

## **Arise, or Be Forever Fallen**

**Word count: 4260**

A vibrant wind washed through the crevasse in the hills that made up our small valley, breaking through the heavy fog that'd held our village beneath its contemptible weight for days. It would've been a welcome relief had I been faced in any other direction; hunched over with my shovel still deeply embedded in the ground left my face only a foot from the loosened earth of my small potter's field, earning me a lung full of dirt when it swept past. I should've worn a cloth tied about my face to keep the sin out of my mouth like I used to, but it'd been far too many days since old Agnes from the tavern down the way grew her first wen and began coughing up black, and now there hardly seemed a reason to try and escape the defilement of it all.

Father Samuel said that it was God's work-- that Agnes was being punished for making her living from the hosting of mendicant wanderers, workmen, and runaways; he said her immodest dress and general state of sacrilege brought our Lord to tears for witness, and so He struck her down accordingly. Father Samuel instructed us to be certain we attended service and kept ourselves pure of heart, lest we fall to the same fate, then sprouted pustules himself less than a fortnight after Agnes drowned in her own mire.

I couldn't recall how long ago that was.

The seasons seem to have stopped changing, permanently stuck in the wet chill of autumn like a clock that'd come unwound. Perhaps Father had been right when he screamed through the wet in his throat that this was the end of days.

That same flirtatious wind pushed through the valley again. I avoided the kick-up of dirt this time, but I could see down the lane that it was sweeping aside my earlier work, exposing the bulging gut of Avery Prowde inch by inch, which left my mood no less foul. It reminded me of how Ma poked and prodded at my poorly laid straw bales and crop rows, mouth twisted up in a disappointed frown, silently signaling to my failures as if saying it aloud was too much a burden to bother with. She was three rows over from Avery Prowde, buried much deeper than the others and very even too. She always wanted straight lines, and this time I thought to try my best to give it to her.

And now Thomas lay beneath me too, only half submerged in the earth, his little feet still stuck out from the shallow ditch I'd dug for him with the last of my strength. I'd buried him head first, unable to bear the look on his tiny face, pustules still leaking white and red even when the rest of him had gone hard as stone. I'd been watching him all night. I didn't remember going to sleep but it would seem I had, and ever since he'd fallen ill he made little more than thick gurgles when he wailed, so there hadn't even been a noise to wake me when the pain started in him. I didn't know what I might've done to stop it, but at least he would've known I was awake, that I was alive, that he wasn't the last single living soul left in this godforsaken place. I was sorry he was alone, like that. I was sorry I had to bury his head first for not being able to look at him.

The wind came again and now I could see Avery Prowde's nethers burgeoning from the earth like potato spuds.

I put down my shovel.

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The walk from our little mountain valley down towards the riverside village below took almost a full day at the best of times. This time though I was tired and I carried too much. All the houses stood empty now, intestate and abandoned, so I took what I wanted from each. Father Samuel might've cursed me for it, but he was buried out behind the church with everyone else who'd sinned so I figured there was a chance he didn't know the Book as well as he thought. I took Da's hunting knife first, strapped to my back under my clothes, then moved on to the rest.

Back before, no one had two of anything, but with everyone gone the only hands to share the chattels were my right and left. It turned out to be more than I could carry so I thought to take Farmer Blake's wagon and his horse. The horse ran off though, and I didn't know how to catch it, so in the end I pulled the wagon myself.

I arrived at the riverside village after dark and made my way to the local inn. I offered to trade a candlestick for a room and three bushels of wheat to put my wagon out back by the innkeeper's quarters where people might be less inclined to lift from it. Too much to pay but I wasn't going to try to haggle now, with my feet and hands still

bloody from the walk and my back aching. The innkeeper made me strip for him, checked me all over, even inside. I told him he didn't have to check there, the wens don't grow on the inside, but he still insisted on it, peering in me at both ends like a roast partridge.

In the end he didn't let me stay. I'd lied, of course. They do grow inside you, and he found two in my mouth leaking white down my throat. I wanted to hack it up and spit it in his face, but the only way I could keep my own guts down was by pretending they weren't there. I offered him my other candlestick but he said he wouldn't even take the first, so I let him evict me and slept on top of my bounty like a guard dog.

By morning some of my things had been lifted even with me lying on top but I still had most of it. I tried to sell it on, maybe buy a ride with someone who knew how to handle a horse, but word spread quickly even in the bigger village on the riverside. No one with the money to pay wanted the goods of a blighted sinner no matter how cheaply I offered them.

One man did approach me, wrapped in a threadbare cloak with lumps underneath and pale hands turning black at the tips. His gums were as red as fresh blood and with his lips pulled back he appeared half a corpse already. He asked if I'd anything I could spare for him. I told him I wouldn't give him anything for free, but I'd go easy on him if he could find something to make it worth it. I couldn't carry everything anyway, the cart was too heavy, and I had a place I needed to get to.

He told me to wait, so I did until night came, and he met me at the edge of the village with a horse he wouldn't say came from where. I gave him everything that wouldn't fit onto the saddle.

"You're from up in the hills?"

"I am," I said.

"No one's been down from there in a long while."

"And no one will, I imagine."

He didn't ask me any questions after that, but he did help me get up onto the horse, his blackened hands shaking all the while. I thanked him, stopped, then told him not to go near anybody anymore lest it spread. I knew I shouldn't have, knew it wouldn't do any good, but I could hardly stand it, seeing him there grinning like a kid, the wens like mulberry knots all across his shoulders.

He at least had the decency to look ashamed of himself.

"I've... I've always had a taste for drink. Near ran us out, the wife and I," he said. I could hear the grease in his throat when he tried to say the hard letters. "But I've stopped now. And Reverend says God forgives all, you know. Once I act better, it'll get better, like."

I needed to get to the city, so I left.

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I feared if I got off the horse it might bolt and I'd never catch it, so I only left the saddle when I had no other choice and even then only for a moment. Two days in, I woke up still swaying with the horse's slow amble, my stomach in knots, with three of my fingers black and something crusted on my chin. The muscles in my legs got tight, then went numb soon after. I let the horse stop from time to time to drink, but if it tried to stop for longer I'd kick at its flank like I'd seen Farmer Blake do whenever he rode out. By day three I thought I might've been finally finding my way about it all when the horse stopped again and I kicked it and it fell.

My left leg got trapped beneath it. On top of me the horse whinnied and huffed like it was mad about something I'd done, like I was even supposed to know it was dumb enough to walk until it killed itself. I reached behind me to take Da's knife, thinking it best to kill the thing and save it the pain, but then I looked out at the road, stretching endless like the open maw of a great beast, and I lay paralyzed until its cries turned to nothing. It died on top of me, still warm but going hard all over just like Thomas.

Eventually, I pulled my leg free. Then, I stood up and walked.

I now had four fingers black and the smell out of my own throat was enough to drive me to sickness more than a few times on the side of the road. I stopped eating after that, to make it come up easier, and even thought to leave all I'd brought for provisions behind for some lucky soul to find before thinking the better of it. Nothing given for free, even when the only thing needed lay strapped to my back, rubbing at my skin like a lullaby.

The sun rose only a few hours before my horse dropped. Still, by the time the houses outnumbered the fields and the roads narrowed to half their size it was almost dark. The moon should've been out but I couldn't see it for the tall houses surrounding the street, stacked on top of each other like a funeral pyre. After walking in that darkness for what felt like hours, suddenly, the road stopped.

It might seem childish to some, but in the desolate places of the world there often isn't but a single road. I suppose I'd just assumed it would go on forever, leading me from where I came to where I wanted to go. But it hadn't: it'd only led me there.

I looked around, finally recognizing the stares that I'd been getting since I emerged into the city streets for what they truly were. I wasn't the only one with black fingers but I was the only one using those same fingers to clutch at a sack. The onlookers were no better than crows, and when the sound of a preacher came to my ears—"cavorting with the pestilent who hath defiled our land even in mercy shall bring about damnation in eternal hellfire! For to look upon the familiar of the Devil with kindness is akin to taking the name of thy God in vain with sibilant tongues, so be it!"—I thought it best to keep moving on lest someone try to relieve me of my burden.

I had never been to the city before. I didn't know the way, and the small roads and alleys seemed to go in no sensible direction at all. I could hardly see for the smoke and the ash and the filth in the air, and the muck was so thick and so foul it soaked into my boots and stung the open wounds on my feet. My head began to swim and when I felt a tug on my clothes and turned to find little Thomas staring up at me with eyes full of white my heart leapt so far it carried the rest of me with it, sending me into the chest of the nearest stranger on the street.

The warmth of another living soul pushed down into my bones, but I pulled away as quickly as I could. I didn't look either, I knew better, gaze averted in deference, stuck instead on where that pale figure had stood. Then I felt a hand grip me about the shoulders and turn me around and I looked up to see a tall man with the black eyes of an angel.

"Watch it now."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be more careful."

"I'm sorry."

"Where might you be going, so quick like that?"

I didn't answer.

He smiled at me with a mouth full of too many teeth and took me with him.

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He lived not far from where we'd met. He said he'd let me stay and I offered him everything I had in exchange. He said he didn't want it, said a small thing like me wouldn't but take up any room anyway. I knew what he meant and almost didn't want to take off my cloak for ruining it, but eventually I did and he saw the rest of me and seemed to know right away it went all the way down. Still, he let me stay the night.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" I asked.

"I am afraid of no one." He smiled, teeth jutting past chapped lips. "I have never sinned a day in my life."

The room wasn't but half the size of our farm house, lit up with so many candles I feared the walls might catch at any time. The man seemed heedless he was living amongst kindling.

His name was William. He had books.

Unfussed by the late hour of my arrival or my general state, he let me sit at his table while he explained to me in gentle tones every title on his shelf, what it contained, where he got it and why. I didn't have much interest, but William didn't seem the type to care if people liked what he said as long as he got a chance to say it. When he caught me fading he was kind enough to offer me some of his drink. I watched his hands, long fingers with blunted ends and proud knuckles, as they rolled a cigarette and placed it between thin lips, so dry I knew now for talking. Halfway through his sermon on the conspiracy of pricing scientific texts as a form of proletariat oppression, he asked a question from across the room so suddenly I almost missed it.

“Why have you come all this way?”

When he said it out loud like that I couldn't help but look around the room with its tight walls and soft candlelight and feel the floor shift and shiver beneath me. It sent my head spinning, so I locked eyes with him and didn't look away, lest I see little Thomas staring up at me again.

“I've something I need to do.”

“Is that so,” he said. His voice was like candle wax. “And what might that be?”

I moved in my seat, felt the knife move with me.

“Everyone’s dead. Everyone I—“ I stopped. Swallowed. “Our preacher said it was sin that got us. Said it was because we hadn’t acted as we should; that it was God’s will.”

“The preachers know nothing,” William said.

“They know nothing,” I agreed. “They’re always just saying the same: ‘Obey the will of the holy Spirit’, ‘let the Lord lead thy steps’, ‘thank God for thy blessings and plead forgiveness for thy sins’—“

“—And nothing in this life without reason.”

“That one has truth at least, I imagine.” I pinched my mouth up tight; my stomach felt like boiling. “There’s a reason, but they’ll never say it. They just say what they’re told to.”

“And you intend to find who it is that tells them?”

“I do.”

His black eyes shone in the light of his legion of petty flames.

“And then what?”

I didn't answer him.

“I had not known people like you thought about things like that.”

I didn't know which part of the accusation to question first, but William didn't give me a chance either way. His thin lips twisted into a scowl and he crushed his cigarette into his empty glass.

“Half the nobility has fled, they say. Escaped to their villas to wait it out; left the rest of us to pick up the pieces. We die for their empire,” he laughed. “And then they call it sin.”

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He woke me the next morning. It took me a few tries to unstick my eyes. They were heavy, and the rest of me came slowly too. I wonder if he hadn't woken me if I would've woken at all. He did wake me though. And he took me where I needed to go.

In the daylight it was easier to see but no easier to navigate. I just followed, black fingers balled up in his coat, my own face covered by a cloak he'd given me big enough to fold in front and hide both my face and the wens bulging out of my neck like crab apples.

It felt like we were going in circles. Blisters that'd scabbed over in the warm embrace of his home broke apart again inside my boots. My knees were weak, muscles stiff, and I couldn't catch my breath no matter how hard I tried. It must've been the cloak, I thought, and pulled it back, but no, and with my mouth uncovered I could hear now that the squelching pops hadn't been the mud under my boots but my own insides bubbling out. I covered my mouth again and kept my head down, trying to think of nothing at all.

Soon the road went wide, covered with flat stones worked together into a smooth surface. The crowd grew thick; throngs of people moved from one place to the next, taller and broader than any people I'd ever seen. William kept me close by his side, arm about my shoulder and my face pushed into his chest, before he finally came shortly to a stop and pulled me back.

I was breathing heavy, even stood still. I looked up at William to find him fading in and out of focus, those black eyes barely visible among the fog that was creeping into my sight from all sides. He put his big hands on my shoulders, shook me twice till a pain shot through me from top to toes, then turned me bodily the other way around and pointed past me to a gate on the far end. It rose up just past the push of the crowd, twice the size of the stacked houses and crafted of white stone so brilliant I thought it may just burn the pestilence from me by the sight of it. Four men dressed in gilded steel were standing on either side, spears sparkling like glass.

“What is it?” I asked, reverent.

“Do you still have that knife?”

William shook me again and I looked up at him, blinking the spots away. He asked once more about the knife, and this time I heard him and retrieved it from where I kept it tied against my back. It wasn't particularly big, but it was big enough to kill a boar if you needed to. A boar wasn't much different from a man, and a man wasn't much different from anything else. William stood in front of me, his body shielding me from view as I moved the knife to my pocket.

“Hold on to it tight,” he told me. “Don't let go for anyone.”

“I won't,” I said.

“Stick close to the wall until you get to the gate.”

I didn't understand.

“You want to get to the man who rules the preachers, right?” He asked, black eyes trained on my face. “You want the man who saw your family die and did nothing? The man who heard you suffer, then blamed you for it? The man who called you sinner while he sat in his tower of privilege and prescience, and watched your village slough back into the mud?”

I went hot, blood pumping through my veins like fire.

“Yes,” I said.

“There he is.”

I turned back to stare at it: the white gate. Everything else went soft in the face of it, like the last wisps of a dream. It was a pressing weight, a stanchion of burning radiance holding up the world. I was suddenly struck with the fear I'd wake up at any moment to find myself still pinned beneath that crying horse, dying along with it on the side of the road.

“I won't make it.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders, a soft embrace like he meant to say something kind, and then he pushed me.

My legs felt leaden, already stiff from standing in place so long. I tried my best to catch myself but took several steps to do it and by the time I'd turned around William had disappeared. I didn't know where he'd gone nor even where we'd come from. My eyes were going again, the fog pouring in the corners and scattering the light into prismatic pinpricks. Even so, I could still see the gate.

I walked towards it.

I had listened to Father Samuel every Sunday since I was a child. He spoke of hellfire and suffering and the sins of man, how only the Lord was true, how we must spend our lives in search of His perfection within ourselves, how we would never make it. Forever wanting, forever corrupt. And then I'd shake the Father's hand, as would Ma and Da and Thomas and everyone else, and he'd walk back into his white and shining church and shut us out to slog through the mud back to our houses.

I had listened when Agnes cried out in agony, the black tar dripping from her nose and hardening across her mouth and her eyes. I had listened as Father Samuel condemned her to a fate in hell, as if her suffering were proof of its own worthiness by virtue of its existence. I had listened to the endless bromides he spoke after she passed, as if a kind word was all the rest of us needed.

I had listened to every home and every person within them, one after another, crying out in the night until the pus and blood and black stopped flowing out of them. Most of them begged for forgiveness even as they lay in their pitiable souls, others cursed from the earth up to the firmament and all that lay between for bringing them to the oppressive liberty of life in the first place. Father Samuel had called it the end of days with his dying breath; he couldn't fathom a world in which he didn't exist, in which he wasn't the chosen one of light, in which he couldn't see more than for two feet in front of him like everyone else, but then he died too and he begged for forgiveness too and he was buried in the churchyard with the rest of them. And then I knew. The world went beyond our village, beyond our hillsides and our road. There was more, so much more, and beyond all of it lay God, in His palace with His little Lord, watching over us as we crawled around in the muck, groveling and prostrated before his exalted empire.

And so I crawled, too. I pulled myself, my body swollen and sore and leaking as it was, through the dirt and the soot and the hordes of bodies that pressed in.

I was getting close.

The white gate towered before me, the men dressed in glittering glass and iron, bathed in sunlight and glory and pride. My black fingers gripped my knife and my blood roared in my ears; my guts stopped their undulating beneath my skin and the pain in my feet went numb. It was as if I'd shed my earthly flesh, my broken body, and rose again a being possessed. There was nothing else, nothing left but this, standing there at the white gate, our King hidden away behind it, and I swore by all I knew that I would bury my knife into him and watch him bleed back all that he had taken from me. I looked back and saw William smiling at me from beyond the crowd, and Ma and Da too, eyes gone white, and little Thomas, toddling along beside me as we fell upon the silver men of light like a torrent and thrust the knife towards them with the weight of all our black, rotting souls piled high like corpses in a churchyard.

The spear caught me in the ribcage, right below my burning lungs, and cast me down to hell.