

“In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.”

— Eleanor Roosevelt

II.

Six months turned to two years, eight months.

Asher was only nine years old--swiftly approaching his tenth birthday--when his mother came to their home, the fortress of Theoria, from her long trip in the Arctic. She was gone for over two years, and details were mum about what she experienced. The world was a lot different from the last time Manila saw her son. Theoria didn't even exist when she left for Antarctica. Asher didn't understand what was happening, or why she was already on her way out again, but his mother insisted her work was “very important”.

“Everything I've done,” Manila insisted during one of the arguments she had with her husband. “Everything I am doing, is to ensure that you and our boys can live a life as close to normal as before... Theoria is NOT the kind of world I want them growing up in... is this what you want for them?”

“Look around you, Manila,” Anthony had screamed. “Things are never getting back to normal, no matter what you and those goons think you're doing.”

“They're good people, doing good work,” Manila's voice was very defensive.

“Why can't you take us with you, then?” Anthony asked.

“They--they won't let me.”

“Good people split up families? Good people let you abandon your family at a place like this, a place that you insist is awful?”

“It's... not ideal, but it's kept you safe... I'll admit that much.”

“It's not just kept us safe, it's made Asher strong.”

The rest of the argument escalated into fighting, screaming, but Asher didn't want to listen to any more of it. During one of these outbursts, he heard his mother claim he was a “killer”... It was true. Theoria's training was harsh. Asher had killed animals and been taught to slaughter the Plagued in hordes. But to hear her voice hiss at the idea of it, to reel back in disgust, it hurt Asher. That particular night, he remembered crying himself to sleep, hurt by the unfairness of it, and especially hurt by the kiss goodnight he received from her... because he knew the smile she gave him was tainted by the disgust she really felt beneath it. He was sad, because he felt he disappointed her.

The night before she left again, Manila invited her oldest son to the central hub of Theoria. The Epitaph Tree. Its leaves were falling as the seasons were beginning to change. But what didn't fall, were the small strips of white paper strewn with names that hung from each branch. There were hundreds of them up there, and the way they swayed in the soft breeze was almost hypnotic. The

sunset was orange-red, with swirls of pink and shades of violet. It was a beautiful evening, and one Asher would never forget.

“You need to protect your brother,” Manila Bolio told Asher.

“Protect him?” Asher peeped. “Just like how you protect the world?”

“The General will keep Theoria peaceful,” Manila replied. “I am just a traveler, a researcher, I -- I’m not really keeping anyone safe. I just find the bad things in the world and I let the people know -- people like The General -- people who can keep others safe. You’re a lot more like that than you are like me. And that’s a good thing. A strong thing. It’s your responsibility, just like it is his.”

“Responsibility? What does it mean?”

“Do you love Gray?”

“Of course!”

Manila laughed at how defensive Asher got. The boy even balled up his fists. His mother smiled, knowingly.

“Why?”

“Because... because he is small and... and soft. Because...”

“Because he is your family,” gesturing to the tree, Manila continued. “Our community has changed a lot, and though we built up these walls, though Theoria stands for strength and solidarity--we haven’t forgotten where we’ve come from. The Epitaph Tree is hung with the names of people that have been lost, people we choose to remember. Life means more to us than just what’s within these walls, Asher. This tree serves as a reminder of that, for all of us. A reminder that we are to protect what we love, make every second count... That is our responsibility.”

“Love. Love is responsibility.”

“Indeed it is. It was my responsibility to care for you, for Gray, for your father... I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

“Huh?”

“I know you heard me the other night,” Manila said, tears welling in her eyes. She stroked Asher’s face, pushing back his long locks to see his eyes. He started to tear up too. “About calling you a killer. I know that doesn’t define you. I know it’s unfair for me to judge what you have had to gone through these past few years. I’m very sorry. I don’t think down on you. I don’t blame you. I love you, Asher, my sweet, strong boy.”

Asher didn’t say anything. He just hugged his mother and cried. They both didn’t need to say anything else. The beauty of the evening was calming enough.

The next morning, Manila and her friends with the giant guns left. That conversation served as a beacon of hope and purpose for Asher, and it served as closure to the mother he was certain he would never see again.

The fortress of Theoria was not the only home Asher knew. Asher could remember learning to ride his bike at six years old, in the suburb that he could probably draw a map of in his sleep. He remembered the learning process being a tedious one: Anthony was not very patient at stuff like this.

Asher kept falling and not heeding his father's advice, and Anthony--easily frustrated and perturbed--gave up on Asher and headed inside. Asher, eager to prove he was right and always quick to butt heads with his father, wanted to do it. He remained outside and on his bike--he kept falling, screaming in anger, and getting back up. Rinse and repeat a few dozen times, and the kid was riding his bike on his own. It was the moment Asher knew he saw his father at his most proud. The independence Asher fostered at only six years old was almost prophetic.

Gray, however, was not so fortunate. While Asher had a few solid years of memories as an only child with play rooms and friends and vague recollections of school, Gray was only a year old when everything changed. Anthony tried to tell stories to young Gray, barely able to comprehend any of it. He'd talk about Italy and Ireland, where his lineage--The Bolio family--was from. He'd talk about the Philippines, where mom's family was from.

Anthony Bolio was never the same, not after Manila came back and left again in such a whirlwind. It must have been too much for him. He started to lose traces of his memory. He cursed the boys' mother every moment he could. He blamed her for everything that happened. The impatient Anthony that blew up on Asher for not being able to ride a bike as quickly as he'd have liked, was amplified at the impatience he felt at the world coming back to normal. Manila had said she left to make life return to a sense of normal, and every day he was angry at her for that promise. A promise he considered broken and dead.

One night, two years after Manila had last been seen, Anthony disappeared. Eleven-year-old Asher woke one morning to find his father's bed made, his sheets folded neatly, but all of his clothes and belongings gone.

For what he assumed were days, Asher held onto hope. It could have been weeks, though. Time seemed to crawl so slowly, so lifelessly, that he couldn't put his finger on it, really. Gray was now five, and he had fits of toddler rage that Asher had become accustomed to handling, better than most parents. He kept assuring a confused Gray, "he will be back tomorrow!" Asher did his best to supply Gray's needs. He often helped with whatever his father needed, but this element of taking responsibility was new, frustrating and terrifying all at once. While boiling a chicken he had to kill himself one evening for dinner, Asher spilled the contents of the pot everywhere. He remembered being burned, and sitting on the floor in the hot water, just crying. His tears and screams seemed to match his little brother's.

They both wanted Dad back. They both wanted Mom back. The weight of that 'responsibility' crushed Asher, but his mother's words kept bringing him back up. He did it for her, and for Gray.

The days kept going, and the food supply was running low. Asher wanted to leave the house so badly, to reach out to Theoria's leader, The General. The General had such an affinity for Asher. He trained him personally to fight, to shoot, to not look back in the face of fear. Asher was trained as a soldier, even at such a young age, and The General insisted that this boy was "special", a "born killer", a "natural". His mother's fear was correct. He was a killer.

He knew that The General would help him if he knew his predicament, but Asher also knew that he could not leave Gray alone or bring him out of the house with him. Babies were so taboo around Theoria and even at eleven years old, Asher knew it was dangerous. So he held little Gray in his arms and kept reminding him that their parents would be back. That was their responsibility, so of course they would be back. Just like it was Asher's responsibility to care for them until they came back.

Asher shot up from his place at the table the moment he heard a pair of voices outside.

"It must be mom! Or dad! Maybe they both came back, Gray!!"

When Asher threw open the door, he found an unfamiliar, gaunt, pale man and a smaller man with darker skin and slicked black hair. The gaunt man smirked at the sight of Asher, while the other man's eyes widened.

"Well... hello," the gaunt man said. "The name's Gareth. I was told that, as the new lieutenant of Theoria, I could have this nice abode since it is currently -- unoccupied. Clearly, there was some form of misunderstanding, perhaps on your end?"

Asher was silent. The other man, whom Asher recognized as Father Jimenez, whispered, "Gareth, Anthony Bolio had children... I would have thought when he left..."

"My dad is coming back," Asher declared boldly. "He wouldn't leave..."

"From what I heard," the gaunt man, called Gareth, said. "Your good ol' Daddy packed up his stuff and left in the dead of night. Shame he just left his babies."

"No, he wouldn't!" little Asher squeaked. "He loves us, he's responsible for us..."

"Responsibility? It's nothing but a burden. Just like your mom, your deadbeat daddy left because... well... being a parent? That's the type of responsibility you aren't meant to have in this brave new world. He ain't never comin' back, and good ol' mama felt the same. Your baby brother ain't nothing but a liability. They both knew it. It'd be best for you to learn it, too."

That was a very formative day. A day that affirmed to Asher that he needed to raise his brother to be stronger than he ever was.

Nothing but a liability?

Asher was dead set to hopefully one day prove that Gray was anything but.

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Asher Bolio was a messy cute seventeen-year-old whose insane behavior – often rambunctious, otherwise surprisingly serene and wise – changed depending on those around him and what they required of him to make a good impression. His ability to morph his personality based on others' expectations made him seem braggadocious to those around him who were more mature and understood his desperation to be liked and accepted.

Asher was a smart kid who grew up used to having a lot of expectations from adults from a very early age. But Asher, a kid, just wanted to relax and enjoy life by stretching out and taking it all in, instead of being wrapped up in, and stressed out by, what others wanted from his life. It was his

life, after all. Asher slammed down the emptied glass on the bar countertop. The alcohol burned his throat as it went down. He released a scream of vindication, flicking his long, shoulder-length so-dark-brown-it's-almost-black hair out of his eyes and yelled, "That's good!" Then repeated "Good!" again, but louder this time, as if to prove it to himself.

He kicked the jukebox attached to the wall and it flipped through the options before finally landed on a selection. This was a regular occurrence. The machine had been rigged to play without having money involved. He was thankful for this, because there was no money to be found. The funky riff of "Love Rollercoaster" by Ohio Players kicked in immediately. Drunk, Asher smiled. It worked.

He followed the staircase to the roof, where, through the shattered glass windows of the pub, he could hear the jukebox still. Asher plopped his butt down on the edge of the roof, his feet hanging off. He loved the view up here, especially when he was drunk. It allowed him to see what this city might have done in the past, what its function was when people lived and thrived here. He wasn't one for imagination, usually. Imagination was more Gray's forte, his younger brother. But when drunk, Asher relaxed a bit. His mind was allowed to run free. He saw the buildings sprawled around the city, within the barriers that he and his brother built, and imagined that these streets could be populated, lively. That the bar he used to wash away his fears, his sins and his tears was once filled with people who did the same, and something about that soothed him and made him feel less lonely.

"Precipitous," Gray's voice chimed in from behind Asher.

Asher jumped a bit, but his grip remained. He wouldn't fall. He turned to look at Gray, his younger brother. Gray Bolio had a rounded face topped off with a head of unkempt hair. His eyes were big and almond-shaped – like moons, orbiting people into his presence. Gray was very intelligent, quiet, and intense for his age. He held a yellow notepad close to him, because he didn't want to expose its contents to his brother.

"Maybe use some tact next time you see me sitting at the edge of a roof, Gray," Asher snapped. "I refuse to die so pathetically, if I can help it."

"Sorry," Gray said flatly. He didn't mean to sound so dry. It was just how he talked. He flashed a weak smile to try and make up for his tone.

"What is preci-pa-tou-wa anyway?" Asher asked flippantly.

"There are two definitions for the word that are relevant to your current situation," Gray said, flipping to a specific page in his notepad. Once he found what he was looking for, he continued. "The first? An adjective, meaning dangerously high or steep. The second? An adverb, meaning an action done suddenly and without careful consideration. Both relating to you being drunk and lolling your feet off the side of this building..."

"What are you doing?" Asher asked him.

"It's silly, but, every day I pick up my dictionary and I just flip to a random page. I choose the third word down, and I write a poem on that word, using its definition," Gray started to explain. "It's my way of expanding my vocabulary. I read a book once that told a narrative story in poetry

and it utilized similar poetry as a technique in getting the character's emotions across through new words he learned in school. He made his own sentences as examples of the word in a freestyle poem. I thought maybe it'd help me. I've been doing this for months, and it's been a cool experience, but today I landed on the word 'murder'. Of all things, you know?"

"Did you write about it?"

"Yeah..."

"Can I see?"

His curiosity piqued, Asher stood and approached Gray. The younger boy was hesitant, pulling the notebook closer to his chest.

"What's the matter?" Asher spat harshly. He was offended. Why wouldn't he share this with him? All they've ever had was each other. How could Gray not trust him?

"Writing, it's -- it's deeply personal, you know?" Gray pouted. "I just--I'm embarrassed to share, that's all. I've never been good at spitting it out. Words. I'm better at writing them down. It's the only way I've ever been good at expressing anything, and it's so personal for me. That's all."

"Well, I love you bro, and I want to hear what you have to say."

Although he had plenty of thoughts in his head, Asher's inability to put them into words made him easily frustrated thanks to poor communication skills. He would try to spell out what he meant in words, but usually failed to get his point across correctly; this made him easily misinterpreted, and often come across harshly, because he could never be quite sure how to spit out what he had to say. He'd known that he has always been hard on his brother, and he feared that Gray hated him for it. The more conscious Asher had been about his harshness, the more he tried to say "I love you", because he meant it and never wanted Gray to forget it.

Following a few more moments of dither, Gray handed over the notebook. Asher picked it up and read the page:

mur . der

noun

The crime of unlawfully killing a person

Especially with malice aforethought

As in: The first time I saw

one of The Plagued

I thought I witnessed a

premeditated

and spiteful murder.

As in: There is nothing mindless

about murder

it requires thought

and emotion

sometimes the lack thereof

and sometimes because

it overflows and is

uncontrollable.

As in: It seems so strange

and so sinful

and so horrifying

and sometimes so natural

to commit murder.

He smiled at Gray, looking up, "This -- I shouldn't sound so shocked, I've always known you to be a genius, little man, but this is really good."

"Thanks. You're not just saying that 'cuz you're drunk, are ya?"

Laughing, Asher gave a belch. Gray shook his head, his face turning red with embarrassment, and snatched the notebook back.

"Asher, come on, don't--" Gray pleaded, the anxiety returning to him as Asher plopped back down and his legs flopped uselessly over the edge of the roof again.

"Do you find this song creepy?"

"What? When were we talking about this song--?"

"It just hit me, I don't know. It's just eerie-sounding, is all."

"You know I don't like it when you drink, Asher."

“I’m just feeling especially sad today. It’s the only way I know how to navigate that--weird pit feeling. It hits you in your stomach, it feels like a big empty hole. You know... like a pit. You understand what I mean... right?”

“Not really.”

“Oh yeah, sorry ‘drunk-me’ forgot that I’m the only one of us who feels emotion.”

“I feel emotion. I just don’t--really know how to express it. But I can express this: That you’re scaring me and I want you to move back a little. Please.”

At nearly twelve, Gray was different from most people. A creature of intense habit and routine, a boy with a love for astrology, words and poetry, Gray was more educationally-inclined compared to his older brother. He had complications expressing the deep connections he was able to make with others, but the irony was that he was also the most empathic person Asher had known.

Awkward and quiet, Gray didn’t necessarily *not* get along with others, he just found himself uncomfortable around people. His intelligence made him feel like an outsider, even with his brother. People were not easily impressed by a kid who knows-it-all, and he’d learned that the hard way--especially from Asher. When he did open up to people, though, Gray revealed an optimistic and sweet demeanor. Asher was convinced that Gray wouldn’t, maybe even couldn’t, harm a fly.

Gray had an enormous heart only rivaled by the size of his brain. His hurdles came with learning who to trust in any given moment. He had an issue in seeing things from too many perspectives; some may say this is a good thing and a blessing, but Gray only saw it as a hindrance. He was unable to appreciate his own point of view. He liked to take others’ opinions in account and was easily swayed and misled. Whenever Asher had one of his bouts of sadness or distress, Gray picked up on it immediately. Probably because Gray was so used to, so drilled to, the status-quo of Asher having it all together and being in charge that the emotional outbursts threw off the routine and made Gray uncomfortable.

Asher’s eyes fell to where his feet dangled: to the red brick daubed in even darker-red paint with the word:

REPENT

So many thoughts flooded in his head. He was a sappy drunk, that he always knew.

“I’d be a lot more hopeful,” Asher mumbled. Gray didn’t react. Asher looked back at his brother, and continued. “What about you, what would you do differently if mom were alive?”

Gray shrugged, staring detachedly into the middle distance, toward nothing in particular but everything all at once.

Pointedly, he replied, “She isn’t.”

The sound of something smashing erupted unabashedly before Asher had time to chastise his brother’s bluntness.

Asher’s head snapped back, looking right toward Gray. Alert and nervous, Asher’s field of vision darted around, surveying the area. If Gray didn’t know any better, he’d have assumed in this moment that the sudden crash startled the drunkenness out of his brother.

“You heard that?” Asher hushed.

Gray just nodded. His heart was pounding so hard, so fast, that he thought Asher could hear it. Asher held out a hand and Gray slapped his own hand into Asher’s palm, pulling his older brother to his feet. Gray instinctively yanked Asher right into his chest, away from the building’s edge, to safety in his arms. The thought of a drunken Asher splattering to the cement below hadn’t left the younger boy’s mind this entire conversation and Gray was glad his mind could wander elsewhere... even if that wandering led him to think that there was a potential breach.

An intruder.

An enemy.

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Rows of empty desks, upturned desks and discarded objects strewn about the room gave the vibe that this once was a classroom. It just looked like a shell, a carcass of its former self now. Fourteen-year-old PJ Cassavoy never went to school, well--not traditionally, at least. But he’d seen plenty of movies with it in there, so he was familiar with the room’s cliché set up and was definitely familiar with how unsettling the atmosphere was.

PJ was a charming kid, curious and sweet with an inkling of rebelliousness; an independent, playful spirit with a crude, goading, and wicked sense of humor. Quite timorous at first meeting, the cheerful buoyancy of his true nature was quickly revealed through getting to know him. His boisterous and out-there personality caused him to grow on folks like a leech. He was smart, too, “a technical prodigy”, people always called him. People like Declan and Winnie, people who he looked up to (though sometimes, for the latter, he wasn’t sure why he did...).

They also called him a bit of weirdo. He wore a tube sock on his arm, tight against his skin. He called it his lucky sock, an infallible charm that he claimed saved his life on numerous occasions. They didn’t really bother asking why. Declan found it endearing, usually, but Winnie treated the lucky sock thing with embarrassed contempt, as if she were around someone too uncool for her, as if coolness or popularity mattered in a world such as this.

PJ picked up a piece of chalk from the floor and approached the black board pinned to the wall. He started to scribble something. He came here on a supply run with Declan. Declan O’Day was a plain white tee kind of guy. Standing in contrast to PJ’s grubby curly brown hair that was kept in a mop atop his head, Declan’s hair was clean cut and dark. He had seen a lot in his thirty-ish years of life. He didn’t let the hard times bring him down, though. He was almost always wearing a beaming grin, which helped support the youthful atmosphere he carried about him. Declan didn’t look like he weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, and often touted around guns much bigger than most expected him to be able to handle. He hadn’t fallen over shooting any of them, at least not recently. He’d trained himself to be used to gripping the heavy weight of the weaponry that has become natural, a given, now. He taught some of the kids, like PJ, how to handle the heavy

machinery too because leaving home without your rifle was like leaving your house without your wallet, or keys. Unheard of, and completely foolish.

“PJ, come on,” Declan interrupted. “Did you even manage to grab anything useful?”

PJ smirked, backing away from the blackboard proudly while Declan inspected his writing.

I SEE DEAD PEOPLE!

“I see you’ve kept yourself entertained,” Declan said dryly.

“Come on, Declan, I’m just getting started,” PJ replied with a mischievous smirk. He spoke with a slight lisp. “Let me get my eighties-movie, John Hughes ‘school’s out!’ moment.”

“Have at it,” Declan beamed. He was easy to win over. “You stole my heart by remembering John Hughes.”

“I appreciate your artistic tastes, Declan, I really do. Thank you for letting me have this moment. Do you think John Hughes is still alive in all of this, by the way?”

“Lucky for him, he died long before all of this.”

PJ started to smash the place up. The air in the room was so jubilant. Declan laughed. He didn’t participate, though. He wanted PJ to have his moment. Picking up a beaker and chucking it out a window, PJ shouted, obviously very proud of himself for a line he considered to be very clever, “I always thought we had good *chemistry*!”

Again, letting PJ have his moment, Declan laughed but didn’t perhaps find it very funny, “Good one.”

Things were so jubilant that PJ didn’t see something moving in the corridor outside. But Declan did. He swung the rifle he hung over his shoulder back into his arms, pointing it forward with such gusto and skill. PJ heard the clunking of the rifle and swung around.

“What’s up?”

“Hands up!” Declan announced to whatever awaited them outside. “If you’ve got a voice, if you ain’t one of The Plagued, you better start talking or else I’ll--”

“Are you with him?” Asher Bolio’s voice exclaimed.

He stepped out of the shadows, pointing a rifle of his own in Declan’s face.

“I’m sorry?” Declan asked, breathless. He wasn’t expecting a living being, but especially not a kid.

“Are you with *him*?” Asher snapped. “I need you to tell him we’re not interested. I’ll give you both the chance to leave as messengers rather than join the pile of dead folks who tried to recruit us last time...”

“We aren’t with anybody,” PJ assured.

“PJ, stop,” Declan demanded calmly.

Asher gave a quick nod and Gray stepped out from behind Asher, a little less confidently training a firearm of his own on PJ. Declan noted the non-verbal communication and was thoroughly dazzled by the two boys who stood before him.

“Let’s just talk,” Declan’s words escaped him like smooth, milky butter. He gave a smile that Gray was quick to trust, but Asher was not so sure. Asher didn’t even need to see the look on Gray’s face to know that his brother felt assured, and felt the need to spare these two strangers.

“You have three minutes,” Asher said. For Gray’s sake, he was willing to give these two the benefit of the doubt. But he wouldn’t relinquish control.

That would just be callous.