

# BELOW

ALARIC CABILING

## CHAPTER 1

# DEATH AND DESTRUCTION, 2022

**B**arangay Happyland was home, and it was in flames. It was one of the poorest districts in Tondo, Manila, where the largest, most congested slums were found in the Philippines, as well as the world. Minutes ago, the zombies had broken out of hiding. First, from drug addicts that mysteriously changed. Next, from victims who had been bitten. They ran riot like a termite swarm buzzing around a fluorescent bulb, attracted to flesh and blood, not light. They multiplied, feeding like voracious eaters. After infected cases started increasing in the shanties where we lived, they spread like wildfire. Literally. Fires burned down homes. Bodies fell into the stagnant tarn. The polluted bay filled with corpses. It was Armageddon.

Collisions stopped traffic on intersections. Desperate drivers jammed the streets. It wasn't long before the roads were unusable, and cars lined up for miles. Overturned trucks crowded highways; panicked motorists left their vehicles behind...and never returned home.

There I was, one of the few survivors, a mere child, wondering what to do. Victims were screaming, zombies bobbing over them, feeding on their living tissue. Their sausage-link sets of intestines were hoisted in the air in a gruesome feast. Their hearts were ripped from their chests. Their choice meats—liver, spleen, pancreas—were eviscerated.

Fire was devouring any unusable substance. The toxic fumes suffocated.

One zombie passed through my area, eyes alert, hunting for strays, for children who were small, who were hiding in the tightest spaces. The zombie gnashed its teeth, hissed. It breathed hard like a predator on the prowl. I hid beneath a table, yet I could hear.

The zombie went down the hallway between neighboring homes, hungry for its next meal. It looked so much like Mama, like Mama used to be.

In the not-so-distant past, there had been Mama and Papa, my only family, serving me meals. I worked as a scavenger in the landfill, making very little money, enough for cheap canned meat and some rice. I never complained of eating too little, or getting too used to the same food. In the zombie apocalypse, there were few provisions. You had to break into people's houses to steal what supplies you could find and escape the zombies that would come your way. They came out at night. If you were lucky, you would be back someplace safe until morning. Someplace remote. Like the sewers.

Life in Tondo before the zombie apocalypse was hard enough. You were a slave to the grind, the worst way how—scavenging for recyclable wastes, going knee-deep in refuse.



From underneath one table I darted to a fence, climbed over it, felt the wire hot to the touch, scalding. My hands came away with burns. I couldn't stop. I had to keep going.

Over to my left, there were more zombies; to my right, the coast was clear. Easy decision to make. I dashed to the right and hid behind a trash bin, finding a group of scavengers-turned-zombies feeding on a middle-aged woman nearby. Too late to save her. They took big bites

into her flesh, tearing away at muscle and layers of fat. She screamed. I could only look away, barely able to tolerate her cries.

I broke out into a run. I crossed an open area, seeing zombies feeding on another woman on the ground. I recognized one of the zombies. My stomach sank. I was aghast. It was my friend...feeding on another victim, nearly all night. I was scared to meet him head on, face him, no room to get away. What would I do then?

I recalled scavenging in the landfills with him. I remembered being new, when I was determined to help my mama and papa put food on the table.



Poverty was one thing; a catastrophe was another. When friends died brutal deaths in the zombie outbreak, the sinking feeling worsened. Grief swept over me like a tsunami. I would stop, breathe, relax, and cry silently so no zombie would hear.

That became increasingly hard to do. In congested Tondo, the zombies were everywhere. One bite was all it took to turn one healthy adult into a blood-crazed, flesh-starved maniac. Something would happen with their blood vessels, looking like they were carrying some kind of poison. Their muscles would stretch taut; their skin would change texture; their gums would darken. Neither animal nor man, but instead monster, a newly awakened zombie was deprived of compassion, immune to its rapidly disintegrating memories of love. I had seen it in the eyes of my transformed loved ones. Whatever good moments you'd shared were gone. Simple. Don't expect mercy from a zombie.

Before the apocalypse broke, Mama and Papa had warned me. "The isolated incidents are growing more common. The police and military are having trouble containing the contagion. A bite brings irreversible symptoms. What else do we do but hope and pray?"

Indeed, in the Philippines, the indigent person placed faith in

miracles. A stroke of luck was greeted with devotion. An empty pocket brought desperation—drugs. Drugs signified more than rebellion. Drug use enabled sweet oblivion. To forget about hardship, forget about obligation. As far as I was concerned, I had never wanted to run away from my situation, to forget or deny. There was a way to refuse the corrupt establishment, to resist the force of gravity that kept poor, uneducated peoples stuck in the mud. It didn't involve drugs, a prayer pamphlet, a lotto ticket. It involved education. I knew early on. Literacy was my way out of poverty. I read books and enjoyed them, treasured them more than my real circumstances.

I read YA adventure books like *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Wizards, Warriors, and You*. I had fun reading. I saw so many things I couldn't find in Tondo's shanties. Entire worlds formed out of my imagination. They gave me hope. Hope meant everything.

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*Months earlier...*

In Happyland, drudging the mire allowed for survival. No one was immune. Not to the stench. Nor the ridicule. To outsiders, we lived in intolerable conditions, but we were used to it. Better to scavenge the landfills for material wastes to resell than beg for alms on the street. In fact, kids in Barangay Happyland didn't beg. The streets were muddy, the landfills toxic.

Such is life in the slums of Manila, and Tondo contained some of the city's worst slums. The shanties were built beside the highly polluted water of Manila Bay. The primitive dwellings were stacked on top of each other like floors in a building, neither by concrete nor stable footing. Hallways snaked in and out like labyrinth tunnels; in these tunnels, doors opened into small, ramshackle rooms.

Trash littered the muddy trenches, sacks full of rubbish lined the

roads and adjacent homes. Here, capitalism reared its ugly head in a polluted landscape. Mass consumption fed the poorest of the poor.

In the slums of Barangay Happyland, garbage settled on roadsides in mountains, where people would not tell the difference. People did not mind the stench. They were used to it. What choice did the homeless have?

In the polluted bay where we dumped sewage from our homes, no light could penetrate, no amount of cleaning could ever fix.

On my first day scavenging, I asked the junkshop buyer how much I would get for my recyclable wastes.

“Eighty pesos per kilo of plastic wastes; five pesos for copper wire,” he said.

I thanked him. “How’s business?”

“We’re always open. There’s always garbage.”

Scavengers made less than six dollars on most days. The occasional gold-nugget find made them ecstatic. There were too many unemployed, impoverished citizens living in sub-human conditions in tight, congested quarters.

This is where the city threw their waste. These landfills were sorted, and the scavenged goods sold back to recyclers. The remaining trash often entered the bay area or stayed in mounds on the roadsides in Happyland. The waters were black as oil, murky as charcoal. Fish floated on the water, unable to breathe due to bacterial saturation.

I lived in such a slum. My name is Luzvimindo Arnaiz, Min for short. The name Luzvimindo stood for Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao—the three main island groups comprising the Philippines. I was twelve years old. My family and I lived in a squatting community of hundreds within a small land area—a part of Barangay 105 in Tondo, Manila, the place famously known as Barangay Happyland for its smiling, playing children.

The landfills were located within walking distance. Dump trucks

stopped at roadside. Residents used jeepneys and tricycles for public transportation. Private vehicles consisted of motorcycles.

When I returned home from classes after 3 p.m., I scavenged at our landfills for glass bottles, aluminum foils, cartons, and cans to help with our bills. I carried a big, black garbage bag over my shoulder and back, and used a stick to prod the mountains of refuse.

There were flies everywhere, wings buzzing on fat, blue-black bodies over piles of food waste and ripe juices. Dogs and cats were on every street, feeding just like flies.

Coming home from the landfill, I would typically find my mama waving from the second-floor window of our shanty, smiling and calling me. “Min, I brought food for you and your papa.” I would run up the stairs.

Papa would already be inside, eating. He was a quiet man who worked construction jobs for most of the week, coming home on the weekends after sleeping at the construction sites. While he spent most of his time on construction sites, he never smoked or drank. I would walk inside and hug him at the table, then get seated so I could eat.

Mama worked full-time at a canteen serving customers meals, often tying her hair in a ponytail to prevent it from getting in the cooking. She was very gentle. Mama couldn’t yell at anyone nor harm a fly.

Drudging the mire in Tondo was life. Wading in refuse and heat was everyday reality. Together with Papa—Josel—and Mama—Frances—we tried our best to weather life’s challenges.

But poverty was only the beginning of our plight.



The years digging for gold in the dirt of Tondo’s landfills came back to haunt me, when salvation was harder to find by hazard than a worthwhile book in the public library. Unlike a large hunk of metal to sell to a junkshop dealer, which equated to good money, enough for a

number of meals, YA books offered a glimpse into another world that money couldn't buy.

Every day, old and young alike hunted for gold in the trash in Barangay Happyland. All the items recycling plants didn't want stayed in our back yards. Most residents scoured all day long. We waded in trash as it poured out of the dump truck and hurried to find any steel or pricier valuables.

The smoke rising from the garbage heaps looked like spirits on Halloween, like dry ice inside a funhouse at a carnival. I prodded the waste materials with a stick and placed them into my bag with my bare hands. Sometimes, I wiped my nose and forehead with my dirty hand or arm, causing me to get sick with a variety of conditions. My mama said, "It's natural. Where else would we find a means to make a living?"

In overpopulated, polluted Metro Manila, that just seemed to be the case. Landfills were a cheap source of employment. Else you begged on the streets, working for syndicates.

It seemed like trips to the free clinic came as often as my trips to the produce and meat stores. However, besides sickness, Mama told me about kids that violated curfew, prompting policemen to detain them. "Conditions are abominable in youth detention centers, where smaller kids are beaten or raped by the bigger ones. The centers are tight, caged spaces packed with many kids. Be careful that you do not end up in places like those."

I was an obedient child who never strayed too far from Happyland. There was too much work to do, too little money.

We had family photos in our little house close to the bay. And although we were poor, we weren't miserable. We had genuine smiles on our faces in the photos.



The trouble started close to home.



Home consisted of two adjacent rooms. First, a living room with a window that looked out into the bay—a space where we slept and ate our meals. The next was an open kitchen space where the sink was located.

Beside our unit were several others stacked together like a tiny apartment building. We were located on the second level. Papa had helped build our home, and explained the construction once. “I used wooden clapboards and old signs for some of the walls, while the roof consisted of discarded yero, steel sheets that I nailed to wooden beams and weighted down by rubber tires.”

In the neighboring units, families huddled; sometimes, solitary rooms were inhabited by single residents who worked jobs in construction or as security guards for stores, banks, or malls, while some worked as meat and produce vendors to residents in the community. They set up stores all over Barangay Happyland, smiling at residents like me.

Now imagine all that dilapidation. Imagine our primitive wooden housings being subject to electrical sparks from broken lamps. Imagine the fires raging, the communities of people hiding from the zombies having no choice but to leap to their deaths into the polluted bay, where they would be anchored down by the trash on the ocean floor to drown. Imagine these homes with fragile locks on their doors, easily broken down and entered. Imagine me making my way through one corridor to another, seeing if friends of my father’s had survived, and finding none. There were bodies, barely recognizable.

Imagine dodging one zombie trying to get a bite from your neck. Imagine adrenaline spurring your tired legs in an all-out run for the walls and fences. Imagine climbing rusty barbed wire and incurring cuts. Imagine pulling away from the grasps of zombies’ outstretched hands—a warzone.

Imagine firetrucks waging a losing war to kill the fires, the firefighters under attack by the zombies. Imagine the massive inferno, smoke

filling the sky. More survivors were turned to zombies. More burning bodies fell into the polluted water, the screams echoing.

So many neighbors ran amok as fully transitioned zombies down the hallways. The inhuman screams were deafening. The sound of flesh flayed from bone by dull teeth was excruciating to bear. The sound of blood sputtering from a hard bite turned my stomach.

The trouble really started in other neighborhoods, with teens in other homes close to Barangay Happyland who did drugs.

Older kids who resided in other districts across the Radial Road R-10 who used drugs to cope with poverty didn't influence me. My parents had warned me explicitly.

"Min, promise you will never turn to drugs to drown your troubles," Mama asked me one night. "Promise?"

I nodded and gave my word.

I continued to read my textbooks.

In those shanties, teens who attempted to numb the pain brought by lifetimes of abuse and hardship did drugs and started to look and behave like zombies. They turned to the most primitive means to seek temporary relief. Cheap methamphetamine: a drug called *shabu* by locals. Afterward, they opportunistically stole, picked pockets, snatched cellphones and handbags, and worked as runners for drug dealers to get their stash.

But then, they changed; they grew hungrier, more savage.

They looked gaunt, emaciated. Their limbs twitched and spasmed. Their eyes widened in anticipation of drugs...or food.

The reasons behind the transformation were a mystery. No one had seen it before. Drugs deteriorating people's brain functions, reducing them to starving, hunting wild animals. Isolated cases popped up, and the police contained them. But when the outbreak ensued, the infected cases were overwhelming.

All that time, in the district of Happyland where I lived, we thought

we were safe. Yet, it was crowded, congested there. An outbreak of horrific proportions was going to be easily catastrophic, with victims piled high as the assailants went on a smorgasbord. Cutting through the shanties, on benches outside stores, or deep within rooms untouched by the sun, addicts took more drugs and transformed daily, multiplying in number, amassing into an army.

The next battleground was school.

We found drug addicts there, and they, too, were transforming...