're dangerous and complicated, but I'd be willin' to bet that things'd become far more dangerous and complicated if we were left without a water supply." Thomas preached at them.

Doug hadn't really thought about it too much, but, to his surprise, he found himself nodding his head.

"Well maybe they have it written down somewhere in case something happens to them. That way we can learn how to do it if we need to!" Abbot offered.

"Well then why ain't they told us where the instructions are? What use are written instructions if no one knows where to find 'em? I'm startin' to think there *is* no process at all." Thomas responded.

"Hey come on, what do they have to gain by makin' it all up? It's not as if there are many other places we could be right now. I say the system works so we shouldn't be tamperin' with it." retorted Valerie.

"Yeah, the elders are keeping us alive. So what if they don't explain everything to us, we've got enough to think about with all our chores!" chimed in another soldier, Tania.

"Don't you see? That's just the point! We're doing *all* the chores, save for the water-gathering'. And what's that take, a few hours a day? And they do it in parts; it's not as if all of 'em are working for the entire process. I just don't know. It doesn't seem to add up." Thomas responded.

No one said anything after that. They all admitted to themselves that he was making sense, but after honoring a system for so long it didn't seem right to them to outwardly agree with points he raised, however valid they seemed. They went to sleep after that, all with their own new thoughts to accompany them to whatever dreams awaited.

Thomas continued talking with the other soldiers. He decided he was getting nowhere by himself with the elders. He thought it might be more effective to have a partner or two to join him in his inquiries. Maybe that way their questions would be taken a little more seriously. He started with the older soldiers first. His questions led to discussions and he was careful to be considerate of their allegiance to the elders. He, too, greatly respected the elders. They had rescued him that day in the gas station from certain, lonely death, and at this point he had no intentions of accusing them of anything. He just had questions that he felt needed answering.

The simple explanations weren't enough for him. He needed to know the how and the why. Why did no one know the cause of the virus? Why did this group of survivors seem unaffected? Was there anyone else out there to even be researching the virus? In his conversations with the others, he brought up these questions. One of the more popular topics of discussion was whether or not there was still life outside of the United States.

"I remember when it was all still in the beginning stages, before my folks died and the elders found me. They was sayin' on the news that Europe or somewhere didn't wanna help us. They was sayin' it was too much risk and there didn't seem to be nothin' could be done for us. My dad yelled somethin' nasty at the television, but he was already sick so he couldn't get too rowdy." said Susanne, the youngest female soldier.

Like Susanne, all of the soldiers were from Zapata or neighboring towns. They had either wandered into the small town after their parents died or already lived there and had been picked up by the elders.

"Hey, anyone know anything about this age gap?" Thomas ventured one evening. "Seems awful strange the difference between ages, doesn't it? Them being all old and tightly-knit, and us being young and outside of all the decision-making, just seems strange."

"I don't think it's so strange," answered Abbot. "They was all friends back when Zapata was a real city. Them six and a few others were the toast of the town. I guess the others died, but I know they were together most of the time. "

Thomas hadn't thought too much about the roles of the elders before the outbreak days, but now he was intrigued.

"Yeah? Got any idea as to what they did?" He asked.

"All sorta had more important jobs than most folks. Them two, William and Margaret, they was geologists, like they said; married when I was young, but divorced when I hit twelve and became an adult. A few of 'em was teachers; one of 'em at the university up in Laredo. And Lennon, he was some fancy psychiatrist that always seemed to be around. Ran for mayor one time, but lost it I guess. I didn't care so I didn't pay too much attention."

This new information sent Thomas's mind reeling. *They were all friends before all of this started*, he thought. It had seemed to be a random incident until now. Why had it never occurred to him before to ask the other soldiers about life in Zapata before the outbreak? *And Lennon the psychiatrist!* It made perfect sense to him. Lennon was the one who always did the talking. He seemed to have the ability to ease everyone's mind. Of course that was no problem for him; he had been paid obscene amounts to do it professionally in the days when the word 'professional' existed. So where were the other people from Zapata? Why did this group survive? It seemed to him too much of a coincidence that this group of friends could all have the same immunity to the virus. Do they have some kind of injection or cure that prevents it? Thomas walked away from the cleaning they were doing to go get some air. It was too much for him to process right then. He walked to the large, metal doors and cracked one open.

"Hey! What in God's name do you think you're doin' over there, tryin' to get us all infected?" yelled Margaret.

Thomas immediately came back to reality and slammed the door closed.

"Sorry, I thought I heard someone knocking," Thomas replied.

"Well you know the rules, boy! You can't just go around openin' and closin' doors willy nilly," It was Lennon lecturing this time. "There's too much at stake here. You know just as well as I do that if someone was knocking it could easily be one of them murderers that seem to be everywhere that you were telling us about. You know we're going to have to punish you for that."

He called the cleaning crew over and moved them to a different task.

“It’s all yours, Thomas. I don’t want to have to do this, but you know there are rules and they have to be obeyed if we want to remain ‘the Survivor Camp of Zapata’.

Thomas nodded. He didn’t care much, he had plenty of thinking to do anyway and he could more easily accomplish this while working alone. This new information changed everything for him. This was when the first thought of a revolution came to him. It all made sense. Ever since Thomas had seen the librarian, dead where she sat in the place she loved the most, he had begun to see a bigger picture. He had started to believe that he’d survived for a reason.

*It’s time to investigate this camp a little more deeply,* he thought.

## 8

### Thomas Investigates Stuff.....Hard

For the next few weeks Thomas was stuck in the camp on cleaning duty. The work wasn’t so bad. He assumed that it would be much worse if they knew what he was thinking, but as it was they didn’t seem suspicious of his concerns. At night Thomas grew bolder with his words to the other soldiers. At the beginning he was met with reluctance and refusal to believe what he was suggesting. After all, they had been stuck in the same routine for so long that it seemed like things would never change. However, Thomas proposed new ideas and made the other soldiers question things just as much as he was.

“What we’ve got to do,” Thomas told them, “is investigate this water situation. We don’t know a single thing about it. We’re all aging; no one is going to live forever. So why wouldn’t they let one of us go on the trips to the reservoir? The secret for curing the water has got to be handed down at some point.”

Thomas had their full attention with this argument. It did seem strange to even the most die-hard followers of the elders.

“So what do you suggest,” asked Valerie, “that one of us just go along with them unnoticed? You told us yourself that they flat out refused you when you asked to tag along.”

“Well then that’s exactly what I suggest,” answered Thomas, “One of us has to trail the water crew unnoticed.”

It seemed almost like an act of treason to most of the soldiers, but they were far more open to the idea than they would have been a couple of months before, when Thomas first began posing questions to them.

“Look, I’m finished with cleaning duty tomorrow. Val, you and Doug are on my scavenging team. We leave at about the same time as the water crew. You two just go on to the points we’re supposed to cover by yourselves. I’m going to stay behind and follow the ‘em. I’ll be back in time to meet with you guys so we can enter the camp together.”

“Thomas, I don’t know,” said Valerie, almost desperate, “if you’re caught, who knows what will happen to you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” countered Thomas, “at this point it’s worth it. I have to know. *We* have to know.”

No one else opposed. So it was decided. Thomas would become the first spy in the history of the Zapata survivors.

That night, Thomas didn't sleep. He couldn't stop from wondering what he would discover in a matter of hours. The answer scared and excited him simultaneously. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe they collected and cured the water just as they said, but he didn't really believe that. He thought there was too much mystery surrounding the whole process for it to be just as they said. He felt alive. He remembered the stories of Zapata and how important carrying out a revolution had been to him. He stopped at nothing to bring necessary change. This was Thomas's calling just as it was Emiliano's. Before he knew it, the morning was there. Thomas got out of bed and prepared for the day as usual.

He and his team put on their suits and exited the camp. Thomas accompanied them for the first hundred yards or so and chose a hiding place in the field.

"Good luck." Valerie offered. She and Doug continued on their route.

Ten minutes later, the water crew left the building. Thomas was on the move. He stayed about fifty yards behind them the entire time. This was when he noticed the first oddity; they didn't take the most direct route to the lake. They could've gone through the neighborhoods and ended up at the closest point of the lake in a matter of half an hour. However, they meandered along an old farm road. Then came the second piece of evidence against the elders: They removed their masks. They ran their fingers through their hair and continued walking and talking. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he imagined their conversations:

"We've sure got those kids fooled. They genuinely believe these suits do them any good. They'll be working for us without problems until the day we die."

"Yeah, poor things. They're our puppets as long as we tell them to be. And when the time comes to cut food rations, they'll gladly give up part of their shares so that the elders that give them life can be comfortable and continue providing for them."

Thomas followed for close to an hour; the walk was slow and steady with all the equipment and containers they had to bring. Finally, the lake was in sight. But it wasn't *exactly* the lake. This was surprise number three. He took off his mask to make sure he was seeing it correctly. They were at a small pond that appeared to run off from the lake. It looked like they had blocked off the connection between the lake and the pond. *Fresh water!* Thomas had known it all along. They had a water source that was already nicely packaged and ready for collecting. The curing was a scam. They came to this pond, took the fresh water, brought it back and waited a few hours before distributing it just to make it seem as though they were running complicated process on it. Thomas tried to get closer, to confirm what he was already convinced of. As he approached, he slipped on a rock and it was hurled down the bank and into the pond. He lost his grip on his mask as he fell and sent it flying down to the bank. The elders quickly looked up, guns raised. Thomas just laid and watched them from the grass cover at the place he'd slipped. The elders quickly threw their masks on and began searching the land surrounding the pond. Thomas slowly and carefully backed away on his belly and, when he was safely out of sight, took off at a dead sprint in the direction from where he'd come.

A couple hours later, Valerie and Doug were on their way back to the camp when they saw Thomas sitting by the road a good distance ahead of them. When he saw them he jumped up took off toward them. He reached them out of breath and put his hands on his knees to catch it.

"I was right!" he finally managed to pant, "The water, it's a trick. They have a fresh water source that they gather it from. It's a trick and we've been falling for it the whole time!"

"What?" cried Valerie, "What do you mean it's a trick? How do you know they don't go and cure it after? Maybe it's just the cleanest place to gather the water and they still have to run processes on--"

“No!” Thomas cut her off, “You guys, I swear. They took off their masks when they were out of site of the camp. If the lake was so contaminated that they needed special suits, why would they take off their masks and leave them off at the water’s edge? It’s a sham and we’ve been falling for it! They’re using us! They don’t do anything but give us orders and sit around living off of the work we do! They’re not trying to expand our survival time! They’re just ordering us around until we run out of food! There’s no plan after that, don’t you see? They know we’re doomed and by leaving them in charge we’re just running toward our own deaths from starvation or God knows what else! We can’t leave them in power!”

Doug and Valerie were dumbfounded. Thomas was right. It made perfect sense. The elders had revealed no plans for keeping the survivors alive for any longer than the food in the stores would last.

“It’s not right!” cried Doug, “We run this place and they take all the credit while sitting around doing nothing!”

He looked up at Thomas.

“So what do we do?” asked Valerie.

The three of them hurried back to a point where they could intercept the other scavenging team. There were four in this group. The three remaining soldiers were back at the camp on cleaning duty. Thomas quickly explained to the second team what he had discovered. Valerie and Doug had his back during the entire explanation. The second team was shocked and then outraged.

“We’ve been lied to and used this entire time!” cried Abbot.

“They don’t care about our survival! They only care about their own! We’re just ants working with no end goal in sight!” said Freddie, one of the youngest of the soldiers.

“I think it’s about time we have a talk with those old-timers.” Thomas growled.

The group split up with plans to talk later that night. Arriving as one large group would make the elders suspicious and break the rules of how the scavenging was to be done. And so they all set off toward camp, each at a visibly furious trot.

The Abbot’s crew arrived first. Thomas’s team came in about ten minutes after. What they arrived to left them shocked and scared. The entire group, all the remaining thirteen, stood outside. The soldiers were all in a line facing the elders. Lennon and William both held shotguns. As they approached, Thomas became aware that he didn’t have his mask. The others had been too distracted to notice. They reached the group at a slow walk.

“Take your place alongside your fellow soldiers, team one!” yelled Lennon.

They did as they were told, as angry as they were scared. No one knew what was about to happen.

“Now I’ve got a mask here that belongs to one of you youngens,” began Lennon, “Any idea as to whose it might be?”

Thomas stared at the ground, his jaw tensed.

“Well, well, Thomas. It appears you’re the only one out here not properly suited up. Any idea where your mask was found?” said Lennon.

Thomas didn’t answer.

“Well your comrade here, my faithful soldiers,” Lennon continued, “found it necessary to trail the water team on down to Falcon, isn’t that right Thomas? And what, pray tell, did you expect to find there that was so important that you felt you needed to break the rules? Furthermore, what did your team think you would find that was so important that they lent their aid in your breaking of the rules?”

Now Thomas and his crew were all looking at the ground, uncomfortably shifting from side to side.

“No answer, huh? Well you’ll talk. Abbot, go fetch me a piece of straw to chew on. We’ve got some questions that need to be answered.”

Abbot hurried off to the nearby field. Lennon slowly approached Thomas and his team, clutching the shotgun as he did so.

“We know that the water’s safe to drink.” Said Thomas, weakly.

“What’s that, now? You’ve got something to say? Well by all means, speak up. We’re beyond eager to hear what led to this unfortunate misconduct.”

Thomas, aggravated by Lennon’s cocky attitude, stepped forward and addressed the soldiers all together.

“It’s all a lie!” Thomas yelled with a sudden burst of confidence, “They gather water from a fresh source. That’s the only job that the elders have and it’s a sham! They do it to make us think they’ve got the most important job there is when it’s really not a job at all! They’re riding our backs to our deaths! There’s no plan to work toward a self-sustaining community! We’re just going to gather food until it’s gone. And then what? What’s left to eat? Us?”

Lennon chuckled at this, as did a few of the other elders.

“Listen to him laugh!” Thomas continued, fearless now, “He’s got nothing to say! He just laughs! Every single time we ask a question about the future, they give us no response. They keep us working and thinking that we need them. But we don’t! We’re doing all the work, so we should be making decisions, too!”

That’ll be about enough, Mr. Revolution,” said Lennon.

He shifted his gun a little bit in Thomas’s direction. That was when they heard the rapid footsteps coming from behind Lennon. Abbot, although young, was big for his age and was a star defensive tackle of the Zapata Hawks until the outbreak. He form-tackled Lennon from behind and the shotgun went flying to Thomas’s feet. Thomas quickly recovered it and pointed it at William who had the other gun. The blast deafened them all. Everyone had covered their faces when they heard it, but when they looked back up, William was lying on his back with a hole in his stomach the size of a cooking pan. Thomas was in shock, but pointed the gun at the rest of the elders.

“Go get that gun, soldiers.” Said Thomas, calmly.

Doug quickly grabbed the shotgun that had been thrown from William’s hands when he was gunned down. He liked the way it felt. It gave him, the youngest of the group, a feeling of power that he’d never experienced before. He paced along behind the group of four elders. He enjoyed watching their knees tremble in fear. Abbot stayed perched on top of Lennon.

“What did you just do!?” cried Lennon.

“Just what needed to be done,” Thomas answered. “Now I’m going to need some answers as to what your plan is for the future, if you have any.”

Thomas began pacing back in forth in front of the soldiers, addressing the elders.

“My boy, we’ve got plans!” Lennon said, desperately, “I’ll show you the drawing room. We’ve got plans for planting and harvesting. We’ve been developing them all along, I swear it. And the water, we just go to that particular pond because it’s the cleanest source. It takes the least work to purify! It’s the truth; I’d swear my mother’s life on it!”

At that moment, Margaret turned and ran for Doug. That’s when the shots really started ringing out. There was a momentary chaos, the elders running this way and that. The two gunmen didn’t know if they were attacking or not, but they didn’t hesitate to pull their triggers. When the dust cleared, all five of the remaining elders lay in piles of their own and each other’s blood. Abbot remained with his head ducked and ears covered on top of Lennon, who was trembling in disbelief.

“What-what have you done?” he lowered his head and began to sob softly.

At Thomas’s signal, Abbot got off of Lennon’s back.

“I already told you, old man,” said Thomas, “exactly what needed to be done.

One more shot sounded and there were only the soldiers left. They were all uncertain of what to say.

“Doug, run over to one of those containers of water and let me know how freedom tastes.”

Doug smiled proudly.

“Yes, sir!”

Doug dropped the shotgun and ran over to one of the containers and reached his hand in. He pulled the water to his mouth and drank deeply several times. He smiled up at Thomas.

“Sweet as honey, Thomas!” he reported.

The soldiers, who were now the elders, went back into the camp. Thomas quickly walked to the section of the camp where the elders lodged. The others followed, wearily.

Thomas was looking through some papers when they walked in. He looked puzzled.

“What is it?” asked Valerie.

Thomas's expression turned into a look of worry. He handed Valerie the papers he was reading. They were diagrams of the farmland surrounding the camp with subsequent pages of complicated formulas, notes and even more diagrams of the land. The title of the pages read *Plan for Growing and Harvesting a Sustainable Food Source*. Thomas pulled a file from another desk. It, too, was full of complicated formulas and diagrams. This series was titled *Water Purification Process*. There was a multitude of other files all over the room; maps, illustrations and charts laid out anywhere you turned. Each pile was titled with something related to the future of the Zapata Survivor Camp.

Just then Doug came stumbling in, violently retching and vomiting with every step. The smell was horrid and there was more blood than anything else in what he was hacking up. He collapsed to the floor. The others stood with their jaws dropped, disbelief written all over their faces.

"Abbot, go fetch me a piece of straw to chew on," said Thomas, in a grave voice. "I've got some thinking to do."

The End

(probably more happens to them, but I can't be bothered to write about it)