

CROWN UP



Esther Dale

In the allegory *Crown Up*, Aneta learns how to trust her father and deal with her daily battles. She strives to plant a church with a small group of friends in a spiritually threatening environment.

Crown Up

By Esther Dale

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A note from the author

This book is an allegory for those ages 13 and above. It is however family friendly and could be read by all ages. Sometimes terms can be intimidating, so let us define what an allegory is. “An allegory is a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.” (Dictionary.com.) This still might seem vague, so let me break it down.

Many times, people’s bad moods are results of battles that you don’t see. *Crown Up* depicts different characters and what they go through on a regular basis. When it looks like someone is working their job at a department store with a sour attitude, they are mentally fighting for their life, trying to overcome Pain and Sorrow, two trifling demons always causing problems.

When it looks like your sibling is being careless about their words, they are mentally drowning, trying to plead for help, attempting to escape Defeat and Chains, but no one hears their cries.

When it looks like your loved one hates you, they are mentally lost, wondering if they will be tormented by Guilt and Fear for the rest of their lives.

It is nearly impossible to fully understand someone else’s life and pain, but through this allegory, I hope to open your eyes so you may heap grace, mercy, and forgiveness onto those who are struggling to simply survive the day.

This book will have two sections alternating back and forth, one showing the spiritual journey in this font and one showing the physical journey in this regular font. This system will help differentiate what you are seeing in the physical and the spiritual.

May you keep your crown up and guide others to Him.

|Chapter 1: A Child of the King|

Aneta scrambled behind a boulder as three demons prowled by her hiding place in a canyon ravine. Even though their general shape was outlined as a man except their odd hunched position and bent deer legs, their shadowy figures, seemingly half solid and half smoke vapor made up their being. Upon their head where a man's hair would have been, a black mass slowly waved back and forth, like a dreary fire with weary flames. Their face was indiscernible, as it held no features. They were without eyes, without nose, and without mouth. Their long, coarse fingers tapered off in much of the same effect as their head, giving the demons a monstrous advantage of intimidation.

As usual, the pitch black demons wore pitch black rubbery armor, dull to the look. The black armor perfectly matched their body color, and most of the time, it was hard to tell whether or not they wore anything at all, even though the demons were indisputably clad in some version of armor at all times.

None of them were chief demons, as those kind were usually in the form of gigantic wolf bears, but Aneta still knew that the lowly demons would have no trouble calling in a chief demon or two. Wincing, she stepped tenderly as sharp rock shards ripped open scabs from previous injuries. She hid her face as one demon hesitated, then continued. They must have only been traveling by, for if they were scouts, they would have investigated more thoroughly. After they were gone from sight, she waited as long as she dared, then rushed away, fleeing from the restless creatures. Those may have not been scouts, but they still hungrily scavenged for souls.

She gazed above the stony canyon walls to catch a faint glimpse of the Bridge. It was hard to see from her angle, but she knew it from any distance. It led to a lush meadow. Across the meadow was a large orchard of every fruit that one could imagine. Among the orchard, there were several cool streams that watered the ground and comforted the tired.

This Aneta knew. She had been born there, after all. But she could never get back up after having fallen down from the edge of the cliff.

She had tried for days to climb the canyon wall or find another way up. It was useless. She was lost.

At the hissing whispers of another group of demons, Aneta held back a fearful gasp and tried to hide in the canyon maze. She had barely glanced back when she spotted the chief demon who led the charge: Fear. Afraid of what might happen, Aneta nervously slipped through a narrow crevice, hiding as quietly as possible.

When evening came, she slowly crawled out of the canyon wall and sighed. She was safe...for that moment. She began walking in a general direction away from where she knew demons usually were located. Demons were not often out in the canyons in the night, as they must always have had other more important things to do in the cover of darkness. That being the case, Aneta liked to breathe fresh air as she took a walk through the canyons at night. With the night came a cool breeze and a dropping temperature, but the chill was worth it. She came out of the canyons and quietly moved through tall dry grass that made up a desert like plain near the canyon entrance.

Someone with the appearance of a man came up next to her as she strolled around in the tall grass. Depression often joined her as she walked at night, much to her dismay, although she found no reason to tell him to leave. However, even though Depression looked and acted like a man, he was not.

He was indeed a demon of sorts. For the most part, however, he kept to himself in terms of actively working with Fear, the chief demon only second to Satan. He did not answer to every wish and whim of Fear, as nearly every demon did, but that did not mean he was safe to interact with.

At any rate, Depression often looked harmless. His eyes were soft, and his chin sharp. He often left his hands in his pockets as he walked, talking quietly in his soft, lulling voice. It was so gentle and persistent it annoyed Aneta, but she could not do much. She remembered her last talk with Depression. She had had it.

Aneta stopped where she was. "I *told* you not to come back. Why are you here, Depression?"

Depression made a face. "Well...whether you realize it or not, you invited me."

She sighed again, faintly remembering the contract she made with Depression in the beginning. Until she no longer needed his services, he was obliged to come and go as he pleased. Why had she signed the contract again? Defeated, Aneta let him follow her around. Talking to him never availed much.

“I want to do something.” Depression said.

“Like what?” Aneta tried her best not to say much, attempting to discourage him from talking. She herself was already tired of walking and decided to head back to her main hiding spot.

“I don’t know.”

“Depression, go away.” Aneta walked through the desert plain and into the canyons again. Her mind raged. She was angry Depression had ruined her usually pleasant nightly walk.

A piercing screech penetrated the dry air. Aneta whipped her head around, in a scrambling panic. Depression was about to ask her a question, but she darted off, leaving him behind. She tried to conceal herself between the first rocks she could find as she held her breath.

More howling closed in. The demons’ signature sound was close to a coyote’s call, but mixed with a man-like howl filled with whispers. Their sound never failed to hover in between menacing outrage and nightmarish subtly. Aneta could hardly stand their controversial call, as it pierced her eardrums and sent chills down her spine.

Aneta’s lungs burned. Rasping breath. Her own and the demons trailing her.

Aneta could picture their coarse fingers grabbing her ankles and yanking her down. They had done that before. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold her breath. A long pause began. She could no longer hear the terrifying beings. It was eerily silent. She exhaled.

Aneta scrambled out of her temporary hiding place and ran through the canyon again. She hesitated next to a tunnel-like passage that went through the thick canyon wall and led out to a secluded place. She had once been afraid of tight places. Not anymore. Narrow crevices were how she survived. She slowly and carefully crawled on her hands and knees, going deeper and deeper.

It was dark and she could not rely on her sight. She felt along her path on her hands and knees. Soon, Depression had followed her

inside, not bothering to let her focus, but filling the silence with endless, mindless chatter.

She kept silent, not wanting to entertain Depression, but he kept talking anyway. She felt the floor beneath her with her rough hands, anticipating to find a jagged fissure in the stone floor. She had painfully found it earlier when she first took the path. It was only a foot long, not big enough to fall through, but big enough for her arms to suddenly plunge until her chin caught her, cracking in the process. She soon found the fissure and gingerly clambered over it.

Aneta's head popped out the other side of the tunnel. She found herself in a small, secluded area where four walls of canyon came together, making a small square of safety that was about six feet by six feet. The night sky was visible high above the little area, fifty feet up. She sat down in relief, thankful she could rest in peace.

Abruptly, the four walls violently shook, causing the small gap she had crawled through to widen. She screamed as maniacal laughter echoed off the tight, steep cliffs around her. The small, foot-wide drop in the middle of the once-small gap she had passed through widened, and clouds of black surrounded her as she shrieked for help.

Before the dust and smoke could clear away, two chief demons stood on either side of her... Fear and Lost. Unlike other demons with a man's body, demons looked more like wispy shadows of giant bear wolves, with a discernible mouth and two gray slots for eyes. With a triumphant howl, they grabbed her, chained her, and dragged her by her ankles into the pit below. Aneta struggled until her head hit a rock, and she could not think straight with the high pitched whine in her ears. She barely noticed the cold shackles pulling her through underground caverns, and she was finally tossed into a small, cell-like place. Fear snarled a warning and pounded away.

Depression came around shortly and sat down next to her, pointing out every terrible thing that happened to her. Angry, Aneta flung herself towards him and wound up to slap him in the face. She lashed out, but Depression had moved aside and shoved her to the ground. Her face hit the stone beneath her. She cried out in pain. She slowly sat up as Depression released her in silence. She rubbed her cheek, knowing a bruise would appear.

Still bound to the contract she had foolishly signed, Aneta sighed, doomed to listen to his soft, annoying voice.

It was at least a full day before she was given water and some food. Aneta eagerly devoured the soft bread, but it became scratchy and stale as she swallowed it. Aneta found her cup of water in the dark and sighed. She knew it was not clean, but it was water. It soothed her dry throat, but it turned to acid in her stomach. After the second agonizing day in cold shackles, with Depression constantly chatting in her ear, something began to echo in her mind.

Aneta? Where are you?

Aneta slowly let tears rise to her eyes as she thought about it. At first, she wondered why she would ask herself such an odd question.

Suddenly, Lost prowled by, startling Aneta with his bass voice that rumbled her metal cup sitting on the rock floor of her cell. “You will never be found, so don’t get any ideas.”

Aneta slumped back, defeated.

Depression continued to talk. “He’s right. You ran off and you will never be able to get back to the Meadow. Besides, these demons literally opened up the canyon fissures and shoved you in here. There is no way anyone could get down here even if they knew you *and* wanted to help...which no one does.”

Beginning to sob, Aneta pulled up her knees to her chin, shivering on the stone floor in her ragged clothing. Depression leaned closer and continued to whisper in her ear. But even as Depression droned on, she heard another voice, asking the same question that came to her earlier.

Aneta? Where are you? It was more pressing this time.

Aneta straightened up. None of the demons were around, and it was not Depression's voice.

“What?” She asked aloud.

Depression sighed. “Don’t make me say all of that *again*.”

“No. It was someone else.”

“No one else is here.”

The soft voice echoed in her mind again. *Aneta? I’m waiting for you.*

Her breath was caught away. She remembered that voice. “Father?”

Depression made a face. “Aneta. Your father isn’t here. He’s-”

“No-” Aneta stood up, looking around. “No, that was...Jesus. That was His voice.”

Fear bounded up to her cell. His voice seemed to shake the entire cell. “Quiet! Don’t say another word.”

For a while, Aneta quieted down, afraid that a demon meandering by might tell on her. However, the peaceful voice still sounded in her mind.

Aneta? I’m looking for you.

Again, Aneta straightened up, wondering where the voice came from. “God...*please* tell me that’s You.”

With angry growls, Lost and Fear approached her cell. “Say another *word* and *no one* will ever be able to find you!”

With a deep breath, Aneta stared down Fear in defiance. “Jesus? Are You there? Can You find me?”

Lost and Fear ripped open the cell door and rushed in, both trying to slash her to pieces. Aneta pushed herself away...as the canyon wall broke open behind her. Fear and Lost both froze, terrified at what appeared in the opening.

God barged in, upturning all works of the demons in the entire sub-region, ensuing chaos among Fear, Lost, and their henchdemons.

God gently picked her up, threw off her chains, and carried her back through the canyon, to the Bridge. Aneta blinked. It was sunny. How long had it been since she had seen the sun? She looked ahead of her. Across the Bridge sat the immense, lush Meadow. Beyond that, blooming orchards.

God smiled at her. “You have been trying to get up here for a while now.”

Aneta sheepishly nodded.

“You can cross now, but I will not carry you across. You have to do it yourself.”

Feeling like it would be the easiest thing in the world, Aneta strode forward, stepping across the Bridge. She glanced down at the ground, seeing the deep canyon. She clutched the side rails, gasping at the height. She looked up, seeing that the Bridge seemed much longer than before. Anxious, Aneta tried to keep going, striving to go back home.

Just then, the entire canyon seemed to shake as Fear and Lost, followed by Chains, pounded into the area below.

Raising their voices as angry giants, they shouted at her. “You will never make it! Those thin ropes will break! Turn back! He won’t help you! He said so Himself!”

Aneta stared into the canyon below. The cries replayed in her ears. God *did* say she had to do it herself. Did He leave her to fend for herself? Did He abandon her?

“Look up, Child.”

Aneta glanced up, seeing God waiting at the other end of the Bridge. As she focused on Him, the length of the Bridge did not seem to matter. Lost stopped howling. The Bridge seemed to creak and groan under her weight, but she kept walking, approaching the green Meadow. Chains quieted down. Fear could no longer say a word, or if he did, Aneta could not hear him. She at last rested her foot on the grassy Meadow’s edge. Aneta embraced God, thankful she was safe and it was over.

She stepped back as she realized she now had a new dress. Aneta smiled as she lifted one side with one hand, admiring the comfortable cloth.

God smiled. In His hand, He forged a sword. “This is for you. If you allow it, it will work just as it had before in your hands. It is lightweight and immensely strong, and it will not shatter or dull. You will find that it is comparably easy to travel with; it will also guide you. Even so, you will need armor.” He laid out leather and chain mail. “This, as well, is lightweight and tough; it will not be pierced by any mortal-crafted weapon, as many will attempt to combat you.”

Aneta tried on the leather vest, then the chainmail, remembering how to properly fit it to herself. It was indeed light and comfortable, with the chainmail neatly matching her attire.

God next brought out a pair of sandals with a matching belt and a crown. “The shoes are for when you travel through uncharted territory. Here, there is no need for them, since the grass is soft and the ground is smooth. You will be at peace when you travel, for your feet will not tire and you will be able to cover much ground.

“The belt will gird you with strength and truth, and in the end, it will be one of the only things to help you when truth is not known from falsehood. With this crown, as you wear it, nothing can harm you without your permission. Take heed: they will succeed in convincing you that they can do harm, and that they already have taken position to injure you. That is their most potent weapon: trickery. That is how many fall. Use wisdom with great boldness, and you will not fail as long as you have the smallest amount of faith. Plant a single seed of faith and you will reap a hundredfold. My warrior and princess, go forth and make disciples and encourage My followers.”

Aneta was quiet. She wanted to tell her Father something, but she wasn't sure if she could.

“Is there something you would like to discuss?” God sat down next to her.

Aneta sat down cross legged on the grass. She tried to keep her voice from wavering. “I...have a question...”

“You may ask.”

She gulped. How could she ask? Would He be mad? “Jesus...I'm not sure I can.”

God didn't say anything yet.

“I'm...I don't think I could fight with a sword again. I'm out of practice...and...well. You know the other reason.”

“Aneta.” God gently spoke to her. He was compassionate and understanding. “I know. But you are able to fight again. You are called to fight for My kingdom. When you go to the place which I will send you, you will find many hardships. It is a difficult place with difficult people. And you will have people come along to help you, but at one point, you will have to decide to fight. I know it will be hard. But your past does not tell your future what to do.”

Tears brimmed her eyes. “How am I supposed to fight? I can't do this, Jesus.” Overwhelmed, she sobbed. “I haven't fought since--since the day I--I--I...I haven't fought since...since Coward and I...”

“Aneta, all is forgiven. Forgive yourself. I will give you all the strength you need to fight through your hard days.”

Aneta wanted to protest, but she knew He was right. God was always right.

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“Alright.” She wiped her face with her sleeve. “Alright God. I will do what I can for you. I’ll try my best to fight for You.”

With a deep breath, Aneta held up the sword, upon which she noted the words engraved elegantly on the blade.

Aneta, the Child of the One True King

|Chapter 3: Try|

“I’ve thought about it.” Depression leaned against the wall, holding Aneta’s crown. “And...if you would like, you can borrow this today. Just, you know, so you know we are on good terms.”

Aneta gave him a face.

“Just an *offer*.” Depression shrugged and smiled innocently. “You know, I don’t have anything against you. Really. As soon as you don’t need me, I’m gone. I’m just trying to help, and since I’m feeling helpful, I will lend you this crown.”

Still not saying a word, Aneta ignored his confusing, contradicting comment and got ready to go.

“Are you sure?” Depression prodded.

“Yes.” Aneta could not hide her exasperation. “Keep it.”

“I’m...just *tired* of trying, God.” Aneta half muttered to herself.

She grabbed her purse and headed outside where Courage was waiting. It was Sunday morning, so Aneta had borrowed some clothes from Courage and they both walked to the little church near the edge of town.

Courage had been right. The church was small. There were few people gathered in the sanctuary, making the little church almost look oversized compared to the occupants of the pews. A chorus of aged voices filled the air as the congregants began to sing. Aneta glanced around.

Everyone was wearing armor, but she noticed some people were missing a piece or two. Still, some only wore one piece of armor. Nevertheless, Aneta was more interested in their crowns. The pastor wore a crown, along with another woman who was probably his wife. Their armor was as shined and polished as Courage’s. Most of the rest of the members of Whimsicalton Church wore crowns except for one man. He didn’t wear a crown at all. There was also a woman wearing a large hat with her shield by her side, except Aneta couldn’t tell if the woman wore a crown or not.

The pastor preached a sermon and ended the service at eleven sharp, having no extra comments beyond his notes. One or two members approached Aneta and Courage after the service, one of them being the pastor's wife. They talked for a little bit, then left.

Aneta had expected to feel convicted about wearing her crown after visiting there, but Whimsicalton Church did nothing of the sort. Subtly, she was disappointed.

She and Courage walked back to the apartment.

"So...that is the *only* church here in Aphoticton?" Aneta clarified,

Courage nodded. "The only one." She paused for a moment. "Aneta...are you okay?"

Surprised at the question, Aneta wrinkled her eyebrows and wondered if something was wrong. "Oh. Yeah...why?"

"Are you sure?" Courage raised her eyes to the top of Aneta's head,

At that moment, Aneta realized why Courage was concerned. Aneta hesitated. Her ears reddened and a lump formed in her throat. Her first thought was to make up a story, but that idea quickly faded. Aneta would have rathered to keep the fact hidden, but Courage seemed so genuine and understanding.

"Yeah...I just, um, well I have a hard time with the looks. I...don't even know how you handle it." Aneta's cheeks burned as she quickly looked at the ground, not liking her ridiculous excuse.

Courage gave her a little side hug. "I did that too."

That was it. She did not go any further. Aneta acknowledged that and felt like Courage was a true friend.

But then Depression caught up to Aneta. "Hey! See what I told you?"

Aneta half expected Courage to see Depression, but even she did not see him next to her.

Annoyed, Aneta turned her attention to Depression. "*What* did you tell me?"

“You should have borrowed my crown. You know...I can’t believe you. What does Courage actually think right now?”

Aneta glanced back at Courage, who still did not see Depression next to them. “What are you talking about?” Aneta was already done with the conversation, and it had just gotten started.

“I try and *try* to help you, but you refuse. When are you going to learn? When are you going to *grow up*? When are you going to be an adult? You sure look it, but you never act like it.”

Depression rattled on, and Aneta’s heart sank in agony. His words grated on her ears, but she could find no actual reason to tell him to leave.

“I have nothing more to say,” Depression concluded. “But. I do have a message from someone else.”

“From...who?”

“Pain. He says he owes you this.” Depression pulled out a dagger and stabbed her in the gut.

Aneta gasped, then gagged as she clutched her stomach. Again, she had not worn her breastplate that morning. She regretted that.

Depression roughly yanked it out again, and then waved it as he talked. “I don’t know his reason...but who am I to ask? You never listen to me, or to any of us. Failure has a hard time keeping you in check, and Fear loses you sometimes...you had it coming.” Even though he knew Courage did not see him, Depression cheerfully gave a mocking salute to her, and walked away.

Even though Courage could not see Depression or his knife, she noticed Aneta’s wound.

As Aneta hastily staggered over to the wall of a building to sit against, Courage worryingly said, “are you okay? Aneta?”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Aneta waited a moment before replying, only keeping one hand over her stomach. “Thanks, Courage. But, uh...” she held back a moan. “It...just hurts sometimes.”

“What hurts?” Courage asked.

Aneta slightly exhaled. “I don’t know how to explain...”

“I’m sorry, Aneta.” Courage tried to find the right words to say. “I’m not sure...Father was always better at this. He knows

exactly how to make you feel better.” Courage smiled sympathetically. “Maybe you should talk to Him. But whatever it is, God still wants you *here* and you are still needed. And appreciated. If you don’t feel that, go to Him. I’m not sure what you’re struggling with, but...let me know if you need to talk to another human being.” Courage laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Amused by Courage’s words, Aneta allowed a single chuckle, but soon returned to her sad state.

Later, when Courage was not around in the apartment, Aneta decided to talk with God. She pushed up her sleeves and began to wash the tiny pile of dishes. She started out with a few thoughts, telling God how annoyed she was at various things, but then continued out loud.

“I’m not even sure why I’m here. You told me to come here, so I did. You said I was supposed to fight for Your Kingdom? What does that even mean? And now I don’t know what to do. I’m...not even sure why You chose me? How could I possibly fulfill the position You set aside for me? Why isn’t Courage doing it? She’s been here longer, she’s older, she has everything rolling for her already.”

“Hello. How are you doing this evening?” Depression came in, with an unusually good mood, and leaned against the wall.

Aneta snapped a glare at him. Her stomach still throbbed in immense pain. “You stabbed me. How do you *think* I’m doing?”

“Oh please, don’t hold that against me. That was Pain. But, if you ask me, I think you should just stop trying.”

“Trying to do *what*?”

“Live. Breathe. Exist. Whatever you wanna call it. You are always trying and trying and never getting anywhere. It would be easier to just quit.”

“I *can’t* just quit.” Aneta scoffed, but she began to worry. Depression had a way of twisting what she thought, often sounding like he was contradicting himself or making her sound like she was

contradicting herself. He usually left her completely baffled. Nevertheless, she could not just quit life. That did not make sense.

“Well you *could*,” Depression said. “Lots of people do. You say so yourself that you hate trying to keep going. You don’t even *have* to, you know?”

Did she say she hated trying? Aneta did not know anymore.

“I mean, if you ask me,” Depression pressed her, “why *not* just quit?”

“Funny notion.” Aneta was never in the mood to hear his voice. “No. Go away.”

Depression walked around, talking with his hands instead of leaving them in his pockets. “Oh, just *listen* already. Quitting is easy. Just...stop living and you’re good. Think about it.”

“I have.” Aneta’s words slipped out.

“Think about it more.”

Aneta paused washing dishes and considered everything. Eventually, she dried her hands and propped open her Bible, looking for encouragement anywhere. She read: “*And the Lord, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear no, neither be dismayed.*”

She hesitated and sighed. Again, she asked God, “what am I supposed to do?”

Aneta thought about her crown. Seeing Courage wear it all the time made Aneta regret her decision to leave her own behind.

Suddenly, she looked up. “Now that I think of it...you’re just the person I want to see.”

At this statement, Depression eyed her in confusion. “I...never left? What do you mean?”

Aneta stood, unsheathing her sword at the same time. “I want my crown back.”

Depression shrugged, then produced a contract from his pocket. With the swipe of her sword’s tip, the contract lay in two pieces on the floor. Aneta pointed the sword at him and narrowed her eyes, biting off each word as she repeated her statement.

“I. Want. My. Crown. Back.”

“It’s mine.” Depression’s voice showed no worry, but as he spoke those words, he moved out of the way.

As he did so, two demons, hidden until that moment, charged at Aneta.

Aneta gasped and ducked, surprised by the attack.

That made her rethink her objective. Was her crown worth it? Would Courage say anything about it if she put her crown back on? Courage had seemed to let it go earlier, but would there be an ‘I told you so’ look on her face? Aneta’s mind filled with possible scenarios. What if she put it back on, only to take it off again as soon as people looked at her? That would be more humiliating than not having it on in general.

Even though she knew God would forgive her, Aneta still struggled. With a groan, Aneta rested her eyes for a moment, tired of fighting with herself. She was done fighting in general.

“God, I’m...so done.” A sigh escaped again. “I’ve...fought my *entire* life until I was sixteen. Well, you know, my *entire* spiritual life. And...I am just so done. Trying is so hard and so annoying. I feel like I try and try and try without getting anywhere. And then when I was little, I would try and try and You would encourage me to keep going. So I would. But then I would keep trying and nothing ever seemed to progress. I *hate* just *trying* to fight. I hate trying to always win. It never feels like it’s worth it.

Even as she spoke, partly to herself and partly to God, she knew she was wrong. She had paused her thoughts only for a moment when God seemed to tell her to keep going.

It is worth the world to Me.

Aneta sat and let the words seep in. She remembered a verse she had learned in Sunday school as a kid; in many cases, she had been the only one who memorized the weekly verse.

But thou, O Lord, the verse said, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head. Aneta nodded to herself as she acknowledged the scripture.

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Aneta's shield kept the demons away from her face. She flung them off, leaving the two black demons to claw the air in anger. Their shadowy forms twisted in mid air and landed on all fours. As soon as one of them touched the floor, she plowed her sword through one demon's head, and horizontally struck the other one. Both vaporized. Swiftly and skillfully, Aneta slung her shield to her back, and turned her focus to the one who still held her precious crown, her identity.

Determined, Aneta marched up to Depression as he attempted to slip out the door and grabbed him by his shoulder with her free hand. She shoved him against the wall, and then grabbed her crown from his clutches. He proved to be too shocked to put up a fight.

"I will take this, thank you." Aneta immediately placed her crown on her head. "I no longer need your services, and I have *never* needed your services. Goodbye and stay away. I am God's Child, and I am keeping my crown."

Depression finally regained his composure. He placed his hand on the doorknob. "Aneta...I hope you realize this means war. You opened a valve you can't shut."

"You have messed with a Child of God. I hope *that* means something to you."

"Alright." With a deep breath, Aneta nodded. "Alright, God. I'll try. I'll try to do what you request."

|Chapter 13: Another Point Of View|

Advisor held his breath as his wife tearfully nodded on the phone. As she hung up, she put her head in her hands. “Free got in a car crash.” She covered her face with both hands, trying to hide her reddening face full of tears. “He didn’t make it.”

For a while, both he and his wife cried together at the table for their son.

They did not go to the fair that Thursday night like they had planned but instead stayed home, shocked and silent. Advisor could not bear to tell anyone of what had happened, and his wife simply could not utter a word without tears springing up in her eyes.

The only thing she said the rest of the day was, “The Universe is cruel.” The statement may have made sense to her, but Advisor failed to see how that was comforting. There was no possible option to overcome his grief for his only son.

That night, he could not sleep for hours. Each time he closed his eyes, horrifying images of fire and death rose up from a mangled car, black smoke billowing from the wreck and clouding the sky. His wife slept soundly, retiring to bed early and waking up late, having called for a week off of work.

In the morning, Advisor dragged himself to work early, drained and exhausted. He had not eaten dinner or breakfast, and forgot to eat lunch as he stood behind the counter of the café, staring into space. Friday inched by. When he got home, his wife had not made dinner, so he ate a sandwich in silence.

Nothing made sense. Everything was supposed to work by chance. Why, then, was his son the one in seven billion to die that day?

Faith sighed. Her legs ached from the long day. Fridays at the restaurant always exhausted her. At one point, she finally

found a spare moment to go to the bathroom. When she came out, she saw Advisor there. She made a face as she remembered that he typically came on Sunday nights with his wife, Dr. A. Theist. But this was Friday...and he was there alone.

And something was very wrong.

His whole body slumped, and his countenance was so fatigued and ghost-like, with hollow, vacant eyes staring off into nothing.

Faith had to get back to the kitchen, but she wanted to ask.

“Advisor?”

Advisor, who evidently knew who she was and what she wanted, but seemed too drained to react in any way, simply stopped and looked at her.

“Are you...would you like prayer?” Faith gulped.

The man stared at her. It would have been disturbing if he had not already been staring blankly at the wall. “What?”

“Would you like prayer? You seem...distracted.”

“Prayer?” he repeated. “That can’t do anything now.”

Faith bit her lip, unsure of what had happened. “It can do miracles.” She wanted to say more, but nothing else came to mind.

His countenance changed from a languid attitude to a type of fierce desperation. “I know your God does things, but He is nothing I have ever seen. If your God can do anything...if He would do something for me...please ask Him for me.”

Advisor trudged in the front door around nine that night, still drained. His wife had waited up for him in bed, arms folded.

“You didn’t tell me where you were,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I was distracted. I ate out.”

“Oh. Ready for bed?”

“More than.” After hesitating, Advisor said, “Why is this so *hard*? Why should this even matter if we are nothing to the Universe?”

“What on earth are you asking?” she demanded, her confusion and annoyance tinted with sorrow. Her eyes pleaded with him not to mention it again.

“I’m sick of living with this. It has only been a day, and there is no way I could do this for the rest of my life.”

“Advisor.” His wife’s tone of voice begged him to stop talking about it.

“I can’t do it. I asked one of those young ladies to ask her God for me.”

Tears sprang into her eyes. “Advisor, stop it, stop it *right now!* I can’t stand the thought of Him or religion. Stop talking and go to bed.”

“But I am serious. I am hoping God will help me with this.”

“Are you *that* desperate?” Her eyes filled with skepticism. “Are you that desperate to ask some random fictional Being for help? Even if He exists, what makes you think He can do anything more than the Universe? Which one evolved us?”

“I’m going to church on Sunday to figure out something. That group of young people have more than we do, and I want to know *what* exactly it is. I don’t know if it’s their God or not. But I’m going.”

His wife turned under the covers and humphed, too tired to debate about it.

In the morning, he walked to the café. Even though everything felt worthless, he still hoped one of the young men or women starting that new church could help him. His wife showed up around noon with a homemade lunch for him. She remained there until they closed, all the while gently talking to him about how they couldn’t do anything about their son’s accident and it was better to forget everything.

Despite his wife’s careful, caressing words, which he knew were trying to calm him into thinking he did not have to go to church, Advisor still walked across the street on Sunday at noon to church.

He saw Aneta singing in front with another girl while a man played the guitar. After a few songs, Theo stood up to speak. Advisor slowly relaxed as the service continued.

He thought about sitting down near the back, but remained standing. He soon spotted Broken. However, he had heard that was no longer her name. She went by Gracefully Broken now. In awe, Advisor realized what a gentle, confident, young lady she had become. It was a vastly different image than she had presented only a few short months ago.

He watched two young women take care of a few little ones near the back, where he stood with a slight smile. It reminded him of his younger days with Free. He spotted Courage in one of the rows, intently listening to every word of Theo's. How did the five young adults have so much influence in so many peoples' lives? There were at least twenty people here, adults and children, all listening to what Theo brought forth.

Advisor stood there until the service was done. He did not know how to approach Theo, but he did not have to because Faith walked up to him, bringing Theo over.

"Hello, Advisor." Theo smiled.

Despite being over twice the young man's age, Advisor felt overwhelmed at the young man's spirit. There was something Theo possessed that he could only dream of. The way Theo carried himself, spoke of life, and walked in peace astounded him.

Theo asked, "How are you today?"

Advisor paused before replying. "My son died a few days ago." He watched as Theo's face whitened with concern.

"I am so sorry."

"I'm not quite sure what to do. I asked this young lady, Faith, to pray on my behalf, but I'm not sure what God will say." Advisor kept going, before Theo could say anything. "Why did my son die?" He threw the question out there, knowing whatever answer the young man could offer would not make sense anyway.

Theo paused. "I'm not sure. It isn't God's will that anyone dies. But men's free will exists. Every action of a person has consequences; they may be good or bad."

"My life has been a wreck, and it has only been three days. I can't live like this." All of a sudden, Advisor felt foolish for asking help from a young man like Theo.

"I don't know what you are going through, but know that you are welcome to come here whenever we have services... Wednesdays as well. The squad...Aneta, Bold, Faith, Courage...will definitely keep you in prayer. Even if we don't know what your grief is like, we understand it must be horrible to go through this."

Despite his sullen thoughts, Advisor nodded, relieved that their prayer might help, even if it was in the smallest portion. "Thank you. I might come on Wednesday."

Theo shook his hand, then Advisor left the building.

In the fifteen-second interval between the old town hall and his front door, his nightmare roared to life again as a car innocently drove by. This time, it began with the last conversation he had with his son.

"Dad, I don't want to talk about this right now." Free's frustrated voice echoed through to Advisor's side of the phone conversation.

"No, we are talking about this now. Your mother just wanted to see you for her birthday. That is the least you could do."

"I told you. I couldn't make it. I had other plans."

"Like what? Hanging out with your friends?"

"Yes! It was Sunday. What do you expect? Look, I'll come and visit you on Thursday. The fair is that day. She'll love that just as much. We used to go to that when I was little, remember? It'll be a fun surprise."

"It doesn't change the fact that you never even called your mother." Advisor humphed and hung up the phone.

Advisor shuddered. He stopped in front of the door. Instead, he backed up and walked around to the back yard, mumbling to himself. After pacing for a few moments, in a sudden burst of rage, Advisor snatched up the metal baseball bat and began whacking the trash can with all his strength. After taking his anger out on the metal canister, Advisor sank down against the side of the house, exhausted and tearful.

“Blame it on God if it will make you feel better.” His wife stood next to him.

From the ground, Advisor sighed. “You don’t get it!”

“Yes I do, Advisor!” His wife pointed at her chest. “He was my son, too!” Tears fell from her own cheeks. “You aren’t the only one suffering! God is a cruel Being. You know it. Just admit it!”

“It’s not that simple.” Advisor moaned and bowed his head between his knees. “The service was quite interesting. Haven’t you noticed God has a lot of followers for being ‘cruel?’ There is more to God than we originally thought.”

Dr. A. Theist sighed and walked away. “I can’t believe you.”

On Wednesday evening, Advisor walked to the old town hall, earnestly wondering if God would really help him out. He arrived early and met with some other people there, a few of whom he recognized from around town. Conversing with them, Advisor slowly learned how amazing God had been to them. This put him in a curious state of mind. After carefully listening to what the young man named Bold, who taught that night, had to say, he made up his mind. When the Bible study ended, he walked up to Theo.

“I apologize for my actions towards you young people. And Broken...Gracefully Broken too. But I enjoyed the words of Bold this evening. If you could tell me more about God, it would be greatly appreciated.”

“It would be a pleasure.” Theo smiled.

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