

All The Same

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“ALL THE SAME”

THEY SAID THAT, given enough time, even a single thread of water could wear a hardened slab of granite down to its last grain.

Cassian finally let his chest deflate with a long, slow sigh, his fingers absentmindedly tilling through the loose gravel crunching beneath his seated frame. It was true, wasn't it? No matter how strong, how resilient, how unyielding a thing might be—in this case, a thick layer of rock—given enough time, patience, and the gentle, subtle indifference of something else that simply would not stop no matter the time it took, nothing was truly indestructible. Not even granite.

His back uncomfortably settled again on the rough, knobby oak bark, the ancient tree's sprawling roots jutting in and out of the ground around him. Cassian looked up, squinting at the morning sunlight filtering in through the dazzling hues of red and orange leaves lazily swaying in the crisp October breeze. Take this tree, for example—it

had lived long before a single page of his life had ever come to be, and it would live far beyond the final breath his physical body would take. It stood, immovable, unyielding, ancient but as hard as stone.

And yet, Cassian knew, something even more unyielding than itself would eventually wear it down: time. Second by second, year by year, this unyielding oak slowly drew closer to an inevitable fate that would fell it like all other trees to have lived and died before it, and all other trees to come after it. And time would endlessly march on, unphased, unbothered, a steady trickling of water that simply would not cease.

There was nothing new under the sun; what had been would one day be, and what would one day be had already been. In the end, it was all the same.

Cassian drew his knees up to his chest, his lungs quickly drawing in a sharp breath. It was no different for him, was it? He'd been through the same cycle, the same battle, the same inexhaustible pattern of endless defeat again and again and again. There was nothing new, nothing original—it was all the same. But he wasn't a massive tree, or a thick layer of stone; he wasn't the first, and he wouldn't be the last. It was simply his turn in line. If even this tree couldn't stop its own deathfall at the hands of the silently cold indifference of time, how could he? Hours, minutes,

seconds—it was only a matter of time before he yielded to the unyielding, just as it always was. Nothing more, nothing less.

All the same.

Cassian violently shivered at the thought, the cold and dry November wind drawing burning tears from his heavy eyes. Or was it something else that drew them, instead? He rubbed his eyes with both fists and squeezed them shut, groaning and letting his head fall back into the bark's scraggy embrace. Waiting one breath, then two, he slowly opened them, staring up at the brown and amber tufts of leaves still hanging on amidst the gray backdrop of a sky drooping with clouds. He'd been here so many times before, and the knowledge of his own interminable, ceaseless existence of this living death gnawed at his mind like the pit of hunger in his gut.

He shivered again and pulled the thick sleeves of his red hoodie down, maybe not so much to shield him from the wind as it was to shield him from the red and purple blotches of needle injections running up and down his veins.

Cassian held his knees closer to his chest and buried his chin in the warm folds of the hoodie, as though it would protect him from the outside world as well as the world of darkness beating and pulsing in every thrum of his heart.

From outside the safety of his little cocoon he could see a mother walking with her son across the way, the child clutching a neatly wrapped red and green Christmas present, a perfect little box complete with a sparkling bow on top.

The boy turned and looked, eyes locking with Cassian's just as the first snowflake fell, dozens, and then not long after, hundreds following suit. The child's eyes betrayed his innocence, that much Cassian could tell. A sparkling yet indifferent curiosity peered out from those small brown orbs, neither disdain nor compassion flowing out. And that was just like a child, he thought. Too innocent to understand the darkness, too young to really know the light. He had no way of even knowing what deserved compassion, and what did not—and before the day was over, he'd surely return to his warm and comfortable life, the night's deepest concerns over if he could have one cookie or two after eating his dinner that he'd really rather not have. No, something from McDonald's would be much better suited for him than the brussels sprouts adorning his full plate, but at least they'd had that pizza he'd really liked the night before.

Memories flitted through Cassian's mind as he watched the two walk, the mother clearly carrying the impression of a young power woman with her arched high heels and

the designer winter jacket clinging to her healthy frame, the boy's rosy red cheeks full of life and contentment, empty only of the knowledge of what it felt like to be truly empty.

The mother followed her son's gaze over to the old oak tree with the strange, red-hooded gaunt man hunched beneath it, arching a single perfect brow before grabbing a puffy mitt and yanking the well-dressed boy forward and away.

The child glanced back once more as they approached a bend in the trail, and then they were both out of sight, the billowing plumes of snow-laden wind gusting over where they'd just been only seconds before.

Cassian gasped as another sharp gust of sleet-filled air hit him square in the face, his thin frame doubling over to lay on the icy, snow-covered gravel. Howling wind barreled into his ears and he hid his hands in his sleeves. Everything changed with time, but nothing really did. It was all the same, all the same. His stomach angrily growled in protest at its cold, empty home, but the memory of blissful warmth spreading through his veins is all that filled his empty mind. He didn't understand; all he wanted is what he hated, and all he hated is what he wanted. He never did what he wanted, because whatever he wanted is all he did.

He groaned and rolled over, staring at the dark gray, low-hanging clouds. The oak tree's bare, scraggly branches seemed to claw at their undersides, as though reaching for the cold, empty sky. No birds, no sunlight, no leaves—just cold, barren emptiness, like the empty withered husk his heart had become. Empty, always full of emptiness.

All the same. It was only all the same.

Cassian forced himself to a sitting position, then, using the tree's bark as a handhold, he staggered to his feet, leaning on the tree's side for balance. Feeling the hesitant rays of a late winter sun gently warming his neck, he pulled his sleeves up, but stopped and winced when he caught sight of the streaks and splotches of red and purple and even black splayed all over his arms.

Cassian staggered over to the small duck pond nestled in the folds of the park's hilly terrain, leaning to look at his reflection upon the smooth pane of water visible amidst the thawing ice. What he remembered was someone full of life, happiness, promise. Now, all he saw was something empty, something hollow inside. The gaunt, bony face of a stranger looked up to greet him, the other man's baggy, bloodshot eyes boring into his own.

How had he turned into this? How did he even get put on this path in the first place?

Cassian staggered away from the pond, pulling the

sleeves on his hoodie down despite the growing warmth of the morning sun. Birds chirped and sang their Springtime song, lilacs bloomed, and far off in the distance, far enough away not to have to look at the pitiable sight of a filthy addict full of the stench of his own emptiness, he could hear children laughing and playing. Cars honked and flew to and fro on the highway just beyond that, the occasional screech of brakes cutting through the humid air. A whole world out there, oblivious to his mere existence.

Cassian staggered back to the oak tree, his one last loyal friend that would never leave him—because it couldn't. He looked up at the bright green leaves blooming in sheaves of yellow pollen, knowing that he would leave this earth long before this tree ever did.

He finally stopped and placed a hand on the rough bark, then fell onto it, clinging to its rough edges to keep from collapsing. His chest heaved in silent, gasping sobs as the full realization of everything came crashing down on him. His wasted life, his parents' disownment, his empty stomach and emptier heart, and his mind still stubbornly, obsessively, greedily fixated on the one thing he had left to be full of—his very reason for living.

His pulse was already quickening at the thought, his hands clammy in anticipation. He knew where to go to get some. He knew what he'd have to do to get it, but he was

far past the point of holding scruples now, wasn't he?

Over the singing birds and laughing children and honking cars, he suddenly heard something else ring through the warm, pollen-filled spring air. Clanging bells cut swathes through the humidity and chaos of a frantic, business-minded world that had left him in the dust long ago. Church bells, a beckoning for any and all to come through its doors, ringing out with a clarity as sharp as a blade.

But he'd heard those bells every week for the past year, hadn't he? He knew he'd be welcomed there, wanted there, even—but he just couldn't. Didn't know how to, really. He knew he was empty, knew he wanted to feel whole again, knew he hated the only thing he'd learned to want anymore, but he didn't know how to get out. He knew what he had to do, but he didn't have the strength to do it, did he? He never had.

As the bells continued their frantic cries to a world too full of emptiness to bother caring, Cassian found himself staggering forward, knowing where to get his next fix. To the traffic corner, then down 21st, across the alley—that's where he needed to go. He stumbled onto the sidewalk, furtive glances from the well-dressed passersby lashing into him like a whip as they parted like the Red Sea.

A beauty and vibrancy lay springing to life in every

nook and cranny of the city, Spring finally eclipsing the harsh and bitter cold of a long, cruel winter. Cassian stumbled to the edge of the intersection, staring numbly out at the cars racing by. How easy would it be just to end his struggle, end his suffering, and finally fix himself once and for all? Just a few quick steps and he could be free before anyone on the road even knew what was happening, nothing more than another forgotten statistic in a city full of them. It's not like he hadn't already thought about it, more times than he could remember.

Cassian steadied himself by holding onto the pedestrian crossing pole, its soft beeping as the crossing signal changed barely a whisper as cars honked, people chattered, and church bells rang all around him. He glanced up, the light telling him to cross. There lay 21st Street, and beyond it, he knew, his fix. There was nothing new under the sun; what had been, would be again. What would be, had already been.

He looked back at the church behind him, parishioners filtering in, then back at the comparatively quiet street, trash strewn up and down its sidewalks. Just one more time, just one more. But isn't that what he always said? All the same, nothing changed.

A memory came floating back from somewhere in the depths of his tortured mind, his grandmother reading to

him. The only person he'd ever felt had loved him as a child. Cassian looked back at the church, then back again at the street. What had she been reading? It was something he knew, something lost in the outer shadows of his mind's eyes—but still there all the same.

He stared ahead at the crossway signal's blinking image of a man walking, Cassian's bright white cue to move forward staring him straight in the eye. What had she been reading? Something about redemption, God, forgiveness. But what was it she'd said?

Beads of tingling sweat slowly formed through the pores in his nose and forehead, his throat feeling chalky and lined with silt as he blankly watched the crosswalk sign change, a countdown from ten beginning as his window of opportunity to cross slowly closed. Something about birds too, something—that was it! Cassian closed his eyes and let the one verse she'd always recited bloom and grow in his mind as he recalled the memory, still the same as it had been all those years ago.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”¹

¹ Luke 12:6-7, English Standard Version.

He swallowed as his eyes slowly opened again, his pulse shallow and rapid as he watched the countdown for the crosswalk pass five, then get to two, then one, then nothing at all. And landing on it just as the cars started flying through the intersection again was a little flitting sparrow, its head tilting as it stared directly into him.

In that moment, on some level, he became aware that a very important thing had just taken place. Something deep inside him had finally shifted, changed course. For the first time, in a very long time.

With sweat breaking out all over his body, he slowly shuffled to turn around, moving as though in a dream. Eyes unblinking, Cassian lifted one trembling foot in front of the other, walking through the fog enveloping him, slowly falling unaware of anything but the sound of those ringing, ringing bells.

Maybe time wasn't the only thing that persistently followed him, maybe the fix wasn't the only thing that wanted his attention. Maybe there was something else, something that had always been there. Something he could finally find to make him whole, to fill the emptiness that filled him. He'd tried everything else, hadn't he? And it was always the same every time, all the same.

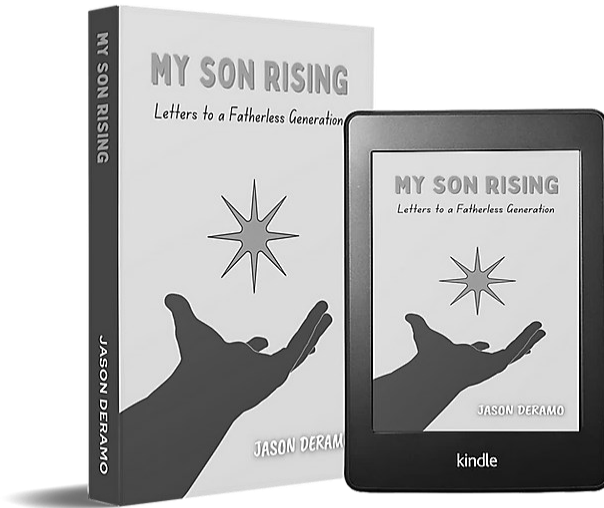
They said that, given enough time, even a single thread of water could wear a hardened slab of granite down to its

last grain. But the same was true of a hardened, cold heart full of its own emptiness, was it not? And when that happened, nothing would ever quite be the same again.

And in the end, that made all the difference.

(RECOMMENDED TITLE)

Have you ever been hurt or abused, and tired of running from the pain? Were you abandoned, wounded, or rejected by the people you loved most? Maybe you've never received grace before, like no matter how hard you try, it's just not enough.



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