

“Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien

III.

How do I sum it all up in three measly minutes? Declan O’Day thought to himself as the wild-eyed teen in front of him held a rifle to his head. They didn’t have the luxury to exchange names yet, so Declan—in his head—gave this tricky kid one himself: Headshot. You know, like, shoving that shotgun in his face would be an efficient way of landing a clean *headshot*.

“I don’t answer to *nobody*,” Declan illustrated. “So I can guarantee that whoever you’re afraid of -- whoever you think I report to, I’ve got no affiliation and neither does my friend here.”

Headshot hissed, “Where is home?”

“An abandoned airport,” Declan said. “Not far from here. Well-guarded too. Lots of security, lots of traps. There’s about...”

Declan then turned to PJ, whose eyes bore wider than a deer in headlights. He knew the kid was probably freaking out, so trying to turn the conversation more casual, trying to include him, felt like it could ease his mind a bit. “...what would you say, Jammies, about twenty of us?”

PJ hated all the nicknames people gave him. Declan saw him wince, but PJ didn’t react any further than that. He knew better. This wasn’t good timing for a squabble. That’s why Declan knew it was precisely the right time for a jab, because PJ couldn’t come up with a comeback. PJ was always amazed at how calm, cool and collected Declan remained in high-stress situations and Declan was continually impressed with how mature such a goofy kid like PJ often was.

“Yeah, twenty sounds about right,” PJ managed through labored breathing. “Well... maybe twenty-one now.”

“Yeah,” Declan nodded. “There’s twenty-one of us.”

He flashed a grin to the boy. PJ’s eyes crinkled and his mouth tugged up the sides, ever so slightly. He felt a peace inside of him that he couldn’t really explain. Assured by this look, feeling the peace too, Declan turned back to Headshot. Then, his vision fell to the shorter, more uncertain, more scared one -- Twitchy -- and then back to Headshot. He knew he had a lot of convincing to do.

“We can make room for two more. It’s not a problem. You two seem capable. Smart. Like you’ll contribute very well...”

“We tried that before,” Headshot said. “It didn’t work out, and now... we’re targets.”

Declan thought that Headshot intended to scare him with this nugget of truth. The idea of these two kids being valuable targets to some dangerous man intrigued Declan—it didn’t scare him. He only knew of one man who was powerful enough to strike such fear into someone.

“The General?”

Declan saw the way Headshot’s face contorted when he said that name. This confirmed it for him. Twitchy took in a sharp breath.

“You’re not well off out here,” Declan said. “Our community is guarded, and our people, they’re trained. We have resources. We have each other.”

Headshot motioned to Twitchy. “*We* have each other. He’s my brother and he’s all I trust. We’ve been out here for months, man, and he can’t touch us.”

“The General has impacted so many of us, you know. His reach is everywhere. It’s only a matter of time, kid.”

“He’s hurt you too?”

“He’s made an impact. There’ll be people back at our home, people who will understand your plight. This city--your city--y’all did a great job keeping things up, but the two of us made it through your traps pretty easily. PJ here thought they were the workin’s of dead men.”

Declan nudged his head toward PJ, who fired a confused look of disbelief back at him.

“Are you trying to get me shot, man?!” PJ cried through bated breath.

Declan scoffed, looking like he was enjoying this situation more than he rightfully should. “We don’t need you two making any commitments. Just--come by. Hang out for as long as you’d like. Hell, take some stuff for the road back here if you choose not to stay. I’ll even let you keep your guns. Consider it a free trial.”

Headshot looked like he was mulling things over. His eyes fell to Twitchy for a brief moment of deliberation--gauging the younger boy’s opinion through sheer facial expression. He snapped back to Declan as quickly as he looked away.

“My name’s Declan, by the way,” he decided to introduce himself to Headshot. He thought it’d lighten the mood. Plus he hoped he could put an *actual* name to this boy’s imminently-rabid face. “And this is PJ.”

“I’m Asher,” Headshot said, lowering his weapon slightly. “The little guy’s name is Gray.”

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The trek from the Bolio brothers’ personal fortress to the airport that Declan and PJ called home was not very far, but it felt like it took an eternity. Asher and Gray stuffed their rucksacks full of things they knew they’d need, grabbed weaponry and left everything else behind. Gray remained hopeful, Asher skeptical. Asher believed this to be a healthy balance for them both.

As an unwritten precaution, Declan and PJ trailed the brothers. They led with words--“We’re gonna make a left up here”, “It’s up here, past this sign”--and kept their backs clean of the boys’ view. It took a lot for Asher to keep his back to them, not knowing whether they’d be double-crossed or not. You don’t live this long without being precautionous. Conversation was not made. Gray found himself marveling at the outside world. It’d been a few months since he’d left the fortified walls of their city. He’d forgotten how skeletal everything looked.

Buildings were crumbling, shelves emptied, cars stripped to scrap... It felt like the hollow, empty bones of ancient creatures on display in museums. Gray had only seen them in books, but it

was the first thing that came to his wandering mind. No other people in plain sight. Anyone alive or around knew they had to hide to survive.

Upon arrival at the airport, the colossal fences stuck out to Asher. They were bound with wiring at the top... electrical, Asher deduced. Spikes protruded from the mesh lining, and lined the entirety of the fence. Dried blood, bronze-red and crusted, hung loosely from most of the spikes. The airport itself was expansive. There was plenty of room for more than just twenty-one people. A lookout tower loomed above it all.

“Hold here,” PJ ordered. He reached into his pack, rummaging through various devices before he produced a small black square tile. Once PJ flipped the black square tile over, Gray realized that it was not just any square tile, but a glass mirror. It reflected the sunlight off the shiny glass. PJ lifted the mirror into the air, holding it between both hands, and flicked it up and down a few times. Gray, fascinated, watched the entire display like it was dinner and show. Asher, however, merely expressed frustration with a grumble, “What the hell..?”

“He’s sending a message,” Gray explained quietly. He was shyly fighting back an impressed grin. “This is pretty brilliant. There’s someone up there--in the tower. Watch--They have to have some sort of mirror, too. They’re gonna flash a message back to PJ.”

Asher hadn’t heard his brother this giddy in a while. When a familiar flash reflected back from the top of the tower, confirming Gray’s theory, he broke. He was beaming now. He nudged Asher playfully with his elbow, “See?” The expression on Gray’s face made this whole risk worth it for some reason. Asher just wanted to see his baby brother happy. Safe, but happy. He’d been safe for a while, but definitely not happy. Maybe being around other people, meeting new faces, would bring that feeling back. Part of Asher, deep down, felt that it would be fleeting--pointless, even. Happiness could only be temporary, couldn’t it? He’d questioned that his whole life, but Gray never did, and he admired him for it.

The flashing kept going -- back and forth, for about a minute. Gray took note that at one point, right before PJ gave his last flash and finally put the mirror back into his pack. Once PJ was done, he nodded to Declan. Another signal.

“What did they say?” Asher asked.

“Well, we made a very primitive heliograph,” PJ expounded. “Using morse code with a mirror is pretty challenging, so we haven’t truly developed any real ‘language’ with it quite yet. We just kind of use it as a way to flash the mirror and say ‘We’re coming, we’re here, let us in?... that kind of deal. They’ve gotta turn the fences off, you see. Or else, if we try to open the gate, we end up deep-fried.”

“Kentucky Fried PJ,” Declan quipped. “Already happened once.”

“Non-lethal setting,” PJ tried, again, to explain. “Long story: But it was kind of a dare. I dunno if I’ll ever be able to pee straight again.”

Asher and Gray both laughed.

Declan grabbed the entry gate and pried it open. He let the kids in first, and then shut it behind him. Nearly immediately after the gate shut, he heard the hiss of a generator kick in. The electricity was back on. He looked up at the tower, and gave a quick salute and thumb's up.

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Declan's back was killing him. He rubbed the back of his head. Another day, another thought of misery, another thought of regret and self-hatred. He hated this miserable place. He hated himself for landing in here. He knew he deserved every bit of his misery, but he never wanted to show it or admit it. The meals were terrible. The only thing remotely interesting was Sunday service. He never considered himself a religious man, but he never had the amount of free time before he was sentenced to the state penitentiary. It had been six months that he'd served time here. Six long, hard months. The past few days had been especially grueling. The staff seemed to drop off the face of the earth. He hadn't been let out. The twinge and pain of his hunger was a sensation that Declan had never felt before, and admittedly wouldn't wish upon his worst enemy. He thought he was reaching a point of starvation.

Weakly, he stood up, and approached the bars of his prison cell. He gripped them and pressed his face against them. Declan liked the feeling of the cold metal on his face; it reminded him of being sick at home and laying flat on the cold bathroom tile; that familiar, somehow soothing feeling. He closed his eyes and imagined his wife: the woman who broke his heart, who tore it out and stomped on it and watched it bleed out under the weight of her boot. He imagined his daughter. The daughter he had to raise alone because of the choices she made. The daughter he had to leave with his mother, because he couldn't handle being a single father. He imagined his students--God, he missed them. He imagined the parents who would come up and thank him for making a difference. This is where the memories of Declan's life came flooding back and gave him feelings of worth, eliminating the self-deprecation that threatened to eat away at him like acid on his bones.

Being a teacher was the first thing that gave Declan's life some semblance of purpose. Being a husband and father, he thought, would continue his uphill climb but then he ended up here, in this cell. He was forced to face the idea that he failed. Declan felt that he failed as a father and as a husband. But one thing he didn't fail at, was his passion for teaching, and for his students. It was the only redemptive quality Declan was certain of in his spirit. Those kids needed him, and he needed them. He hoped they were alright. He hoped that everything he did for them stood strong and was more powerful than their knowledge that he was now in prison, now a 'bad guy'. It was interesting how one horrific instance of losing self-control could define you more than years of service and selflessness. People start to doubt the authenticity of your character because of one event.

Declan heard a strange noise from the hallway. His imagination seized as vision returned to him--the memories, fantasies, faded. He found the shadow of a figure in the hallway lumbering toward him.

“Hey,” he started to talk weakly. He heard other voices rumbling too. Most shouted obscenities. Then, Declan screamed. He started to join them. The toxic vitriol within him erupted, unable to contain the feelings of neglect, intense hunger and abandonment any longer. He ranted about the reek that filled the hallway and simply remained there from everyone doing their business on the floor of their cell, because surely every other prisoner had to do the same until they had nothing left to digest. He shrieked about a lack of food, about being treated worse than animals. As the figure drew nearer, Declan realized something. He had never seen this person before in his life.

This man was lumbering. A giant in every sense of the word, he stood at about six feet solid, and his weight clocked in probably about two-hundred. He had thick eyebrows, an even-thicker mustache, and a smile that spoke more than it needed to. He wore heavy camouflage, decorated with badges of honor, and most importantly--he gripped a shiny pistol in his hand, and a larger rifle hung on his back from a strap that wrapped around his shoulder. The man fired the pistol into the ceiling, and dust and grime fell from above. He didn't even blink. He was careless. He was in control. The noise around him stopped. The prisoners were all quiet now.

A few men flanked behind him. This man looked right at Declan, nodded, and then turned to the others.

“They left you,” this man started to talk. His Mexican accent was thick. “They abandoned you. It seems to me, the most tragic part of it all, that you don't even know what's going on outside. Do you?”

“I heard some guards talking about it,” a prisoner in the cell next to Declan was the first to speak after moments of intense silence. “The virus? Is that what you're talking about?”

“The world outside isn't just falling apart,” this man confirmed. “It's already collapsed. Your government abandoned you. They felt this place--you people--were not worth protecting. But I see your worth. I want you to know that.”

He turned his gun toward Declan's neighbor. Declan's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. He closed his eyes, turned away. The gunshot rang out clearly, loudly. And then the clinking of the metal followed it. He heard a scream of victory, and the noise of the cell's gate collapsing upon itself. His neighbor left the cell and approached the man.

Then, without a blink or a word, the man turned the gun on the man and shot him, right in the heart.

Declan had no words. So many thoughts rushed through his head. What was going on? What did this guy want?

“But you need to know your place,” the man bellowed. “I am The General. I am your leader, your master. If you want to live, if you want to survive, you leave with me. You serve me. Your worth, your life, all of it lies with me.”

The dead man started to twitch. He started to make continuous twisting, squirming contortions of his body on the floor, and foam at the mouth. The soldiers that flanked The General picked the man up and pinned him to a post nearby, tying him to it quickly. Declan noticed their

hands were shaking, and that a few of the men were hesitating. They were scared of whatever the hell was happening, and Declan was too.

“This man has about two minutes until he’s strong enough to break through that rope with sheer will,” The General boomed. “And he’s going to be hungry, for your blood. And despite those bars keeping you between him, he’ll find a way. Or maybe starvation will hit and you’ll beg him to tear your face off. It won’t be pretty, either way.”

“How is that possible?” Declan dared to ask. “He’s dead.”

The General just flashed the sickest smile that Declan had ever seen, “Not quite. If I were the lot of you, I wouldn’t want to be a sitting duck here to see what comes of him next.”

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Asher and Gray moved slowly through the entrance of the airport. The sheer size of this place intimidated Gray. He reached for his brother’s hand. Asher, sensing Gray’s discomfort, gripped his hand in response. Gray could feel it: Asher was nervous too. The airport was transformed into an emergency field hospital in the initial outbreak of The Plague. Various areas were cleared out and emptied, leaving the lobby wide open and hollowed of what it once was. There were still shops (destruction would’ve been more of a pain than a blessing, and the government never got that far in their triage efforts anyway) and kiosks and a couple benches but everything was spaced out more than their initial construction. People were there, and that’s what made Gray the most nervous. He knew to expect them, twenty-one of them in fact, and the butterflies bounced around in his stomach the entire trip to the airport. But it was different seeing them.

One girl in particular stood out to Asher, though. She sat at a bench alone. She was one of the few whose clothing stood out to him: colorful and stylish. She wore a strapless cropped tube top, with a frilly white skirt. She dressed as if she actually cared what people thought, and her clothes were free of scuff, grass or blood stains. The girl was thin and blonde, with a heart-shaped face and square jaw. Something odd struck Asher that had nothing to do with her appearance: her lack of care or notice while the people around her flocked toward them excitedly. She was too busy hard at work on a crossword puzzle, the tapping of her pen showing something of annoyance. At the foot of the bench was a dog. A bloodhound. Wrinkled features, a face that watched and was aware of its surroundings more than most of its human companions. It sat by her: no leash, no restraint. It just watched everyone--much more than she did.

“Winnie,” PJ said her name loudly, trying to get her attention. The dog’s tail wagged as PJ approached. Winnie peered up from her crossword, realized it was PJ, then she returned her attention to the crossword. “Hey. We’ve brought new friends.”

“What’s a four-letter word for ‘I don’t care?’” Winnie replied plainly, her voice oozing with apathy. Her eyes fluttered, falling on PJ again and her lips edged into a tiny, excruciating smirk. This was a smirk that PJ was incredibly used to seeing, and he countered it the only way he knew he could: with a nonchalant eyeroll and chuckle.

“I’m in the middle of something,” Winnie insisted.

“They’re close to our age,” PJ gushed, trying to entice her. “Maybe we could all like, hang out or something. Maybe at church tonight...”

“When will you learn to stop asking me to...?”

“Never. Maybe the day I stop caring. Maybe the day I become more like you.”

“Then I hope for my sake, that day comes soon.”

PJ knew arguing with Winnie was a losing battle. He just nodded.

“Well, I hope you change your mind,” he said.

He turned back toward the crowd, petting the dog on the head and giving him a warm, “Hey, Sarge!” before heading in the other direction. The hound, Sarge, looked back at Winnie with that puppy-dog look.

“Oh, what, dog?” Winnie sighed. “Quit judging me.”

As he returned to Asher, Gray, and Declan, the crowd of seven or so people began to swarm around the new arrivals, throwing questions their way. Winnie watched PJ go, and her peering eyes ended up falling on the new boys. Both were looking at her, too. She began to, again, tap her pen against the book. She liked the sound of the pen hitting the thick wad of paper of the already-finished puzzles she’d flipped through but it also, paired with the furrowing of her thick eyebrows, did a thorough job at showing the people around her that she was annoyed at something. Her attention returning to the puzzle in her hands, she read her next clue to herself:

Six letter word: clandestine, mysterious

Winnie simpered, looking pleased with herself as she realized the ironic timing. The answer immediately popped in her head, and she filled in the six corresponding boxes:

Arcane

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Ushering them away from a hounding crowd asking a ton of questions, PJ struggled to make conversation with Asher and Gray. He truly was excited to have two guys closer to his age around. He was, however, iffy due to the fact that a few hours ago they had guns pointed at him. PJ was the youngest in the airport until Gray’s arrival.

“So I guess we kind of already knew this, but I didn’t get to introduce myself properly,” PJ said. “The name’s PJ Cassavoy.”

He held out a hand as they walked, his fingers long and made for piano. Asher shook first. Then Gray.

“Sorry, maybe my hand was too sweaty,” PJ stammered. “Winnie... she always says so. So, uh... you guys ever heard of an escalator?”

“A what?” Asher asked.

“An escalator,” PJ repeated.

He looked back at Gray. “You? Escalator? Anybody?”

Gray shook his head ‘no’, prompting PJ to dive into explanation mode, “Well, these things -- you see how the steps are, like, bumpy or whatever. The stairs actually moved on their own, so you could just plant your feet on one of the steps...”

He demonstrated by stopping in his tracks, gripping the side rails, “...and the step *moved for you*. Wild, right? The batteries are dead or something, though. I’ve thought about seeing if I could get it moving again.”

“You can do that?” Asher asked.

“Maybe. I’m good with anything mechanical or electronic... I made my own suppressors for my pistols, I built pipe bombs, repaired radios... I’ve always wanted to try my hand at fixing up an old car or something. But I think maybe restarting this escalator can be my first project.”

Gray sounded impressed, “That’s really cool. I hope you can, I’d like to see this thing work.”

It was at that point that they reached the top of the escalator. They moved down a corridor, leading to a variety of offices and other rooms. They stopped at the first door to the left. Their voices grabbing their attention, Asher and Gray spotted Declan and a mousy woman with reddish-brown hair standing on one side of the hallway and another woman--blonde, imposing, authoritative--on the opposite side of them. They stood at the very end of the hallway, and their conversation sounded quite serious. PJ noticed the boys prying.

“The woman with the brown hair is Phoebe,” PJ explained. “She’s like the co-captain of this place. She runs a lot of the at-home operations, and spreads about responsibility through the community. You’ll see more of that later. The other lady is named Gwen, she’s a guest like you two.”

PJ opened the door to the room he stopped at, and gestured for them to enter. “This’ll be home. Make yourselves comfy. Declan and Phoebe will be by in a moment. I’ll see you two later.”

Gray replied with a quick “Bye!” PJ waved, and was gone. The brothers walked into the room and saw two beds on the floor. It was a clean room, and decent in size, but very bare other than the two beds.

They heard footsteps, and the boys sat on their respective beds (Asher chose the one closest to the door), waiting for Declan and Phoebe to walk in.

“It’s roomy,” Phoebe softly spoke. Her voice was calming and smooth. “I hope you like it.”

“Thanks,” Asher said. “We don’t know if we will be staying very long, but Gray and I are super thankful. You’ve been good to us so far, real good. So thank you.”

“That’s just common decency. Boys, let’s talk real quick.”

Declan leaned against the wall, and waited for the brothers to take a seat on their new beds, while Phoebe remained at the door.

“A big part of our community, a cornerstone I guess you can call it,” Declan started. “Is the opportunity for us to come together and recognize the importance of us all being here together. There’s a reason for it, we believe that wholeheartedly.”

“We don’t ever want to be forceful or demanding,” Phoebe interjected. “You’re never forced to do anything you don’t want to do. But we ask that you respect the foundation of this place and this community.”

“That foundation is Jesus Christ,” Declan said. “Do you... have any idea...?”

“Yes,” Gray peeped quietly. He zipped open his rucksack and brought out a Bible.

“You still have that?” Asher asked his brother incredulously.

Gray just nodded as an answer, “This Bible means a lot to me. I wouldn’t just be rid of it like that. I read from it every day.”

That statement struck Declan. He didn’t know what circumstance led Asher to want his brother to throw away that Bible of his, but Gray’s defiance and his passion for the book--that was something special. Declan saw the look on Asher’s face, and saw that Asher felt it too. He wasn’t angry, he was *impressed*. That reaction? That was something special, too.

“We believe, as the leaders of this community, that every human life is precious, is sacred,” Declan disclosed. “That there’s redemptive quality and something special about every single person we come in contact with. We don’t shoot first. We ask questions first. We get to know people first. We believe that we’re on the brink of a change, for the better. We want to be a part of that. Ushering in what we believe God is going to do in the coming days.”

Phoebe was effusive and genuine in her expression as she declared, “If Dec were to tell you his story, you’d freak.”

“That can be for after dinner,” Declan insisted. “We teach each member of our community some element of responsibility. We want you to be able to make your own meals, and be independent in that sense. But for your ‘free trial’ period here with us, we’ll serve you. Winnie’s a great cook and I asked her to whip up something nice for you two.”

Asher smiled, “Sounds good to us.”

“We’ll give you some time to unpack while Winnie cooks,” Phoebe explained. “Meet us downstairs in an hour. In the lobby.”

“Okay, thank you,” Asher answered.

Phoebe and Declan skirted out of the room, closing the door behind them. Asher looked at Gray, who was shoving his Bible back into his backpack, a look of embarrassment on his face.

“You didn’t have to lie to me, you know,” Asher said. “I’m not mad that you kept it. I get it.”

“And I get why you’re jaded. I’m sorry I didn’t just tell you the truth.”

“Jaded?”

“It means like... you’ve had enough of something. The General and his hypocrisy... that’s not a real experience with Christ.”

Asher gripped his brother's hands and said pointedly, "You're nervous. I'm nervous too. But I trust your gut more than I trust my own. What's it saying?"

Tears streaked Gray's face. He started to snuffle.

"Hey, why are you cryin'?" Asher asked. His tone was a mix of harshness and confusion.

"Because what if I'm wrong?"

"You never answered me. What's your gut saying?"

"That they're good people and that we're safe."

"Aha!" Asher said, twinkling at Gray. He gave the younger boy a light tap on his cheek with his palm, who choked through his tears and fought to not release anymore. "Always so sensitive," Asher teased. Gray turned away from him, recoiling with embarrassment. Asher snapped his fingers to grab Gray's attention back: "Hey, look at me!"

Gray looked up into Asher's eyes. That twinkle was still there. Gray's expression softened, the anxiety he felt--the weird butterfly-fluttering-in-a-pit feeling in his stomach, the breathlessness--began to ease. Asher wasn't mad, wasn't laughing either. He was serious.

"Your gut says that? Then that's that," Asher assured him. "We're good. Let's go enjoy dinner... though if they poison us, or whatever, you best bet I'll be kicking your ass in Heaven or whatever afterlife we get sucked into."

Wiping his tears and heaving a big sigh, Gray then forced a genuine laugh, "Deal."

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A big dinner table was sprawled in the middle of what once was a food court. Signs surrounded them for relics of a distant past -- a Taco Bell, a Panda Express -- and it made for an interesting aura in the room. Asher and Gray sat together. The intimidating blonde woman they saw earlier, Gwen, sat on the other side of the table from the brothers. No words were exchanged. The boys poured themselves water from pitchers in the middle of the table. Gray clumsily fumbled with his pitcher and spilled some on the table and onto his lap, and Asher laughed at him for it. Gwen twiddled her thumbs carefully, quietly, and didn't react to anything. She just waited for Declan and Phoebe to return, and they did, with food.

Winnie helped them carry out trays of food that she cooked. One of the meals was a roast. There were also mashed potatoes, gravy, and a plate full of steamed carrots.

"Thank you," Asher said as Winnie passed him a plate. This was the most polite Asher had ever been. He couldn't tell before, because she was lounging on a bench, but Winnie was tall and that surprised Asher. A bit taller than him, he noted. Winnie didn't say anything. He watched her go back into the kitchen. Despite the cold shoulder and the ever-present scowl Winnie wore, Asher couldn't help but feel a bit bummed that she was not joining them for dinner. Nevertheless, Asher dived into the meal messily and immediately. Gwen dug her fork in and started to cut when Declan cleared his throat.

"Let's pray first," he suggested. Then, "Phoebe?"

“Oh,” Asher struggled to speak with a huge hunk of roast already in his mouth. “Sorry. Yeah, go ‘head and pray.”

“Heavenly Father,” Phoebe shut her eyes and started. “Thank you for this wonderful meal, for this time together, and for the roof over our heads. You’ve blessed us immensely and we are so thankful to have crossed paths with each other in these crazy times. Your hope shines through in all of the dire circumstances, all of the struggles and pain. You’re with us here tonight, and we thank you and praise you. Amen.”

Asher peered through his half-shut eyes to see Gwen struggling, too. She tried to close her eyes at first, but halfway through Phoebe’s prayer, her eyes shot open again.

Declan started everything off, “I know the three of you haven’t met yet, but Gwen just joined us what... two days ago now? Gwen, this is Asher and Gray. Asher and Gray, this is Gwen.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gwen’s tone was curt, as if she had other business to attend to.

“You too,” Asher said.

“Where’d you come from?” Gray asked.

Everyone seemed a bit taken aback by his bluntness, except Asher, who felt the need to apologize for him.

“No, it’s okay,” Gwen laughed. “I’m a bearer for New Venice. I got hurt and Declan found me. Phoebe helped fix me up, and I’m going to stay here for a little while longer as I heal.”

New Venice was a central hub, a shell of an overruling government. They took it upon themselves to create an impartial service that rallied up supplies and was now dividing them up amongst the rest of the surrounding communities. Not everyone trusted New Venice, or could rely on their sporadic deliveries. Asher and Gray managed to fortify a city that had enough supplies for them to survive a few months on their own without any outside interference, and Declan and Phoebe decided it would be for the benefit of everyone in their community to train everyone as efficient supply gatherers and go on consistent runs for scraps. Neither party depended on New Venice for much of anything.

“It’s amazing that you two survived on your own out there,” Phoebe noted.

“I was pretty well-trained when we lived in Theoria,” Asher explained. “And I’ve been teaching Gray everything I know. In exchange, he’s been teaching me to read. Teaching me new words.”

“*He* taught *you*?” Gwen asked. “How old are you two, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m seventeen,” Asher replied. “And Gray’s eleven, miss. He’ll be twelve soon, though. Only a couple weeks. Gray went to school, I didn’t. The General said that I was built for war, trained me up, but didn’t think the same of Gray. So yeah. *He* taught *me*. Anyway... what did you all do? You’re all... well... old enough to have seen life before The Plague. What did you guys do?”

“I was a nurse,” Phoebe answered. “Those skills translated pretty well.”

“Now this is a question I haven’t heard in a while,” Gwen giggled. It was a comment that was usually reserved for sarcasm, but there was an element of sincerity in her voice. “I was a city planner. I traveled a lot. I guess not much has changed for me, either.”

“I was a teacher,” Declan responded with a proud smile. “Fourth grade. I loved stories so much that I ended up also making some children’s books in my free time... most of them were adaptations of old fairy tales.”

Gwen peered at Declan through her glass as she took a drink. She sniggered, “Fairy tales? I guess not much has changed for *you* then, either.”

He just chuckled, “I took a collection of classic fairytales and did retellings of them. I rewrote them myself, and did the illustrations too. It’s a pretty famous book, no Caldecott winner or anything, but I made bank.”

“No way. Why such an interest in fairy tales, though?”

“Parents would always criticize the stories that the Brothers Grimm told, you know? They didn’t think their kids watched anything bad on TV or did anything behind their backs. So they thought that going to school is where their kids would be tainted and they wouldn’t be alright anymore, which is this really narrow way of thinking. In controlling what they learn in school and blaming their kids’ imagination getting the best of them on the literature in their curriculum, they failed in finding the real problem: their own ignorance of what kids really do, and who their kids really are.

“Because the kids aren’t alright, but it ain’t because of what they’re reading in school. So I took these stories and made them quote-unquote ‘alright’ for the parents. They’re getting the same morals, but in a more acceptable medium and environment. So I re-told the stories from the perspective of kids in a school. You take that chaotic setting, and you can create so many stories from it that kids can relate too. Characters in a fairy tale aren’t necessarily complex, either: they’re well-defined and they don’t navigate out of that familiarity. If you’re good, you’re good, and if you’re bad, you’re bad. Replace the big bad wolf with the big bully in school who wants to steal poor Red Riding Hood’s lunch and you’ve got something that’ll strike kids as something relatable, but also give parents the peace of mind in knowing that at the story’s end, the bully won’t end up dead. Just nicer.”

“That’s actually really cool,” Gwen said. “I mean that. I think storytelling is so important. I love to hear this, because it’s so vital to retain some sense of culture and creativity. You read novels and see movies all the time of dystopian depictions where it’s just this vast nothingness. There’s no focus on culture, just violence. If that’s where we head as a society, to this sameness of no culture, then what is going to sustain our future? How will our kids remain ‘alright’ without an appreciation for the past and in creating their own memories, and telling their own stories? It’s an interesting thought. Sameness is all that is out there. There’s no appreciation for the past or storytelling.”

“Beyond these walls... the empire that The General is raising up, it’s mindless, thoughtless,” Declan said. “But life like that isn’t really life at all. That’s what this place is all about. We’re here to raise up real citizens of a new world, a world that’s welcoming and hopeful. Even if it seems like a fairy tale to some.”

“If you even dare try to expand or carry more influence,” Gwen started. “I hope you know that a war will brew. The General’s not gonna stand for anyone to get in his way. That’s all that comment insinuated, I promise.”

There was a pause, and the expression Gwen gave--one that exuded ill judgment--told Declan that she meant opposite of what she said. He responded, “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. For now, we wait for guidance.”

From God, surely, Asher thought with a twinge of sarcasm. Something burned inside of him: a feeling that made him angry at himself, but one that he knew was brewed from experience. He felt *annoyed* at this man’s faith.

“Guidance,” Gwen repeated. Asher saw it in her face: she felt that same annoyance. “Right.”

Phoebe announced, “Tonight there’s going to be a service. We have most of our community join us. Declan and I really would like for you three to join us. It will really speak to the heart of what we’re all about here.”

Gray’s response came at breakneck pace, “I’ll be there.”

Asher was surprised at his brother jumping forward so independently. He also joined, just with a lot less enthusiasm.

“I guess I don’t want to be the odd one out,” Gwen murmured.

She sounded even less enthusiastic than Asher.

*

Dinner left Asher full, and heaved not only his stomach but his eyes as well. Upon returning to their room, Gray dove into some reading while Asher crashed on his bed almost immediately. He did overhear Gray talking about how much he liked it at the airport, and speculation on what Gwen’s life was like as a bearer for New Venice, but it all droned away as quickly as it came as Asher faded into the darkness of slumber.

When Asher woke up from his power nap, he rolled over to see that Gray was already gone. Asher deduced that it must have been time for that church service thing. Asher wasn’t particularly excited, but deep down he hoped he didn’t miss it. He knew he needed to be there for Gray, and he was indeed curious as to how Declan was as a preacher and how he could compare it to what he was used to (the priest in Theoria was Father Jimenez--and he was a snooze-fest, even if Gray loved the tar out of him).

He was a bit nervous, because he didn’t want to let his brother down but also because he didn’t want to *not believe*. Thinking about religion, Asher often used it as a safety net. If there was something out there -- in the great beyond, once all of this hellish existence fades and he slips into the sweet abyss of death -- he hoped to go there. He knew his only hope of doing that was to pray every night, or every night that he remembered to. Was it, though? He wasn’t entirely sure what he believed, but hoped that the fact that he *tried* would mean something when he showed up at the

pearly gates and God checked off the criteria on the list to see if he made the cut. That's how he pictured it'd be like, anyway.

He felt something under his head, and reached under his pillow. He pulled out Gray's yellow notebook. Admittedly, Asher was a heavy sleeper. It'd take a lot more than a notebook sliding under his head to wake him up, and Gray knew this. He sat up with a hefty stretch, and noticed that it was open to a specific page.

Asher read it aloud:

jaded

adjective

The sting of broken trust and lies
pumps his veins with toxic spite.

As in: He's been hurt so much,
abandoned and thrust with responsibility far too quickly
and far too young, that life has left him jaded.

Heart contaminated,
beating to the tune of broken waves
along harsh rocks in the river.

As in: It's so much to bear and hope feels drained
It may be easier, more convenient, to just be jaded.

Gleaming soul, crystal hues,
hidden behind a sick, jagged heart.

Something stands out,
something bright and sunny.

As in: There's hope that he'll be happy.

Maybe one day, he won't be so jaded.