

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

— Helen Keller

V.

Life in New Venice was amazing, glamorous, and indubitably perfect.

At least for half of Winnie Knapchuck’s life, anyway. The half she spent partying and crafting an identity for herself. The other half, unfortunately, was reality. Anson would always tell her she wasn’t dealing with her problems very well, that she was trying to mask her pain. He said it like masking her pain was a *bad* thing. She’d let it wear a cape and fight crime, too, she didn’t give a damn.

She used to spend her nights sneaking out of her bedroom window and going to nightclubs with her girls. A pretty blonde with tons of attitude and brattiness to spare, Winnie was a self-proclaimed cardboard-cutout party girl at first glance. She would get into awkward situations on a regular basis, grinding on the nearest boy with no knowledge of who he was or how he operated, then having to deal with the misadventures that followed throughout the night. Everyone, she discovered, enjoyed these tales of scrappy escapades, and all of this twirling on the dance floor and drinking and retelling helped give her something to define her as someone who was sassy, carefree, and didn’t mind the mishaps. In fact, she laughed them off.

In actual fact, though, she wasn’t quite sure if she was really any of those things. She was some of the time. It wasn’t a complete ruse, no, because she remembered spending most Sunday nights at a shoddy warehouse-based dance club called Chatter’s Discotheque. Experienced (they called themselves professional) club kids worked out routines. Winnie was attractive enough, and convincing enough, to be like one of the college-aged kids, so they had no problem teaching her. It was all a huge new thing for her. A routine? Why on earth would anyone need a clubbing routine? She learned how important these routines really were, for restraint gave her an element of control.

Most of the men she met, she danced with, were harmless. The lack of weirdos surprised her, she expected more. But the men are just a lacquer, a façade, something to seal the surface, something to coat the corners. It’s all she has ever needed and wanted, really, a polish and a shine.

She remembered one guy, a ballet dancer named Dante, wore a skintight T-shirt that said in rainbow text, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but I’m gay’. She remembered laughing in the moonlight with him, telling him how very obvious it was and that the shirt was unnecessary. She applauded his bravery in her drunken stupor, leaning on his shoulder and laughing in his ear. That seemed to be her go-to flirtatious move while under the influence, she didn’t even care at that moment that Dante was obviously not interested in her and that the very topic at hand was of how they were both gawking at the same attractive guy.

This particular hottie’s beefy arm muscles were protruding through his shirt as if it were ready to pop at the seams. They took turns dancing with this guy, and he responded to both Winnie

and Dante's dancing. Definitely a guy who was comfortable with going both ways, and that did not change her perspective on him in the slightest. In fact, she respected him more for it.

She won the competition, much to Dante's fury. The attractive guy was the only man she made out with at Chatter's Discotheque, and he was called Anson. Fifteen at the time, she found herself thrilled as the twenty-year-old fondled her on the neck, and then whispered in her ear that he could prove kissing to be something electric and fun, even with no chemistry between the pair. She remembered that she always had something to wear, not all of it particularly good. But she was always proud when the other hammered girls at the club complimented her for her clothes, because she secretly frequented the local flea market for those things.

A thick-accented merchant named Vera, who hailed from some European country like Austria or Russia or whatever, called Winnie her favorite customer. Vera used to save her things, anything with sequins, any tarty shoes, anything with animal print. Initially, Winnie struggled because her flowing blonde hair combined with her baby-faced look made her seem so young to the men she met at the club. But she told all of the men she danced with that she was eighteen, even when she really wasn't! Eighteen... That was such a big deal for her, and she emphasized it so, because surely being eighteen was the qualification for being an adult. It felt like it back then, at least. Eighteen felt so old and grown-up at fifteen.

"The key to these things," Vera used to say in that intonation that Winnie so missed. "Is that, to be really stylish, you need to create a fantastic silhouette with your body." She took Vera's words to heart and was able to fashion together a vibe in which she carried herself like a woman and not a girl anymore. She knew she looked better from a distance -- bright, vibrant and unlined.

The day sixteen-year-old Winnie (so much more grown-up, she'd assure you, than her fifteen-year-old counterpart!) packed up her stuff and said she was leaving, going off on her own, was the day she was tired of living two lives. But her father tried to stop her. His attempts at discipline led to him pulling out a belt and whupping her. It started when she was young, and it started as an innocent slap on the butt. It soon developed into something worse.

Her legs and back were covered in welts at one point, and she was often worried that someone at the club would notice and not want to dance with her anymore. She learned the best techniques to cover the bruises with her makeup. She didn't ask for help, no, she didn't want to expose him. She feared him so deeply.

The world outside was cold and terrifying but none of that mattered in the face of her father. He scared her more than anything else -- more than the random older guys she used to dance with at Chatter's, and even more than the plagued. Maybe not seeing the plagued in so long meant that her view was contorted, and that it was a silly thing to feel, but they almost felt like a myth used to keep her at bay, keep her under his control. She sometimes wondered if maybe they weren't even real anymore.

She got the last swing, with the studded belt he used on her buttocks, her legs, her thigh, an innumerable amount of times. How many strokes she got depended on how badly she'd screwed up.

James hated her cooking, but insisted that as a hard-working construction employee working long days and nights to build a new and shiny metropolis, he shouldn't have to cook.

He was never satisfied, and if dinner was ruined, oh God, the dinner -- she'd get two lashes. If it was worse than usual, he'd pack in four. If she were to backtalk -- and near the end of it, she got pretty good at that -- he'd make it three on the breasts. The pain was stinging, it lasted quite a while, but the part that hurt the most was the humiliation. The way he made her feel, to remind her how little and useless she was.

"You think you'll survive out there on your own?" she recalled him hissing at her, whipping her in the arm with the belt. In that moment, she dropped the glittery pink backpack she stuffed with all of her necessary belongings and they spilled to the floor. She remembered the defeated whimper she gave -- oh, how she regretted that. He kicked the bag and its contents scattered even more. She started to repack them, and he approached closer and closer. "If it weren't for me, you'd be dead by now."

He wasn't wrong. He told stories of the things he had to go through to protect her, to keep her where she was now. Winnie had lived a privileged life as the daughter of one of New Venice's elite, the daughter of a founding council member. She only knew stories of the plagued from what she learned in school, or from stories from 'bearers' who came to and fro. She never left the city, and memories of life before the Plague--memories of her mother--felt adrift at sea. Too far gone for her to grasp.

James kept blaring insults at her, and shoving her into the corner. He was so intent at talking her down that he didn't realize he set his belt aside. She managed to maneuver toward the bed where he left it, and he kept coming at her, spewing insults. "Daddy," she kept whimpering.

Being manipulative is not something Winnie would normally admit to being, but she knew she was damned good at it and took advantage of it whenever necessary. She knew, too, that she learned it from him, just like she learned everything else. "Daddy, I'm sorry."

Her lips quivered as her hand grabbed the belt. She saw the twisted, victorious smile on his face. He chuckled to himself. That's what pissed her off the most. Seeing him smile and laugh as if he won a game. But games were her thing, and she knew this was her opening. She was going to win this time. Her swing of the belt gave an audible neigh as it whipped forward through the air in a beautiful, graceful arc, connecting with James's left cheek. His head flung backward with a snap and a howl, and his hands instinctively reached for his face.

"You broke my face," he mustered as his large bald head looked up at her. Blood poured between each of his fingers and soon enough, coated his entire hand as if he stuck it in a can of scarlet paint. "You broke my damn--"

Winnie's arm whipped again, the whickering belt this time popped his knee. The big man fell down with a thud and a shriek that didn't quite match his imposing figure. She swung again, and again, screaming maniacally with each lash. She didn't even see where she hit him or pay attention to the amount of blood that broke skin by the end of it, her eyes stung with hot and angry tears that blinded her field of view. So pumped with adrenaline, she took the belt, picked up her bag, and

stomped past the crumpled, groaning man (who was uttering what she thought and expected to be curse words but she couldn't really be sure) without another word.

At least she had the consciousness of knowing that the last thing she ever said to her wicked, abusive, but beloved Daddy was "I'm sorry." Even if it wasn't sincere, even though she knew in her deepest parts that it was an apology crafted out of pure manipulation, any feeling of guilt that would wash over her could be fumigated by remembering that she said those words to him.

She hoped so, at least.

After all, despite how awful he was, he did love her. He was right, too. He kept her safe.

He didn't have to protect her all this time...

...But he didn't have to hit her, break her, either.

The night carried on at such a quick pace.

Anson was ready to go by the time Winnie arrived. He held a large spear (his weapon of choice) in one hand and his large bag slung over his shoulder with the other hand gripping it. She met Anson at his place in the dead of night, the belt still in her shaking hands. Her father's blood splattered onto her yellow blouse. He noticed these details, but he didn't bring it up. She didn't recall any dialogue between them. Not for the entirety of their 'escape': which was months in planning. Anson was a 'bearer' in training and found himself hearing all about local communities. One of which was located in a casino, and it felt perfectly fit for the couple. He knew exactly where to go, and knew it would only take days to get there. The people there were not hostile. It all seemed perfect.

New Venice was not a prison. No one asked if you were leaving. This was as close to life as normal as they'd get, but Anson knew that she could not bear to stay with her father anymore, and he knew that as long as they lived in New Venice, he'd be a pest to get in their way. Soaring Eagle Casino, and the people there, was the next best thing. He was certain of it, and she was grateful that he was willing to uproot his life for her. She wished there was another way, but any effort of hers to escape his grasp and still stay in New Venice was only going to end poorly for all of them.

It only took an hour for Winnie to see her first plagued in years. They moved in a pack, and their skin was as yellow and terrifying as she remembered. The humanity that was so obvious in their build, their features, made them more intriguing than terrifying. Maybe what she initially mistook for naivety was actually the truth: her father was scarier than these things. They lumbered around moronically, and only at the sound of Anson's shoe stepping on a tree branch and snapping it, did they turn their attention and snarl.

She was able to see that the plagued that was particularly closest to them had only one eye. The other was gouged out and tendrils hung loose from the socket, the cheek below stained with black blood. She couldn't tell if this one was a man or a woman before it turned, but the one behind her was clearly a man at one point. He clearly wasn't as grotesque as his companion, though, and not nearly as nimble either.

The ungendered compatriot leapt like a hungry lion, and Anson was quick about swinging his spear and aiming right for the heart. It slumped down the spear, dead again, and Anson kicked it off. It made this awful splurch of a sound as its body slid down and off, leaving entrails and gore all over the weapon in its wake. She saw the other one trip off its feet and then it stood again, shaking its head in dissatisfaction, an almost nonchalant reaction to its comrade's demise.

Anson swung the spear in a quick motion, lopping its head right off.

The forest was quiet again.

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Winnie had come late into the church service to make appearances for PJ. She walked in a bit too late, though, as everything was starting to wrap up. There was some sort of altar call where Declan asked people to come forward and stand there and 'respond' to his call to let go of control and give it all to God, blah blah blah. She just wasn't buying any of it, but she knew that PJ was. She was sure that he needed that assurance, and that she probably did too, to have some semblance of hope that there was some greater purpose out there, but it didn't feel *authentic*. She got pulled aside by Phoebe who asked her to take on kitchen clean-up duty from the night's welcome dinner for those new kids.

She didn't particularly enjoy kitchen duty, but she'd been given an ultimatum recently to contribute more and do more, or else she'd be out on the streets on her own and that was not something she wanted to risk. And that was when that new kid, Asher, chimed in saying he'd like to join and help her. PJ stayed behind with Asher's brother, Gray, saying they were going to hang out or whatever.

Winnie and the new guy went to the kitchen to clean up the mess from dinner. It was only the two of them, and awkwardness settled in almost immediately. She didn't want to be the one to start conversation, and neither did he apparently.

"You like cooking?" was the best Asher could muster.

"Not really," she replied. "But I like staying alive, so I do it."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About a year. And you? How long have you been here?"

Asher looked at her in confusion, and saw the smile crossing her face. She was messing with him. He started to chuckle back. There was something mesmerizing about her face; her capriciousness reminded him of rolling dice or drawing cards.

"You're really bad at this," she then said pointedly. Her laugh was gentle; a soft, pure sound like the clink of fine crystal. "Are you trying to flirt?"

"Am I trying to do *what*?" he asked. She could tell he was serious. He had no idea what the word 'flirt' meant. It was almost cute.

"Flirt," Winnie repeated, as if it'd help. "It means like... you're playing around with someone. Trying to talk to them, get their attention, because you find the person attractive. That's what you're doing, right?"

“I just wanted to talk to you.”

His reaction was naïve, but serious. She started to almost feel bad about throwing him under the bus like that, but it was very curious to her to have a boy her age “just wanting to talk” to her. She’d always been under the impression that boys all wanted the same thing, some sort of favor from her that she apparently was very good at returning.

“Well, you’re not very good at that either,” she said. “I know it’s weird though, because like -- there’s not much to talk about. Before the Plague, if you’ve seen movies or anything like that, people always had stuff to ask or say. What did you do this weekend? How was your vacation? And here we are: struggling with words to say.”

“It is pretty weird,” he replied. “And most of the time if we do talk with new people, there’s guns in each other’s faces. That’s how Declan and I met, did he tell you?”

“No, but that’s funny. I’d be freaking out, Declan’s kind of a beast. I know he doesn’t look it, but...”

“Yeah I would be lying if I said I wasn’t crapping myself.”

“Wow, now look at us,” she laughed. “We’re talking.”

There was a clattering outside. They suddenly heard screaming.

“Stay here, I’ll go see what’s going on out there,” Asher said. He skimmed around the counter for any sort of weapon, and went for the frying pan. Winnie thought this was a little funny, considering the knives were only a counter away, but she barely had time to register this as he scurried out the door and into the face of danger. “Grab something. Stay safe.”

“We must have taken different Survival 101 classes, moron,” she yelled after him. “I’ve always been told you’re supposed to run in the *opposite direction* of danger!”

He was already gone. And there she stood, looking around at a kitchen sprawling with potential dangerous weaponry. She made for a nearby knife, thinking to herself all the different ways she could swing it and make contact in a potential plagued encounter. She’d never stabbed anything before. She’d shot them with guns, used long-distance melee weapons, but never something so personal and so close. Scenarios began to run through her head on what could be happening out there and how she could stay alive in the face of potential oncoming insanity.

She heard the noise of someone falling down stairs. Reaching the door, she propped it open, holding the knife close.

“Did someone fall down the stairs!?” she cried incredulously, fighting laughter. “Was that you, Asher? I expected more from the winner of The Hunger Games.”

Winnie wasn’t sure if he’d get the reference, but it was a movie she saw. She heard it was a book, too, but who has the patience or time to read? Yuck.

She saw someone rising up in the lighting.

“You okay? That sounded like it hurt.”

The figure suddenly shook their head, and a sticky red substance slammed against the window of the door that Winnie was using as a shield. Realizing that this man is one of the plagued

and had recently shaken fresh meat from his mouth, she rushed back inside with a scream and slammed her body against the silver metal door of the kitchen.

The door shut with a click and she tumbled into the kitchen clumsily, falling flat onto her chest. She flipped over to see the plagued man's shadow filter through the light seeping through the tiny window of the door. She was able to catch, and recognize, his face. This guy's name was Fabio, and he was always really nice to her. He had a thick Italian accent and behind his back, she used to make fun of him. She started to feel sorry for that now.

Knowing deep down that she wouldn't be able to use the knife to her advantage, knowing she couldn't dig the metal into flesh and rip it in and out again to save herself, Winnie started to look for a place to hide. It was her only option.

She scampered on all fours toward the aisles of counters. She wanted to find some sort of light, so she could see if there's anything lurking about, but she knew that doing so would only attract attention to her.

She crawled over to one of the counters and slides open a tiny metal door leading to the inside of the cabinet. She peeked inside -- the cabinet door ran down the entire counter from one side of the kitchen to the other, where a pair of doors leading to another entrance of the hallway are. There were only a few pots and pans and plenty of other sliding doors, making for an easy escape on the other side if need be.

It'll do.

She climbed inside the cabinet.

She heard the slamming of Fabio's body against the door as she made her way inside the cabinet. The door flung open and Fabio lurched with a howl, like an animal on the prowl, ready to find its prey. Timing herself perfectly with Fabio's inhuman roar, Winnie shut the door of the cabinet behind her. Light was barely finding its way in.

The familiarly horrifying snarling and slathering of a plagued could be heard outside the cabinet as she waited inside. She peeked through a slit in the door, and she saw Fabio wandering about, his face pale and nearly unrecognizable in its distorted, horrific position. She shut her mouth--holding her breath. Her hand covered her mouth next, an attempt to hold in a scream that she was waiting to let loose.

The terror overcoming her, her shaking hand made it difficult to see. The trembling shook her entire face. She was about to burst at the seams.

Fabio scanned the room. He was smelling her. He knew she was there, despite not really being alive anymore.

He lumbered... it was like he was *hunting*.

And he was hunting Winnie.

"Nonononono," she whispered, barely audible, to herself. She watched as Fabio fumbled through the kitchen.

Suddenly, he stopped. He was a few feet away from the cabinet door at this point. Winnie peeked through the only opening in between the doors, waiting...

And then Fabio's head snapped down, his attention gripped by her presence. Her scent.

He stood still for a moment. Their eyes remained on each other. Her trembling stopped. It was like the fear took over and she remained in place, completely frozen.

Taking position like a predator, Fabio suddenly leapt at the door. Slobbering and sending slime inside through the slit, he tried desperately to bang his body against the door and open it. Winnie pulled herself back. She started to climb through the pots and pans -- pushing herself through the cabinet underneath the expansive shelf. She was trying to reach the other side of the room through this 'tunnel' of kitchen utensils, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to.

Fabio's hands flailed uselessly at the door... he was trying to slide it open. Simply, he gave a powerful lurch and smashed his entire body through the wooden door. Surprised by the noise, surprised by the notion that Fabio was *in the cabinet with her now*, Winnie shrieked. She kept the knife in her hand but was entirely sure she'd slice herself open if she held onto it for much longer. So she chucked it back, but missed him completely. She continued to clamber through... shoving pots and pans aside, tossing some behind her, to make Fabio's path a little more treacherous than the one she's had to navigate.

Fabio squeezed his body in, suddenly flopping inside and finding himself able to crawl. He clambered faster than she did. He began to follow her. She managed to toss a pot behind her and she heard the impact of it against his head. The clunk, the unearthly screech he gave pushed hope into her growingly-pessimistic brain... But it wasn't enough. In fact, she wondered if it only fueled him to try after her even harder. She heard him but she couldn't tell how close he was. The clattering and banging of the pots and pans behind her was so loud and overwhelming. Winnie, realizing she was a sitting duck climbing through this shelf, tried for the next door she reached. She yanked and pulled -- but it was jammed. She cursed.

She kept climbing and pushing. Fabio was behind her, somewhere, and gave a shriek of determination. She made it to the next door, and pulled and threw herself forward. With a powerful scream, she dove out of the cabinet and rolled onto the floor. He was closer than she thought.

With a heave, he grabbed the massive heel of Winnie's boot as she hit the ground. He pulled it toward his mouth, ready to take a huge bite. She yanked her foot free, just in time, leaving the boot in Fabio's mouth. With a mighty effort, she tried sliding the door shut but he started climbing out too fast. Giving up, she leapt back, got on her feet and ran. She initially tried for the door. But Fabio was getting up on his feet. The door was too far.

He'd catch her. She needed something closer.

Her attention fell to a huge industrial oven, a massive metal structure that stretched across an entire wall. There was a conveyor belt that led from one end to the other, allowing the mass cooking of tons of product. Having cooked with this thing numerous times, she knew there was a power switch at the end. In mere seconds, impressing even herself, Winnie concocted a plan.

The oven was only a few feet away. She looked back at Fabio, still shaking the boot in his mouth, suddenly realizing that it wasn't flesh. He spit it aside and started to get on his feet. Her attention back to the industrial oven, she charged for it. She dove onto the conveyor belt, and

pushed herself into the oven. Climbing through, she banged the inside of it. She knew the sound would attract him if he didn't already follow her. She turned and saw him jumping onto the conveyor and army-crawling after her.

Picking up the pace, she saw the literal--not figural--light at the end of the tunnel. She was near the exit. She threw herself off of the conveyor. Winnie was stupefied by the sight of Fabio, only a few feet behind her. She went for the control panel to her right, and powered on the oven. She flipped the conveyor switch, and the belt started to move in the opposite direction -- pushing Fabio further away from her. The oven began to glow from within, and heat exude from the orange glow. As Fabio reached the other end, trying desperately to claw and crawl back toward Winnie--toward dinner--Winnie would flip the switch in the other direction, pushing him back through the oven. Then, as he reached closer to her, she'd flip it back and he'd be pushed back. Rinse and repeat.

She kept her eyes on the temperature as it rose. She was always surprised at how fast this thing would heat up. Within a couple minutes, it was igniting at over 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Fabio's inhuman shrieks escalated in ferocity and it was painful and brutal to listen to, but Winnie knew she couldn't risk it. His head was the first thing to combust, bursting into a fireball. She backed away, satisfied by the sight of his head bursting into flames.

This was just as Asher walked back in, holding a bloodied frying pan.

"So, uh," he started, startling her.

"You scared the crap out of me, Asher!" she shrieked.

"Sorry. I--uh--I guess you handled it then... I got the other one, though."

He shook the frying pan with a nervous smirk, and bits of brain matter fell off it, landing on his shoulder.

"Ew," Winnie winced.

Asher chuckled, "Gross", and used his breath to blow the chunks off and onto the floor. Fabio's smouldering body hit the floor with a crash, causing both of the teens to jump. Winnie had forgot to turn off the conveyor.

Inspecting the damage done to the plagued, Asher only had one thing to say, "...Nice."

None of this was nice to Winnie. She failed herself. She couldn't make it easy and put him out of his misery with a quick swing of the knife. She felt a weight on her that she couldn't really describe, outside of feeling as useless as everyone else told her she was her entire life.

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PJ Cassavoy preferred the privacy of the toilet stall to the awkward openness of the urinals, though truthfully, he was just grateful to relieve himself in a toilet at all after years of making nature his personal litter box.

He was excited to have Gray and Asher join them in their community, particularly to have other kids his own age around. It was grating being the youngest in the community. It was, no other way to put it, stressful. There were so many different restrictions and cautions. Being part of this

community was definitely the happiest that PJ had been in a long, long time, longer than he could remember, but it was also the most frustrating because he was so used to being responsible for himself, his own decisions, for Winnie.

He took Gray up to his room and showed him around. He bragged about the computer he was building and how he was using the electricity from the building's generator to help him power it and play PC games. Gray had never seen a video game before. That excited PJ more than anything; to give someone else that experience, that element of fun for the first time.

As he was close to completing his business, PJ heard a rapping at the stall door. Someone was trying to get in, but they weren't pulling on the handle. It sounded like the phantom pooper wanted to bash his way in with his head. PJ frowned.

"Occupied, dude," PJ murmured uncomfortably.

He noticed the banging outside growing more and more repetitious and violent. Dents emerged on his side of the door. Then, as sudden as they started, they stopped. He slammed the lid of the toilet down, and stood atop it. From where he stood, PJ could not see anyone. The only thing he did notice, though, were the bloody footprints that surrounded the stall. He backed away quickly, and right in time too.

A man, one that PJ recognized as someone who sat in front of him at the church service, leapt up from the other side of the stall and reached for him. The man was frothing at the mouth and blood dribbled from his mouth. A nasty bite had taken a chunk out of his face. "P--please," he pleaded.

"No control," the man stammered. "I can't--"

No more words came out. The man leapt inhumanly, and instinctively, the boy leapt back. He fell hard against the toilet, luckily hitting only his back and not his head. Struggling through the hot, searing pain, PJ scrambled backward as the man--now, one with the plague that was coursing through his veins--snapped forward. He had no weapons on him. PJ felt fear pulsate through him in a way he hadn't experienced in a long time. Cursing repeatedly under his breath, the boy looked around for objects he could use to defend himself. Standing on his feet and throwing himself against the wall, PJ yanked the lid of the toilet tank right off.

He heaved the tank lid forward. Taken aback by the sheer weight of it, he dropped it sloppily. Luckily for him, it fell right onto the man's head, which proceeded to explode like a split watermelon in a mushy mess on the floor. PJ felt his head throb and his breath get substantially heavier. The room began to shake and spin, until he became engulfed in the darkness of unknowingness.

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After his new friend was gone for way longer than the "quick pee" he announced he'd be leaving to deal with, Gray started to become concerned. When he ventured to the bathroom, he heard about all the chaos that erupted. Apparently, someone from the church service suddenly

turned into a plagued and spread it to a few others. There was a tall, muscular guy there who looked important, and talked like he was even more important.

“I think I count four dead,” this guy said confidently to Declan.

“PJ went to the bathroom a while ago,” Gray spoke up. “He hasn’t come back. We should check on him.”

Declan agreed that this would be the best option. This was the only point in the entirety of everything going on, that Declan seemed even remotely worried. Gray was impressed at how calm and collected he’d been throughout all of the chaos erupting. He and Gwen accompanied Gray to the bathroom, and they found a mess. PJ’s body was crumpled on the floor, right next to a bloodied mess crushed under the weight of a porcelain toilet tank lid. He looked dead. He wasn’t. Thankfully.

He only passed out, under the stress of something he kept mumbling about -- “the corner of Hoff’s and Drawlar”. Gray was certain he heard the other boy mutter something like “Mommy”, too, but he couldn’t be too certain. He watched Declan lift PJ and hold him in his arms, assuring him it’d be okay, that everything would be alright, and he found himself overwhelmed by the feeling of missing that. Gray knew that it was unfair to be mad about that; Asher wasn’t his parent. He was sure that his brother would want the same thing too, for someone to hold him and assure him that things would perk up when evil seemed to lurk around every corner.

Something else that Gray couldn’t shake was how Gwen, a woman of such elegance and poise from what he’d seen of her so far, looked so hollow and empty. She said next to nothing the entire time and looked sweaty, pale, and right near ready to vomit at any moment.

By the time everyone regrouped in the conference room, Declan asked everyone to take a seat, as Phoebe checked everyone individually to ensure they were not bit. Gray, who hadn’t taken his eyes off of Gwen the entire time, noticed that Phoebe did not stop to check her. He saw Asher and the tall blonde, Winnie, enter through the back doors. He saw PJ, who had finally come back to, leave Declan’s side and run over to hug her. A smile crossed Gray’s face as Asher strode over.

“You okay? You look good.”

“Yes, I’m fine, I didn’t even see anything,” Gray said.

“I got one of them,” Asher assured Phoebe as she came by to do a check. “But I’m okay, I promise.”

Asher wrapped Gray in a giant hug, pressing him against his chest. Gray’s eyes were on Winnie as she and PJ reunited with the burly, overly-confident guy from earlier.

“Anson!” she cried. “I was so worried.”

What was most conspicuous was how his brother’s heart seemed to beat ever faster as Winnie and this Anson character locked lips. Though he was curious, Gray honestly didn’t want any more information, mostly because he didn’t want to ruin the moment.

He liked his brother’s big warm hugs, his only wish was that they happened more frequently and weren’t always perpetuated by some sort of chaos, disaster or tragedy. Just once, he’d like an extra bear-like, suffocatingly affectionate, Asher-hug for no reason in particular.