

1. Mother Beast

I was standing on top of a wall. Not just any wall, but one that seemed to divide the world into four corners, four equal parts. It was strange how I felt myself at the centre of that crossroads, watching each garden open up around me, as if I were at the heart of a mysterious labyrinth.

In two of those four gardens there were no buildings — only plants of every kind, thick undergrowth, creepers, roots and leaves scattered everywhere. In the third, a low, delicate vegetation, a translucent green, almost blended into the damp soil, as if a recent rain were still being absorbed by the earth.

In the fourth corner, the scene changed completely. There was a house there, pressed up against the wall, with an old colonial-style roof, lightly covered with a thin layer of moss, threaded through with dew-beaded leaves that gleamed in the light of the setting sun. The smell of natural decay filled the air; everything seemed perfect, like a film scene set in nature. The leaves swayed in a strong breeze, the sun shone shyly, the air was mild.

That was when the first visitor appeared. Out of nowhere, watching me from a distance — curious and a little skittish — a black jaguar cub emerged and, after

a few seconds, leapt towards me, happy, excited, eager to play there in the middle of that crossroads of walls. But before I could move closer, two more cubs appeared, playing among leaves and twigs piled up at the corners of the roof. I would have stayed there all day with those adorable little jaguars, if not for a sudden, obvious and terrifying thought:

“If the cubs are here, their parents must be nearby!”

Before the question had even fully formed in my mind — “Where is their mother?” — I heard it. A step. Slow, heavy. The sound of something larger, moving with delicacy and majesty, aware of its own strength and authority. The roof, which until then had been just part of the scenery, now seemed to conceal a lurking predator, an absolute danger, something those playful cubs would one day also become.

Survival instinct took over. A shiver ran down my spine, enough to make me crawl backwards along that narrow wall. My feet barely had room to find purchase, and fear forced me into quick, clumsy movements. I had to get out of there. Fast.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, everything changed. I was no longer on the wall. I was running barefoot along wide, endless streets that formed ahead of me a new crossroads of deserted avenues.

Now hundreds of people were hurrying along the pavements in every direction, like rush hour in the centre of São Paulo, but, strangely, there was no sound at all. Only the pounding of my heart, gripped by the fear that the father of those cubs might be behind me. No noise of cars, no voices, nothing. Just my ragged breathing and the sound of my feet slapping hard against the tarmac. I ran desperately. My legs were heavy, my heart on the verge of bursting, but fear would not let me stop.

I didn't know exactly what was chasing me, but I imagined it might be her, the mother of the cubs. I felt I had to get very far away from there, and fast.

That was when I saw on the horizon an enormous circus tent, rising surrealistically in that chaotic landscape. "A tamer!" I thought. If there was a beast behind me, he could control it. Reaching the circus became my only goal, my only salvation. But my strength was almost gone; my aching muscles barely responded to the command to run faster and faster. Even so, I kept going. Every step was torture, my body on the edge of collapse.

Then I heard it. First a scream, then many, echoing through the crowd. I looked back and saw pieces of people scattered across the pavements and streets,

brutally torn away. Even so, I couldn't see the animal responsible for such carnage.

The terror only grew. I ran even faster. I took shelter behind a car, trying to locate the creature.

To my complete horror, I saw it. It wasn't just a beast, but something straight out of a nightmare. Enormous, two or three times larger than any jaguar I had ever seen. Its head looked like a grotesque mask of raw flesh, skin hanging in strips. One side of its body showed the fur of a black jaguar; the other, the stripes of a tiger — both smeared with blood. But its paws... black as oil, with yellowed claws far larger than those of any feline.

It stopped in the middle of the crossroads, big yellow eyes, dark pupils, alert, searching for its prey. I knew it was looking for me, that it would soon find me by scent.

For a brief moment, time froze. The people, the cars, everything stopped, leaving only me and it in motion. I climbed onto the roof of a lorry near the circus. From up there, among mangled bodies, I could see it. Even from more than two hundred metres away, it stood in the middle of the avenue, in a crouched attack position, staring straight at me. And I, at it.

Suddenly it lunged forward three quick steps, stopped, sank low to the ground and began to creep closer, preparing to strike.

I felt that cold along my spine again, from sheer fear. Somehow my legs responded. I ran like never before, a sprint à la Usain Bolt.

The circus tent was getting closer. By luck, I saw hanging at the entrance a thick rope full of knots, stretching up to the trapeze artists' rigging. It was my only chance. Either I reached it, or the creature would reach me.

With a desperate leap, I grabbed the rope almost halfway up it and began to climb. I felt a violent jolt; I nearly fell. I looked down and saw the beast trying to climb too, its enormous claws snagging and hindering its ascent.

The combined weight made the central pole lean, twist, and then snap.

We plunged from a height that seemed to be more than fifty metres, bringing down the circus canvas and the whole structure with us.

I landed first on the trapeze artists' safety net. Then the beast crashed down on top of me, stunned, smothered by the canvas, temporarily forgetting my presence beneath it. The net, unable to bear our weight, tore, and we fell again. The impact with the ground was

so strong it felt like an explosion. I felt no pain, but I realised I could no longer move, even though I wasn't pinned under the debris.

Suddenly I remembered the giant black jaguar. It was no longer there; it must have died in the fall, with all that on top of it. I heard a sound behind me. With effort, I managed to turn — and that was my last effort. The creature bit my head as if it were an apple. There was no time for fear or pain. Everything went dark.

And I woke up in fright.
