

MORTALITY DEVOID OF MORALITY
THE WILLPOWER TO
BREAK AWAY

*“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving, he who teaches, in his teachings, he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”
(Romans 12: 6-8)*

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Steve couldn't recall when the man he affectionately referred to as the Storyteller wasn't a cornerstone of his existence. Each night, as the heavy doors of his quarters creaked shut, sealing off the outside world, an intense stillness enveloped him. From the depths of that silence, the Storyteller emerged—an enigmatic figure, embodying the mysteries of creation and the undeniable call to faith. They would sink into their nightly ritual, the air swirling with ancient tales drawn from Scripture and rich traditions— stories that breathed life into his very being, crafting a vivid portrait of a Creator who held His children close with unwavering love.

“Listen closely, Steve,” the Storyteller cautioned, his voice deep and resonant like thunder brewing in the distance. “What I reveal to you comes with risks. Remain vigilant; not everyone is prepared to embrace these sacred truths.” The weight of his warning settled over Steve like a heavy cloak, embedding itself deep within his heart. A chilling memory flickered to life—a child as young as he was at the

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time, silenced forever by a cold, unfeeling machine, merely for talking to himself after a trivial mishap. That memory gnawed at him: innocence shattered in an instant, a stark reminder of a world indifferent to the sanctity of life. At just eight years old, Steve faced a daunting revelation: what had once seemed a simple act—speaking to himself—had transformed into a potential death sentence in a society gripped by fear, wary of anything that resembled prayer.

Every tale spun by the Storyteller pierced through the lies, illuminating painful truths about the world. But tomorrow loomed large, marking his transition into adulthood—a plunge into a world where faith was illegal and hope flickered like a candle in a hurricane. That night, as their moments together slipped away into the stark reality of change, the Storyteller's voice broke the silence one final time, a solemn melody striking a chord deep within Steve's soul.

"Are you ready for the trials that await you, Steve?"

"No," he admitted, his voice trembling like a leaf caught in a gust. "But I'll feign excitement. If I don't, they'll sense my fear and realize just how much I understand."

The Storyteller's eyes darkened, infused with sadness and urgency, deepening the lines of concern on his wise face. "Soon, you will seek refuge in the wilderness, but for now, you must navigate this unforgiving city. Seek out a companion amidst the harshness. Even when the night feels everlasting, remember—you are never alone. Hold fast to your faith; the Lord walks beside you, His light capable of piercing through all things."

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A storm of emotions washed over Steve, tears glistening in his eyes as the weight of reality settled into his chest like lead: this was it—their final meeting. “Are you really not coming back?” he asked, the words heavy with a bitter taste of fear, each syllable tinged with desperation.

“Not until the time is right,” the Storyteller replied, his voice soothing but filled with mystery as his form melted slowly into the encroaching evil. “Let my teachings be your guiding light, a beacon within your heart. Stay strong; allow your faith to ground you in the course of the storm.”

With those parting words resonating in his mind, the Storyteller vanished into the night, leaving Steve swirling in a tempest of uncertainty and dread. Sleep eluded him, obscurities draping over him like a shroud, with anticipations whispering fears in the stillness.

When dawn finally emerged, shattering the night like glass crashing to the floor, Steve found himself thrust into the city’s brutal embrace—a place starkly unfamiliar and unsettling.

He moved through streets rife with misery, where bodies sprawled like discarded dreams—some clinging tenuously to life, eyes glazed with agony, others lifeless, victims of a merciless society. The people around him shambled like specters, robbed of humanity as they overlooked the suffering around them, turning a blind eye to the broken souls that lined their path. Each face seemed like a ghost, merely surviving against a grim backdrop of anguish. In opposition within him flickered a fragile spark of

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hope— an ember ignited by the faith the Storyteller had graciously instilled in him. He believed that love and redemption could still bloom even in the darkest corners of existence.

As Meech pressed forward, the fear attempting to engulf him like an ill-omened hallucination, unable to believe what he observed was indisputable. But against the dreary gray cloud resting gloomily on his morality, he glimpsed a vibrant neighborhood pulsating with defiance— a vivid symbol of a superior existence that stood in stark contrast to the dejection engulfing those around him. He could see just past the entrance; the streets were alive with breathtaking murals and resilient symbols, each splash of color resonating like a heartbeat, a powerful reminder that hope could flicker and thrive even during the darkest times. Fueled by a renewed sense of determination, he moved onward, only to be met by an imposing figure: a colossal gatekeeper whose profile cloaked him, a menacing presence in the brisk air.

“State your business!” the gatekeeper roared, his voice booming like thunder, echoing off the brick walls of the narrow alleyways. He blocked Meech's path with a massive arm, demanding an exorbitant fee that was far beyond anything Meech could hope to pay. Panic surged through him as he was unceremoniously shoved to the ground, his heart pounding wildly in his chest, each frantic beat amplifying his fear. On the ground before the gargantuan figure, Meech felt dwarfed, as if he were just a fragile ant beneath a boot. The gatekeeper's scowl carved deep lines into his otherwise smooth, glistening visage, a harsh reminder of the daunting world that lay beyond the gate. Once lost among the

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other boys, Meech now felt painfully smaller, his presence reduced to a mere skeleton under the weight of the giant's looming presence.

With a grand flourish, the gatekeeper drew his sword, the blade glinting ominously in the dim light, a silent threat that hung in the air like a guillotine waiting to fall. Just as the tension thickened, saturated with the promise of violence, a flicker of light pierced through the emptiness. A young woman emerged from the vibrant alley, exuding fierce compassion that seemed almost otherworldly, like an angel sent to intervene. Her tall, graceful form moved with the poise of a ballerina, positioning herself effortlessly between Meech and the looming danger, embodying calm confidence.

“Wait! Please don’t hurt him!” she shouted, her voice unwavering and determined. Her violet hair waved in the wind, slicing through the heavy tension like a beacon in a storm. “He’s new to the city and here to see me. I’ll cover his fee,” she implored, her words cutting through the suffocating atmosphere like a flickering candle in a forgotten church. In that crucial moment, her presence reminded Meech that mercy and compassion could still bloom in a world rife with cruelty.

In that electric moment, Steve felt a surge of faith ignite within him. Perhaps, even in this city consumed by futility, divine connections awaited, ready to lead him toward a destiny long whispered within his heart. With hope swelling in his chest and a spirit prepared to rise above the looming storm, Steve stood tall, resolved to face the unknown. He believed that even

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when trapped in the relentless brutality, he would never truly be alone.

“Damn it, Cienna!” Lucius rumbled, his voice a raw grumble that reverberated like distant thunder. Frustration simmered just beneath the surface, ready to erupt as he shot her a fierce glare. “What in the world possessed you to jump in front of him like that? You could have seriously hurt yourself! What were you thinking?”

Cienna met his fiery gaze with a playful smirk that danced on her lips, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

“Oh, come on, Lucius. If you were to hurt me, who would be there to turn you down every single day? I couldn’t just stand by and watch you aim your wrath at someone I actually like. Take this as your fee—now let him through.”

A charged silence enveloped them, thick with unspoken hopes for a peaceful resolution. The tension crackled around them like static electricity, leaving Lucius with an uncomfortable knot of anger twisting in his stomach. He fought to keep his composure as he begrudgingly accepted the money, anxiety looming closer like an impending storm. Just as Steve attempted to step forward, Lucius blocked his way again, his annoyance warping his features into a menacing snarl. “I’ll consider this fee as penance for making me draw my weapon,” he snapped, his voice slicing through the air with a bitter edge. “But don’t think for a second that you’re off the hook. You still owe me for passage, plus an extra \$20,000 for that little mouth of hers.”

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Cienna's mood darkened as impatience tightened its grip, saturating the air between them with an almost electric tension. With an exasperated sigh, she rummaged through her purse, pulling out another stack of cash, each bill a desperate plea for safety. Her heart raced, and the atmosphere crackled like a brewing storm. Finally, Lucius shifted aside, but the danger still loomed large. Cienna clutched Steve's hand tightly, a rush of urgency coursing through her veins, warning her of an unseen threat. They dashed past the guard, bursting into the commotion of the city, a wild beast waiting to pounce.

"Hi, I'm Cienna," she said quickly, trying to project warmth despite her unease. "What's your name?"

"Uh, I'm Steve," he stammered, still grappling with the near-violent encounter. "But why did you lie to him? You don't even know me!" Anxiety clamped down on his throat, forcing the question out in a rush.

"Just... don't ask questions until we get to my place, okay?" she whispered urgently, her tone sharpening with authority. "If we don't, we're both in serious trouble." Cienna's gaze darted around them, every instinct on high alert as she sensed the looming presence lurking just out of sight, a predator hiding in the shadows. An icy shiver ran down her spine; they were being followed. Gripping Steve's hand fiercely, she pushed herself to run faster than she ever thought possible, a primal need to escape whatever dark hunt drew ever closer.

As they rounded a corner, a charming house emerged, nestled within a vibrant garden alive with color and fragrance. Daisies danced alongside

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hyacinths, lilies, and roses, creating a lush tapestry that filled the air with its sweet perfume—a hymn of nature in full bloom. The floral scents wrapped around Steve like a soothing embrace, momentarily washing away the city's dispiriting staleness and transforming the garden into a serene refuge for weary souls.

Inside, the house welcomed the breathless duo with its flourishing plants and decor— simple yet elegant, emanating hope and resilience. As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, Cienna's mood shifted, concern etching lines across her face. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, oozing tension. "If anyone finds out I helped you without a solid reason, we could both be in deep trouble. Here, kindness can be perceived as weakness, and it often invites terrible consequences. There are those who would revel in my disappearance—

I have a handful of allies in the system who keep that at bay, but I can't draw more danger than necessary."

Steve blinked, taken aback by her gravity. "But why did you help me then?" Bewilderment washed over him.

Cienna paused, her gaze thoughtful, as if measuring her response with delicate care. "I can't fully explain it. There was this invisible pull, like a magnetic force drawing me toward you. But tell me this—what drove you to this reckless path? Lucius could have killed you, and nobody would have cared."

"I just arrived, and honestly, I didn't even realize what kind of place I was walking into," he confessed, brow furrowing as crowded memories spilled forth. "Like

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you said... it was wreckless.” Suddenly growing alert, he added, “But wait... how did you know I just got here?”

“I didn’t. I just guessed,” she said, her eyes sparkling with intrigue. “Isn’t it fascinating how our instincts often lead us to surprising truths when we let them? But listen, if you stick to the inner city, you can dodge the tolls. Every exit comes with a price when it’s time to turn back. Welcome to the safest corner of this realm—though ‘safe’ is all about perspective. You can repay me by pretending to be my ‘lover.’”

Steve shot up from the couch, disbelief flooding through him like icy water. “Wait, what? No way! I can’t—”

Cienna’s laughter filled the room, a melodic sound that brightened the dim space around them. “It’s not what you think! Just tell people you’re my lover when they ask. It’ll keep away unwanted advances and give me the freedom to create without interruptions. They’ll believe I’m taken, allowing me the space to capture my thoughts. In exchange, I’ll provide you with shelter, food, and friendship—that’s all I ask. My heart belongs to my writing.”

“Writing? What do you write about?” Curiosity began to chip away at his initial shock.

“A tapestry of truths that unfolds before me,” she replied, her voice filled with passion. “I work as a journalist for the local newspaper, where I often polish the rough edges of reality to fit their narrow narrative. But the true story is layered with complexity. Alongside my articles, I keep a private

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journal—an honest reflection of our lives and the stories we imagine. I dream of a world where we can roam freely in nature, unburdened by the weights that hold us back.” As she spoke, her vision drifted toward a future both tantalizingly close and just out of reach.

Steve felt the weight of her words reverberate within him, echoing through his very being. Their struggles, though different, brought them together by a common melody of resilience, hope, and an unwavering longing for freedom he knew could only be found in faith. Even without fully grasping the guidance she followed, he sensed she was in tune with the Lord. Together, they could forge a partnership that transcended mere survival, creating a sanctuary of understanding among the confusion. The vibrant garden outside, alive with bursts of color, symbolized the beauty they could cultivate even in adversity—a living testament to divine grace.

As Steve nestled into the warm embrace of the well-worn couch, a wave of exhilarating energy surged through him, awakening a deep-seated passion in his soul, much like the first rays of dawn breaking through the night’s grip. The fabric cradled him, soft and welcoming, each thread echoing memories of quiet moments spent on his couch in deep thought and reflection.

Suddenly, Cienna’s voice sliced through the tranquil atmosphere, rich and melodious, each word infused with a fierce determination that held his undivided attention. Her tone radiated a connection to something greater, as if she were tapping into a reservoir of wisdom that enveloped them both. With