

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”
—Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence

Weapons Against our Flaws

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Society and the way of life of the whole world had collapsed 70 years ago, taking with it the lights, the laws, most of the people and the very concept of a nation that prided itself as a well working society. Now, there were no more borders, only scraps of lawless fields of dark ash covered lands and the brutal bones of the now bordered cities.

Inside a scrap metal and old wood tavern on the outskirts of the ash covered town, the air smelled of ozone, cheap alcohol, and the heavy musk of desperate people, old smoke and debris and ashes of the city that once stood suffocated the atmosphere. In the back right corner, beneath a flickering neon sign that died over a decade ago, an old man named Arthur Quince sat behind a charred wooden table. He was a "Keeper,"; one of the last few remaining people who could still read the pre-collapse text.

On the table between his old wrinkled, weathered hands laid a burned, grease stained piece of torn up thin paper that had been glued together more times than anyone could count. He guarded it as if it were a whole brick of gold, his eyes watching the shadows of the dark tavern for any sign of trouble or anyone even looking in his direction.

A young scavenger named Nova slid into the seat across from him. She let out a heavy groan and dropped her ragged bag onto the table, it clinked with the heavy, satisfying sound of rusted gears and copper wiring.

"I want to hear the words again" Nova said, wiping a streak of engine grease from her cheek. "The one about how the old world worked." "Remember? The one you always used to read to me when I was younger?" Nova said, raising her eyebrows, her eyes full of curiosity and hope.

Arthur smiled and gave a tired, deep sounding chuckle, showing a row of cracked teeth. He carefully smoothed out the fragile paper, his calloused index finger tracing the very faded, elegant cursive script. He cleared his throat as he started to read.

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Nova frowned, her brow raising. As she interrupted his story "What's 'equal' mean? You use that word, but it doesn't sound like anything that could be real, not in this world."

"It means that back then, before the sky turned to ash and all the cities fell, a king and a gutter crawler were worth the same under the law," Arthur explained softly, his voice a low rasp. "If a powerful warlord killed a scavenger in the street, the warlord was hunted down. They put him in a cage for years, because the scavenger's life had the exact same value as his."

Nova laughed. It was a barking sound that drew a brief, nervous glance from the bartender and the other people in the tavern most likely thinking she was crazy.

"That's a fairytale, old man," Nova said, leaning forward and gesturing toward the rusted door of the tavern. "Look around. If I get sick out in the wastes, I die in a ditch. If anyone else wants my scrap bag, they take it and break my ribs just for looking at them. If a group wants to clear out a mutant settlement to dig for fuel, they burn them out. No one cares here; it doesn't matter what you do. Nobody is born an equal old man. You should know this. Some are born with guns, and some are born with huge targets on their backs. That's just how the world works, it's just a fact. It's the fight of the fittest but also the most clever in the end."

Arthur didn't argue with her. He looked down at the parchment, his thumb brushing against the charred edges where a long-dead fire had tried to consume history, but it could not fully succeed.

"Listen very closely to me Nova, It wasn't a description of how things actually were," Arthur said, his voice dropping to a reverent whisper. "Even when they wrote this down, they had slaves. They had poverty. They had kings who thought they were gods. The men who signed this and even created this were flawed and blind to half their own cruelties. They didn't see all the bad going on, they were blindsighted."

Nova squinted at the old man. "If it was all a lie then why do you treat that scrap of paper like it's magic, like it's the words of some god?"

"Because it wasn't a description," Arthur said, carefully rolling the parchment back up and tucking it into a protective torn leather sleeve. "It was a dare. They wrote it down so that the world would have a standard to fail against. They drew a line in the dirt and said, 'This is what humanity actually looks like when we are at our best.' They gave us a weapon to use against the flaws"

Arthur leaned across the table, his eyes locking onto Nova's with a fierce intensity.

"They didn't write it because it was true, Nova. They wrote it down so we would never stop fighting the people who tried to prove it wrong."