

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

— C.S. Lewis

IV.

Asher slipped into the church pretty late, and found his seat as the congregation of fifteen-ish were greeting one another. He was thankful that he did come in late, as he got to avoid most of the greetings and find a seat in the back next to his brother and PJ. That sort of stuff always made him antsy. He could tell by the look of discomfort on Gray’s face that he had been hounded by a few of these people for being a new face.

“I’m uh, I’m happy you made it,” Gray said. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Didn’t stop you from digging your hand under my head to drop off a gift,” Asher chided playfully. “But we’ll talk about that later...”

The church was in an old conference hall. A stage that was rather large was at one end of the room and was covered in supplies and boxes. There was virtually no room for someone to preach from, so Declan had a podium -- old, wooden, and delicate -- at the foot of the stage where he stood. As everyone settled and found their seats, random chairs assembled into a few rows of five, Declan was given the attention of the room.

“I’m really happy that you’ve all joined me tonight,” Declan began from the podium. “We have some new faces here...”

Asher was thankful he wasn’t *this* late, he thought to himself as the doors opened and Gwen entered the room. Coolly, she drifted toward the back row and stood there behind the last row of chairs. A kind man tried to show her to an empty chair, but Gwen waved her hand, insisting that she was alright -- more comfortable, even -- standing.

“...Like the beloved Gwen Gamble, from New Venice, who most of you had met,” Declan decided to start with her introduction. Numerous audience members applauded. “And this afternoon, we had two new arrivals. Brothers. Kids. It’s a miracle they survived on their own out there, but these two are strong and capable. Future leaders, surely. Asher and Gray, do you mind standing?”

PJ whooped and hollered, an attempt at making them more comfortable with it. It was a nice gesture, but it only made Gray especially more uncomfortable. Asher took his hand and stood. Gray was slow to follow, but he stood too after a few seconds’ deliberation. Hands clapped, they heard some people give audible expressions of awe and amazement. Declan gestured with his hand that it was alright for the boys to sit, so they sat.

“So many times, things... aren’t quite what they seem,” Declan began. “The other day, PJ came up to me. He said, ‘Dec... you’ve gotta check this out.’ He showed me a paper cup and told me he was going to show me magic. Now, I’ve seen a lot in my life, but nothing magical. Nothing that would blow my socks off at least. PJ had this cup in the grasp of both hands. Then, he removed his fingers and the cup seemed to be floating. For a moment, he got me. He had this beaming grin

on his face. Then he showed me that he stuck one of his thumbs into the side of this paper cup... It was an illusion. We pride ourselves in figuring these things out. How did he do it?! How could I have been fooled? Questions like that kept swirling through my head until PJ told me the truth... in a manner of seconds. I had to figure it out. An illusion is defined as a perception or belief that is simply not true to reality. It's an active deception. It appears to be real, but it isn't.

"Take for example, the illusion that I don't need to eat healthy to stay healthy. Or in a relationship: 'I thought this person was like this, but she wasn't.' In a moment, everything can come crashing down once the mystery of the illusion is ripped away. Then there's the illusion of control. Who here can admit to being a control freak? Anybody?"

The room was silent. Gwen's hand shot up. Declan laughed.

"The only one willing to admit to it is a newcomer," he continued. "I love that. Thank you for your honesty, Gwen. I'll admit it for myself. I need things to go my way. It's so easy for me to just dismiss my control freak tendencies. I say things like 'Oh no, that's just my personality. I'm just very *particular*.' Next time words like those come out of my mouth, I need someone to shoot it to me straight... 'No, Declan, you're a control freak!' We like to control. One of the deepest needs we have as humans is to control.

"We hate having a feeling of powerlessness. We're trying to manage outcomes, manipulate people... When I've been wounded, I say it's never going to happen again. I'm going to control outcomes, guard myself, throw up walls, to ensure that the pain does not happen again. The reality is: No matter how hard we try to control outcomes, control is ultimately an illusion... the more I try to control, the more I realize I don't have control and it's a vicious cycle that leads us down really bad paths. In the end, we get other people hurt and then the cycle starts out... because hurting people hurt people.

"The place of freedom is truly the ironic part... The place of freedom is not putting ourselves in control, it's letting go. Freedom comes by breaking the illusion of control -- not from taking control but giving it up, to the one who controls it all. It's really a great divine paradox: 'To find my life, I need to lose it. To gain all, I need to let go of everything and trust in God.' How do we pull back the curtain and break that illusion of control? To step into the freedom and the life that God has for us by recognizing how much in life that we really do control... nothing."

Gwen found it easy during Declan's preaching to sneak out the same way she came in. Everyone in the room was immensely engrossed in his display that they didn't even notice her leave. The message rubbed her the wrong way. She was someone who prided herself in her element to control situations and because of that, she convinced herself, she had made it this far.

Born into a wealthy family as the daughter of an esteemed American ambassador, Gwen Gamble traveled plenty in her youth. Her father abandoned the family when she was young, so her mother was forced to bear the responsibility of raising a child and doing her job. This meant that she was oftentimes left in the care of an adult who was not her parent - whether it'd be in the form of the nice secretary at momma's office, the maid, or a traveling au pair. Her relationship with her mother was a very distant one; but she learned a lot by showing interest in what her mother did, and

decided to follow in her footsteps. She was born in New Jersey, where home really was, but under her mother's care for the first eighteen years of her life, she lived in various countries: Greece, Japan, France, Bolivia, Romania, and Japan.

She took the first opportunity she could to move out on her own, graduating high school early and attending her freshman year of college shortly after that. Unsure of what path to take with her life, she got her first degree in business. Unsatisfied, and with a drive to help other people, she returned to school and graduated with a degree in anthropology. Her desire to travel along with her warped image of stability and normalcy caused her to grow bored and constantly move around, from school to school. She was never content anywhere. When she finally graduated, having gained over three hundred credit hours between her two degrees, she traveled the world once more; a wandering anthropologist with an empty mission and empty promises to change the world.

Her perceived randomness in events of the world, however, delighted her. When things started to fall apart, she was not one to panic. It challenged her. This was precisely the change she was so addicted to, but on another level. She had heard word of a sickness spreading, of course, who hadn't? But she never expected it to destroy everything and everyone around her. Governments collapsed within themselves. Corruption from within, the usual.

She had a very seedy outlook on American politics and this whole Plague ordeal proved her own inner thoughts: that the government was useless and only in it for themselves. It wasn't until everything collapsed and "survival of the fittest" kicked in that *actual* good leaders rose up. Good leadership didn't always mean the most humane leadership, though. They kept their people safe, but things quickly became territorial. Settlements formed within months of collapse, and everyone only looked out for their own. Empathy seemed to be drained. She dreamed of unity, of peace. And of doing it right this time. The Plague was an opportunity for her--an opportunity to seize life by the horns and ride her into the sunset. She had control now.

That's where New Venice came in.

Her home, her vision, her creation.

Part of New Venice's responsibility, as a beacon of light and a central hub for neighboring communities, was to be of support. Having accumulated a lot of supplies through sheer luck and under the guidance of ambitious leaders, Gwen felt that New Venice had the responsibility to share that accumulated wealth with their neighbors.

Losing her spot on the council meant that she had the time, the freedom, to be a part of that team. Calling themselves 'bearers', she and her team carried supplies and made deliveries to other communities. She had to convince herself that this was a choice *she* made, and that she was in control of her destiny. Her vision on the council fulfilled, she was able to move on to the next thing and be instrumental in the crafting of new things.

However, being a bearer wasn't all it cracked up to be. Gwen witnessed so many horrible things and irredeemable people. Dragging supplies to a group of people who shackle women down and treat them like property, or to people who only treated them as enemies--and rightfully so,

because most people now *are the enemy*--wasn't a very rewarding or satisfactory journey. Not for her, not for anybody.

That was what drew her to Declan and his people in the first place. The idea that she was away from New Venice gave her an element of control again, the possibility of more people who'd listen to what she had to say. Then that damned sermon kept rolling through her mind. Just as she was beginning to think about control being back in her grasp, Declan goes up there and preaches about how control is an illusion. It hit her hard, and she leaned against the wall. She started to actually feel nauseous the more reflective she got.

"It sucks, doesn't it?" a voice asked from elsewhere.

Gwen turned. That blonde girl: the tall, annoying and well-tanned one stood in the foyer. She helped begrudgingly serve dinner alongside Declan the night before. Gwen tried for a few seconds to remember her name--she vowed that she wouldn't respond until she did.

"What's that?" she replied automatically, as *Winnie--that's it!*, clicked into her brain.

"Seeing all those people feel something, while knowing deep down that you can't, because you've never really believed in anything," Winnie responded. "It *sucks*."

"I did believe in something. It just wasn't that."

"What did you believe in?"

"I believed that I could save the world. Naive of me, sure. But... I thought I was doing a damned good job for a while."

"Maybe you still can."

"Maybe *you* can, too. Nothing's holding you back..."

"Nothing but me," Winnie finished Gwen's sentence for her with a signature eye-roll.

"Yeah, I've heard that one before."

"So you choose to stand out here and wallow, because you can't believe in something?"

"Most of the time, yeah, but I actually think I'm going in today."

"Well, good luck. I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Me too," Winnie said, gripping the door to the conference room and going to pull it. She hesitated, then asked soberly, "You don't remember me, do you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"It's okay if you don't. I looked up to you a lot as a kid."

"I don't, I'm so sorry. You lived in New Venice, or you've heard of me?"

"Like I said, it's okay," Winnie assured her. Not quite ready to answer the question Gwen posed, Winnie opened up the door to head into the conference room. "You've met a lot of people, surely. Have a good night."

That girl, Winnie, only previous rubbed Gwen in a way she could only describe as being similar to sunscreen: oozing pure irritation, doing less than she claimed she was capable of (Gwen always peeled even when she applied the highest 'SPF' block), and having the painful quality of sticking around no matter what, despite numerous attempts to rub it away. So it was interesting to Gwen that Winnie was having such a profound impression on her now.

Maybe you still can. Something about those words struck a chord with her, though, in a way that no one else had managed in awhile. Winnie's words served as a reminder that Gwen used to have transformative contributions to this world, and that her work may not be done. As she lowered her arm, she pulled down her long sleeve. She stared at a scar on her arm. A wound that changed her, that would now define her. A wound that took the place of so many other wounds she's carried throughout her life, a wound that now gave her life a new definition and meaning.

That sense of newness excited her, and amplified her sense of purpose.

But it terrified her, too.

-

Gwen and her partner, Wick, had left New Venice with a specific mission in mind: to touch base with Theoria. She met with The General years before, and returned home to New Venice with a promise of peace. Peace they did not have. The General's reign of terror on this side of the Red Zone was evident. As a last-ditch effort to eliminate the Plague by the US government, a falling regime at the time, bombs were dropped and nuclear radiation spread throughout the West Coast, creating the Red Zone. Rumored strongly enough to be impassable, people never dreamed of visiting the California coastline again.

The Red Zone was least of their worries. It had been ten years since the bombs fell and The General made his move from Mexico to the US. New Venice knew very little about this guy: how he came to power, how he moved into the area. All they knew was that their treaty and any effort to collaborate with The General was at an impasse, because his tendencies were growing more violent... and rumors flew (as they do when people used to having information at the tip of their fingers for so long are suddenly forced to forgo that privilege, in exchange for no information at all) of The General developing a weapon. A weapon beyond their comprehension, a weapon threatening the very existence of civilization outside of his grip.

New Venice needed to do something about that. Even though she'd been ostracized from the council, kicked off her seat despite envisaging the glowing metropolis in the first place, Gwen found a new role as a bearer between communities and she was enjoying this new purpose. She was able to see the best--and the worst--in the people around her. All she could hear were smaller communities fearing they'd be next on The General's list. A place she'd visit one week would be wiped out the next. The council was terrified to even cross paths with The General. He was a myth, a legend, a ghost, a boogeyman.

Gwen had met him, spoke with him, and she knew he was none of the above. That's probably why they chose her for this mission: because she was not afraid of him, not like everyone else. And that's why they chose Wick. Because he wasn't afraid of anything. Wick was not an easy guy to talk to. He had a smirk pasted on his face that never seemed to wipe away.

The majority of their journey, like most others, was done via Humvee. The vehicle, spray painted in black and blue camouflage, made easy navigating through the thick and nauseating terrain

but it was against protocol to do so once they left the road and entered former civilian territory. It didn't make sense. The plagued were not particularly effective against the Humvee when it roared through dirt and cement roads, barreling through cars and corpses. But in the roads of smaller downtown areas, now sprawled in all directions by the plagued and overgrown by viney herbage like bows and ribbons on a birthday gift, the Humvee was quick to be cornered and overwhelmed. They left it outside the city limits, placed charges outside of it as a precaution technique, and set off on foot through the little downtown area.

"Two of us seemed like a smart move a couple days ago, but now that we're nearing the threshold of Hell, I'm starting to wonder if they sent us on a suicide mission," Wick muttered.

"They did," Gwen smirked. "You didn't get the memo?"

"Wouldn't shock me. Don't laugh."

As they passed through a long-abandoned downtown area of a small town, Gwen noticed a few wandering plagued. This was her moment to get away from Wick. She shushed him, and nodded--drawing his attention to them, too. Their skin pale and sickly, eyes yellowed and flesh hanging from their lips, it was unmistakable. She grabbed for the gun latched to her hip, and gripped it tightly. In her other hand, she drew her trusty knife. This thing had gotten her through plenty of sticky situations. It was always best to use silent weapons. It seemed as if the plagued were blind based on her observations of their previous behavior, but she knew that these things followed noises quite well. So a gunshot would draw more to her presence, and cause an even bigger mess.

Stealthily, she snuck up behind the first one and jammed her knife into the back of its skull. She yanked the knife out and it dropped like bricks. The other two in the vicinity heard the drop of their comrade, but didn't seem to care either way. Their faces turned in her direction, but they didn't run. They seemed to try picking up a scent. It was a good thing that she covered herself in mud beforehand. That seemed to be a good way of hiding the natural aroma of tasty human flesh. She crept around the creatures, moving slowly. They suddenly started to follow. Like unintelligent puppies, they circled the area and followed in her direction. They could hear her footsteps, and so they followed.

Gwen leapt forward, swinging her knife at the next one, right into the bridge of its nose. The third plagued converged on her, and she kicked it in the chest. It stumbled back, into the other one. They both gave an annoyed grumble... a semblance of personality only seen by these things in the first few minutes of their infection. This made her think the infection in these ones were fresh. It was difficult to determine, usually, because the plagued transformed within minutes of receiving a fresh bite.

Wick came around from behind and stabbed the first one through the side of the head. Wick's appearance distracted the other, allowing her the opportunity to surprise it with a knife to its face. With both of the plagued taken out, she knelt down, ripped off a piece of one's shirt, and used it to wipe her blade clean.

"Look at this!" Wick sneered. He sounded disgusted. "You seein' this?!"

Gwen stood and approached Wick. He was kneeling over one of the bodies. There was some sort of collar, with a crudely-written tag stamped onto it. He had his hands all over the collar, trying to read it more carefully.

“It looks like everyone had a right to be up in arms, huh?” Wick looked up at her grimly.

“That means there’s probably more,” she was wary. Her eyes scanned the area.

“Then, maybe he’s closer than we think?”

“I think we need to move... Take a quick shortcut around this dinky little town, and find another route to Theoria.”

They turned toward where they came in, toward the rinky-dink barricade Wick had made fun of on their way through. What happened next, happened so fast. Gwen heard Wick scream, and she twirled around, ready to pounce. But it already bit his neck. There were three more behind it. Wick’s screams erupted louder and louder as the others pounced him, and his knees buckled. She watched a few more emerge from nearby alleys and buildings. They heard the screams, they smelled the meat. It was too late to worry about stealth, and tact.

She whipped out her pistol, aimed directly for Wick’s head, and pulled the trigger. Wick’s head snapped back, and blood splattered all over the plagued behind him. There was no hesitation. She knew that if they swapped places, she’d have wanted him to do the same. As the plagued converged on Wick, ripping into his corpse, she took the opportunity to flee.

A few of the ones who hadn’t already claimed Wick as their snack spotted her, and the hunt was on. Not only was she now being tailed by a few vicarious plagued, she heard shouting too. Human shouts. Voices trailing behind her.

She whipped around, fired two more shots -- one went through one of the plagued and embedded itself in another. Two decaying birds, one bullet-shaped stone. The other shot simply took down one of them through the head.

From beyond the now-fallen plagued, Gwen noticed three men in heavy body armor. The armor was identical on each. It was brick red in color, stained with black and blue marks, and topped with a matching gas mask. These were The Jugulators, The General’s personal army. Most of them were raised from sickeningly young ages to become these cold, calculated killing machines. Each of the Jugulators were armed with a long rod, an unfamiliar weapon of sorts. It was edged at the end with a pair of electrodes, like a cattle prod would, but underneath that was a fuel tube fitted with a nozzle at the end that looked reminiscent of a bottle cap on an old bottle of cola. She deduced that this bottom piece was a flamethrower.

She saw one of the men prod a plagued with the electrode end, zapping it. It flailed its arms and threw its body forward. Another pair of men whipped around a corner and were guiding a slew of the plagued.

They were controlling them, leading them.

The rumors were correct. The weapon The General was developing was as dangerous and horrific as the details that spread across the various colonies. It wasn’t a weapon that was being *prepared*, though. It looked ready to her, as she came face to face with it.

Realizing how outnumbered she really was, she bolted. She heard one of the plagued crash into the wall behind her, unable to make the turn of the corner as gracefully as she did. Its comrade, however, managed to grab her and pull her back. She was wrenched back with such force, with such pain, that she was barely noticing the grip it had on her with its jaws. She whipped around, and smashed its head in with the butt of her gun.

Wailing a horrific scream, intaking the fact that it bit her and that the infection was going to spread through her very soon, Gwen knew she didn't want to give in. Even though the inevitable was coming, she needed to avoid The Jugulators. She couldn't give them the satisfaction of having her. She eyed a ladder hanging from a roof. She leapt, her hands barely catching the end. She scrambled up, as more plagued turned the corner, and out of sight.

From her vantage point on the roof, she spotted a few more of the Jugulators and a hell of a lot more of their plagued friends. How were they not being attacked? How could this be such a coordinated effort? All of these questions swirled in her head, but the most prevalent of the questions she had came to the forefront as she examined her bite wound. The plagued that got her definitely broke skin. Her wound soaked her arm in a mix of her own red kind of blood, and the black gooeey variety from the mouth of the plagued that bit her.

She always told herself that it came to this, she'd do it with no hesitation. She'd take herself out. She didn't want to become one of them. She fumbled with the gun she had, holding it directly against her temple. She felt her finger tremble against the metallic cold of the trigger, but she didn't feel it push hard enough against it to fire the kill shot into her own brain.

"I can't do it," she remembered muttering aloud.

She never felt more shame before, nor such a spike in her own temperature. Everything felt hot, and the world began to spin around her. She laid down flat on the concrete roof, and stared up at the sky. Nothing, yet everything, seemed to matter, all at once. She also remembered seeing the clouds above her in the blue sky, and realizing how beautiful that day was, as she slipped into unconsciousness.

She never thought she'd wake up, or at least remember it. But she did.

And when Gwen Gamble woke up, confusion overwhelmed her. She instantly checked out her bite. It was swollen, and the pain was pulsing. She was shocked that she hadn't yet turned. The longest she ever knew it took for someone was a few hours. She couldn't tell how long she'd been out, but she noticed the sun was down. It had at least been a couple hours. She felt that she had very little time left.

She stood, seeing that the town was cleared out. No sign of the plagued, or the Jugulators. It was just her and the darkness.

-

It had been a few weeks since she got bit, and Gwen had felt more alive than ever. Her sleep schedule had been reduced to only a couple hours a night, but her energy levels had not felt

depleted: if anything, they'd doubled. Her physical strength felt improved. She'd always been fit, and one to devote her time to workout regimens and programs, but this burst of energy and durability had been incredible.

Her diet hadn't shifted to eating human flesh. She hadn't turned in any way, shape or form, at all. In fact, she felt as if she'd *evolved*. Boy, was she lucky that she was a coward and couldn't pull the trigger. If she went through with it, she'd have never found out that she was this special.

She couldn't tell many people. Only two human beings in the entire universe knew about this, and that's why tensions had been high between them lately: Declan and Phoebe. They hadn't truly decided what to do about everything, and neither had she. Declan, of course, being who he is, was quick to offer Gwen quarters at the airport. She needed this time at the airport, with Declan and his people, to lay low and mull over her future after failing her mission and losing Wick. It was the only option that made sense to her.

Gwen remained in the hallway outside of the conference room, and watched as the people inside began to exit. Service must have ended, and she waited patiently for Declan to either emerge, or be alone in the church so they could talk real business. What the game plan was, what course of action they should take from here. She was never one to carry on with life without plans, and all of this waiting around and playing house--while comfortable and made sense--made her antsy to plan the next move.

It wasn't soon after she began to play scenarios in her head and plot out hypothetical conversations that a man only a few feet from her collapsed on the ground beside her. A woman next to him shrieked. She noticed one of the new kids--Gray--and the goofy kid PJ, were nearby. The older brother, Asher, was not with them, something that Gwen found curious even in the heat of this moment. PJ ushered Gray out of the way, whose face was horrified as he couldn't keep his eyes off the fainted man even as they moved further and further away and out of sight. Gwen plowed over to the fallen man instinctively, and knelt down. She looked up at the screaming woman.

"Do you know him?" Gwen shouted. "Does he have any health issues I should be aware of?"

"Yes!" the woman cried. "He--he has a heart condition, I--"

Gwen drowned out the woman's rambling after that. She listened for a heartbeat, felt for a pulse, and realized the man wasn't breathing. She pressed her lips against his and breathed into him, then thrust her palms on his chest. It all happened so quickly after that.

The man started to seize. His head snapped back and he started to foam at the mouth, and blood spilled from his eyelids. Gwen leapt back. She knew what was happening.

"HE'S TURNING!" she cried. She whipped out a knife, and his wife leapt in front of her.

"No, please!" the woman shrieked, but Gwen was already diving down to stab him, and her knife connected with the woman's shoulder instead. She fell with a pained roar, and landed on top of her husband.

Within a moment, he tore into her neck, and chaos erupted.