

BROKEN & VESSEL

BOOK 1

THE BEDROCK GATE

PROLOGUE

Bound

Kithlom tore through the brambles of Taren Forest, nearly catching his long white hair on thorny branches. Lightning seared the canopy. Thunder rattled his bones and crumbled his remaining courage.

Morik, the Lacmar Lord, was nigh.

Kithlom flicked his black staff, sending a blast of wind before him. A few branches snapped, but it wasn't enough to clear his path. The forest gouged his cloak as he pushed onward.

As he neared his destination, he ducked behind a stout trunk to catch his breath. The scheme was proceeding as planned, but he still bemoaned his role in it.

Sudden movement disturbed the nearby undergrowth. A dozen figures, nearly identical to Kithlom, emerged from the foliage. The Ganok, with their distinctive white hair coiling in the wind, leered with ghoulish faces.

Kithlom grit his teeth to play his part, then stepped out to reveal himself. He aimed his staff at them with no intention of using it.

"You!" he croaked. "You cannot—"

His insides melted when one of the Ganok approached, disregarding Kithlom's threat.

"Traitor!" The Ganok's voice rivaled the wind. He pierced Kithlom with a haughty gaze. "Always a traitor!"

The Ganoks' staves, ripe with dark magic, aimed towards Kithlom. With a simple twitch of their weapons, a burst of air buffeted the trees, followed swiftly by a volley of rocks.

Kithlom bolted as the rocks cracked the trunks behind him. He wove through the labyrinth until he spotted what he was looking for—the edge of the Fallow, the cursed bog. But he languished in the forest's claws, allowing the Ganok to draw nearer with threatening footfalls.

"Kithlom," one spoke his name like a taunt, "you cannot flee from

our Lord.”

The Ganok reached for him, but Kithlom propelled himself with an inhuman leap, higher than the treetops, before landing a safe distance from his pursuers.

“Now!” boomed a man’s voice from somewhere in the Fallow.

The ground beneath the Taren Forest caved, forming a whirlpool of dirt around the Ganok. The three ancient gods, resembling mere men, emerged from their hiding places. Vibrant hair adorned their heads: gray, green and gold, respectively. All three raised their hands in unison to sustain the sinking spiral.

The Ganok succumbed to the trap, wailing and crying as the hellish mass buried them underground. Their muffled cries rose as a flash of heat turned the ground to glass, sealing them inside.

The man from the Fallow finally crept into view at the edge of the Ganoks’ glass grave. His bushy beard and scraggy hair gave him the appearance of a shrub.

The three gods nodded to him, then to one another. But to Kithlom they only offered a blank stare. No one spoke.

Thunder rumbled, and they turned to see Morik’s darkness billowing above the treetops. Their enemy had accepted the ruse.

Kithlom used this opportunity to crouch behind a log.

When Morik arrived, he was concealed in a tight column of destruction—a tornado of shadow. The only sign of his presence was an eerie, black light shimmering inside the torrent. He immediately sent cloudy tendrils at the gods.

The eldest countered by whipping a vortex of his own. The other gods fluttered their arms, sending trees and rocks into it. Their storm met Morik’s gloom with a deafening report.

The bout persisted—two spirals competing for dominance—until at last Morik’s howls of pain resounded. Their deep reverberations made Kithlom’s skull creak.

“The stone!” roared one of the gods. “Take the stone!”

Kithlom gaped as the mortal man leapt into Morik’s torrent, hand outstretched to grab the shimmering object inside. The man’s skin radiated as he clutched his quarry. His hair gleamed like hot wire.

Morik bellowed again, nearly suffocating the man’s glow with a redoubling of his dark cloud. The battle was evenly-matched and showed no sign of stopping. Pops of light and cracks of dark littered the air as the four heroes battled the foe.

Kithlom glanced down at his staff, convincing himself it wouldn’t be

enough to aid the fight. He peeked over the log, only risking a single eye to monitor the fight.

Trees shattered, unable to withstand the clash of pure white and pure shadow. Amidst it all, the radiant mortal flapped like a flag, refusing to release the shimmering dark object.

A white light pulsed inside the dark tornado. Morik hissed with alarm before he was silenced by a crunch of earth and wood. The mortal likewise cried with terror. His voice echoed and faded, as if falling down a giant cistern, before he was heard no more.

When the wind subsided, bringing the ruined forest to stillness, Kithlom crept out of his hiding. The eldest god stood before a pillar of wood and rock, brushing his hand across it as if it were the casket of a loved one.

Kithlom noticed the bony fingers of the Lacmar Lord drooping out of it, motionless. "We must seal this with the Tarendril." He conjured strength in his voice. "If he gets out and finds me, I'll be—"

"Morik is bound," the eldest said, voice faint. His gray hair shrouded his expression.

The prison swelled with a dark light.

"He still has the Ziru stone," Kithlom countered. "No amount of rock and wood will be enough to hold him. You must awaken the Tarendril."

The god tossed him a sour look with his ancient face. "I expect as much from a Ganok. You doubt the strength of my brothers. This prison is not made from mere elements. They gave," his voice faded as he sauntered away, "everything."

Kithlom addressed the pillar and recognized the melted shapes of the two gods—one of wood, one of rock—coiling around the enemy.

Nearby, the glassy ground glistened. Kithlom stepped over and peered down. Despite the hazy surface, the dark forms of the Ganok could still be seen. They rested like frozen threats. Kithlom thought he could see their eyes watching him—waiting for their chance to one day emerge. He gently waved his staff to conjure a breeze until it covered their gazes with a layer of dust.

"And what of the mortal?" Kithlom asked, turning again to the eldest. "Did he perish from touching the stone?"

"He is...gone," the god muttered, now walking aimlessly. "All of them. Gone."

Kithlom's eyes narrowed. He tensed his limbs, finding strength to stand tall once again. He knew what he had to do.

1

Secret

Ander Barr pressed his temple against the bus window to silence the worming in his mind. Every bump in the road rattled his skull as he watched the passing trees blur. Their drab, leafless branches were a reminder that Northern Minnesota was due for its first blanket of snow.

The spacious hardwoods faded from view when the bus turned onto Bear Trap Road, where darker trees grew. The shift in light pried Ander off the pane. As the only seventeen-year-old onboard, he surveyed the younger kids from his backseat throne. The vantage made him want to slip out the back door.

The road descended into a tunnel of pines and bedrock outcrops. The bus tires clicked over the Thompson Creek bridge and its diesel revved to climb the high hill to the Barr family trailer home.

Ander mindlessly ruffled his brown hair, giving it permission to self-govern, before readying his backpack. His stomach fluttered at the promise of being home alone, in his room, behind the locked door. The internet sirens beckoned to him. His imagination ignited with curves of skin as he strolled down the aisle. His innards rose in a pubescent squall before he even reached the front of the bus.

But the moment he stepped off, the promise of solitude fizzled when he saw Big Betsy, the immaculate off-roader, parked in the driveway.

Uncle Brian.

The Wretch was nowhere in sight, but Ander knew he would be looking for him—to give him more ‘goodies.’ The thought once made him giddy, but now the sensation was like the kind he got in speech class.

The bus door closed behind him. He nearly whirled to rip it back

open to somehow convince the driver to take him back to school. But the yellow behemoth hummed around the corner and left Ander in silence.

He stood motionless, like an alert rabbit. He knew his uncle heard the bus. Soon he would appear and ruin Ander's day. The thought made him consider hiding in the surrounding pines.

But he couldn't budge.

Just get to the trees, you idiot!

He heard a voice behind the house, echoing off the detached garage. His uncle's sonorous murmuring gave details in a rapid manner. It sounded like an ordinary phone call to one of his many tenants, but Ander knew better. Judging by the tone, it was to Mr. Sparn, his handyman.

The air penetrated Ander's thin hoodie. He shivered, wishing he had his jacket. It was just inside the front door, and he considered creeping inside for a sneaky grab, but Uncle Wretch's laugh boomed from the garage again and the decision was made—no jacket.

He lurched leftward in jerky movements, attempting to look casual, until the needles embraced him with darkness. Immediately at his feet was a bedrock cliff to the shadowy pine floor below. He crisply maneuvered his nimble frame until his feet found the ground. The damp shade intensified the chill, and his shoulders hunched forward in a vain attempt for warmth.

He meandered through the pillars of red pine trunks, occasionally halting to listen for his uncle. Only the breeze and birds sounded, so he gave himself permission to relax while he strolled to his neighbor's gravel pit, which bordered his family's five-acre plot. He never knew the exact boundary to Mr. Lorin's land, but somewhere in the dense pines he crossed the threshold.

The trees gradually thinned to unveil the pit—an oasis of dusty aggregate. Ander was immediately greeted by a large pile of charred logs, nestled in a clearing between two tall piles of tansy-choked gravel. He sat on an immovable piece of driftwood and used a stick to poke a monstrous charred log he and his friends couldn't fully destroy the previous week.

Thompson Creek trickled nearby, pulling his gaze. He admired the way the water danced over boulders and lapped the sandy banks. Its rhythmic fluttering became something of a sedative, numbing his nerves. But the ever-lingering presence of his uncle spoiled lasting relief.

The Bedrock Gate (Broken Vessel, Book 1)

I can't avoid him forever.

He pulled out his phone without knowing it and took a moment to peruse his usual selection of games. Nothing looked appealing.

But I need to end it...somehow.

The saturated color schemes and cartoon people on the screen couldn't keep his attention from the water. Slouching towards it, he lost himself in a daze at its unending flow.

Boom! Rap! Rap!

The sound pulsed his chest. It came at irregular intervals, like a hammer pecking at a hard-to-reach nail. He touched his ribs, expecting to find the source there, but then he glanced around the trees when he heard it echo off the bedrock cliff behind him.

After a few more blows, he realized it was coming from farther up the river, closer to Lorin's house. For a long minute he faced the noise, finding it hard to believe his neighbor was actually home. As long as Ander could remember, he'd never even seen Scott Lorin, which naturally turned the recluse into a legend.

The pulsing cast Ander into reverie. Hypnotized, he stared at nothing while the droning took control. The quality of its uneven beat was like a melody he didn't know he'd forgotten. It was as if a song, stuck in his head, had fallen into the rest of his body.

He stood, aching with a strange longing. He wondered if he should investigate, but his legs were already stepping towards the sound before his mind could decide. With the river to his left, he sauntered through the gravel piles.

The rapping reverberated every stone in the homegrown quarry. It still hummed his body, despite being muffled.

When he finally came to the cusp of Lorin's premises, he crouched behind a pile of sand to survey the scene.

A lonely workshop sat in the center of everything. It was out of place—alone in the middle of the pit. Beside the workshop sat an old backhoe, lost in a tangle of saplings.

From the shop's entrance stretched a well-worn path into the pines. It ended abruptly at the bedrock cliff, as if the entire rock hill had been dropped onto it. It looked like a path to nowhere.

On the far side of the pit, stuffed deeper in the pines, was Lorin's oversized house. The thick trunks weren't enough to conceal its sickly yellow siding, accented as it was with patches of green mildew. So

decrepit and bereft of upkeep, if Ander didn't know better, he would assume it was abandoned.

The sound repeated. Ander pinned the source at the workshop. A small window on its sun-chapped wall offered him a peek inside, if only he could sneak closer. This was his chance to finally put the legend into fact—to unveil the mystery that motivated many contests between him and his friends to see who would get closest to Lorin's abode. These challenges, Ander would now admit, were only thrilling in thought; for only rarely would they actually do it.

The source of the noise was definitely a hammer, but the object of its violence had a peculiar reaction to the blows. Instead of the expected dull thud of wood or the clang of metal, it strangely resembled the crumble of clay. Yet even this was not the best description.

It sounds like he's...smashing bones?

But the force of the rapping was the most baffling, hitting him like a subwoofer. His entire body tingled more strongly now.

Big bones?

The notion nearly made Ander sprint to the shop window. His chest leapt forward, but his feet didn't move. Something in him wanted to keep it a mystery. He tore himself from his perch and left the gravel pit.

The warmth of curiosity faded back to cold reality as the breeze penetrated his hoodie. Then he remembered that he still had the cigarette lighter in his backpack from when he and his friends went hiking. Warmth returned with the mere idea of a fire.

But he didn't stop at the charcoal heap. He had a better idea.

He forged ahead, farther down the river, to an old footpath that was barely visible under the encroaching brush. As a boy he had walked it daily, yet now the overgrowth betrayed bygone years.

The trail passed through a cluster of papery white birches. Without losing stride, he groped for the best piece of scroll-shaped bark. His selection snapped loose with a crinkle. He cradled the precious tinder to climb the property's tallest bedrock hill. Using his three available limbs, he crawled up the rock like a monkey. When he reached the top, he dropped the birch bark and let his backpack slide off his arm.

The tops of pine trees spanned the horizon. While he soaked in the vista, panting to regain breath, his teenage eyes were overcome with boyhood imagination...

Monstrous beasts surrounded the rock, clambering to overtake him. In the sky swooped a swarm of dragons. It was he alone against the horde.

He clenched his fist, as if gripping a sword. He was usually the warrior, but sometimes he was the rapid-fire archer who loosed arrows from the safety of his fort.

The fort!

The thought snapped him out of his daydream and he turned to a cluster of large sticks nearby—his ‘fort.’ Years of abandonment turned it into an unrecognizable heap of debris. He considered it was probably never that remarkable anyway, yet in his memory it was unbreakable to all but the hottest dragon breath.

He approached it with unhurried steps, stooping to look under the ruined walls. A peculiar, twisted piece of diamond willow lay inside. Moss covered half of it, but the shape remained true—his trusty sword.

He gripped it and the horde reappeared, now nearly upon him. Heat coursed through his sword arm, ready for fury. Ander bent his knees for the onslaught, but he couldn’t raise the weapon.

The beasts halted just before colliding with him, swaying side to side in a chorus of jeering and cackling. They pointed at his stick and beckoned him to raise it.

With great effort, Ander poised the sword behind his shoulder for the first blow, but they met the challenge by stumbling over in laughter. He lowered it immediately to glance around, as if someone could be watching despite being in the middle of the woods.

The horde was gone.

Feeling silly for feeling silly, he exhaled casually and swung it a few more times, halfheartedly, and finished with a slow thrust at nothing. He gingerly placed it back into the fort, as if returning it to its museum...or grave.

He found a fallen white pine nearby and popped the brittle branches off with a twist of his wrist. Once he had an armful, he returned to the birch bark and dropped the load with a rattle.

Fishing the lighter from his backpack, he promptly clicked it a few times under the bark. While the fire crackled to life, he placed the smallest twigs on the hungry flames.

After he placed the last piece of wood on, he propped himself against a pine trunk, which conveniently leaned back to create a makeshift lounge chair. The fire matured into a violent flicker that forced Ander to move his legs to avoid scorching.

A vibration in his pocket soon rent him back to the world. He roughly tore his phone out and let a groan slip as he saw the caller name. He chiseled his face, then pressed the green button.

"Hi, Dad." He stared up at the pine branches to concentrate on his tone.

"Ander? Hey, I just got back from Crest View. Where are you?"

"Out for a hike behind the house."

"Oh, good. Because Uncle Brian said he didn't see you get off the bus."

"He was on the phone." Ander dropped his head and frowned at the fire. "How's Mom today?"

"The same nonsense. The music of rock. The clouds are strange. Nothing new."

Ander grunted.

"Anyway, I'm glad to know you're safe. I'm getting supper started. Be about an hour."

"I'm not hungry yet so I guess I'll see you later. Bye."

"Okay, when do—"

Ander tapped the red circle on the screen and closed his eyes. His stomach rumbled. He remained motionless as the fire dwindled. His mind raced with vague images that never became clear.

Realizing his phone was still in his hand, he opened up his game selection again. But now the screen was embarrassingly desperate in its allure. The bubble-shaped features of the faces reeked of artificiality. He stowed it away immediately and reprised his zoned-out posture.

Once the fire lost the battle with the air, giving him his first shiver, he sat up, stamped the coals out and began the slow trek back.

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At the edge of the lawn, Ander cowered in the trees as he watched the house windows. His appetite disappeared when he saw the distinct shape of Uncle Brian in the dining room. Even from such a distance, sitting at the table, his hulking figure loomed. Ander nearly crouched back into the shadows.

He had no energy to fake a polite conversation, so he decided to do something he'd never done before: sneak in through his bedroom window.

He crept to the house and pushed through the gnarled, weed-choked shrubs—evidence of how long it had been since Mom could tend to the landscaping. Fortunately, his family rarely locked windows, and after quiet grunting and hoisting, he slid the pane up and

scrambled inside.

He quietly shut the window behind him. His backpack and shoes fell off in a wet mess. He plopped on the bed in the darkness and relished the warmth. His family's distant conversation muffled through the closed door. As usual, Uncle Brian's droning was the loudest.

He rolled over to turn on his nightstand lamp, splattering the room with yellow light.

Posters of Legos and dinosaurs mingled with those of the military and video games in a mural of boyhood evolution. The depictions collectively buried the brown paneling that cursed the whole home.

His disassembled airsoft gun laid like scattered bones atop of his dresser. Together with his camo gear and his old Xbox 360, the debris formed a pile that eclipsed his retired gaming monitor. His new one, twice the size, was set up like a shrine, complete with a matching sound system, on a small table off the foot of his bed. All hand-me-downs, their presence in his room was only possible because of his richer friends.

On the floor, piles of video game cases, accessories, and unopened programming manuals were scattered across a long un-vacuumed carpet.

He pulled off his socks and searched for clean ones in the dresser, but all he felt was wood. He glanced at his bean bag chair, which had become his hamper, to notice a teetering heap of dirty clothes.

Dad needs to do laundry...last week.

He begrudgingly put the moist socks back on.

To act normal, he pulled out his homework and laid it on the bed. He started some music on his phone for an added touch. But the longer he stared at the geometric angles, the more they went fuzzy.

His stomach growled and the smell of lasagna was hard to ignore. He decided to see if his uncle was still visiting, so he went to the door and pressed his ear against it.

But as he concentrated on their voices, he couldn't keep his eyes from the top drawer on his desk. It was a simple junk drawer, filled with dry pens, useless trinkets, outdated cables and brittle candy, but he monitored it with suspicion. The longer he stared, the more his heart pulsed. Panic rose. His ribs ached. He expected the drawer to slide open any moment, as if Uncle Brian himself was crammed inside.

I wish I could cram him inside...rip it out and send him down the creek.

He heard footsteps in the hall. He recoiled from the door and

dashed to his homework, bracing himself for his uncle.

His visitor tapped the door with a distinctive rhythm.

Ander sighed with relief. "Come in, weirdo."

The door opened and his sister, Kris, entered with her face concealed behind her sketchpad, showing only her black pixie haircut. She wore her favorite black jean jacket with complementing red pants.

"Ander!" she howled for everyone to hear, but her husky rasp struggled to reach high volume. "You need to lock the door when you do that! Put some clothes on!"

Ander clenched his teeth. "Yes, you got me red-handed."

She poked her dark brown eyes over the pad. "It smells like you've been...red-handing...all over in here."

"Gross! No."

She sprawled herself on his geometry and assumed her usual, lazily cheerful demeanor. "You fasting or something?"

"Not hungry."

"I don't believe you."

"Okay, you got me. I'm celebrating Ramadan. Or Lent. Whatever it is you Christians do."

"Lent isn't in October. Even you should know that." She rolled over and casually looked at the floor. "Why are your shoes in here?"

He had no words.

Her mouth dropped as she fought a laugh. "Oh. My. Goodness. You came in through the window, didn't you? I didn't know people actually did that."

He snatched her sketchbook.

"No, stop!" she pleaded, sitting up. "It's not ready."

He studied her latest work-in-progress. It was a sketch of three teenage girls, a style derivative of anime, with the girl in the center having a mouth a little too large for realism. Then Ander noticed it inside her toothy cavern: two glowing yellow eyes with a cheeky grin.

"What's it called?" he asked.

"Fragile Creatures."

"Interesting." He cocked his head in surprise, for the girl's mouth strangely resembled a monster's body, with teeth like horns and lips like skin.

"It's from a song," she added.

"What song?"

"You wouldn't know it. By John Mark McMillan."

"This is from your *Jesus* songs?"

She sighed, ripping the book back.

"What's it mean?"

"What do *you* think it means? If I tell you, it defeats the purpose."

He pretended to rummage in his end-table drawer. "All right. Be gone, you rat. I have homework to do."

She didn't say anything, so he glanced at her. Her expression made him roll his eyes.

"What?" he asked with sarcastic interest.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Everything, as usual."

"You never miss lasagna."

"No red sauce for me tonight."

"It's Uncle Brian, isn't it?"

He shrugged.

"You know he left right after he ate. Said he had somewhere to be."

"Doesn't matter. I'm not hungry."

"What happened between you two? You used to do everything together."

"He's just," he glanced at the junk drawer, "a lot."

"Communication." She emphasized each syllable. "Let it out. That's how we grow." She paused to smile, as if to lighten the mood. "Stop being a ridiculous, teenage, angsty putz."

He stuck his tongue out at her.

Her smile faded slightly. "You can't get anywhere in life without giving yourself up, Ander."

"Is that from your golden tablets?"

She shot to the door, stopping just before leaving. "You know I'm for real. And you could stop being so stubborn." She went to leave, but lingered to add one final remark. "And the golden plates are from *Mormonism*."

"Same thing."

Her nostrils flared and her eyes expanded, but before she could fire off her apologetics, the baritone voice of their dad came from down the hall.

"Is Lewis Clark back from his voyage?"

The Barr rattle, as the family called it, was the only thing in common between their dad and his brother, Brian. The slim figure, with dirty blond hair that always needed a trim, popped inside the doorframe to reveal a faded Nirvana T-shirt.

Kris shuffled back into Ander's room, now unable to escape.

“Come on, Ander!” Dad said, his clean-shaven mouth sipping from a cup of coffee. “Why you scare us like that? Thought you went missing.”

Ander held his arms out in surrender.

“Why you being so weird?” Dad raised an eyebrow. “Are you depressed or something?”

“Why can’t I just like the woods?” He looked around his room aimlessly.

“And skip supper?” said Dad.

“I’m hungry now. I’ll come and eat, I just had to—”

“And when did you come inside? I didn’t see you.”

“You were too busy talking to Brian.” Ander glanced at Kris, who pursed her lips at the fib.

Dad studied Ander for a moment, taking a sip of coffee, before speaking in a typical fatherly tone. “That Big Dan kid is calling you ‘Fish’ again, isn’t he?”

“Dad,” Ander rolled his eyes, “everyone calls me Fish. It’s a joke.”

Dad shook his head with severity. “Not a funny one. You’re not ugly. We Barr men are never ugly. Just...rough.”

Kris mumbled something as she leaned against the desk. Her hands were inches from the junk drawer.

Ander forced himself to ignore her. He readdressed his dad, framing himself with his fingers. “Big eyes, long nose, skinny face.” He waved off the frame with a flutter. “It’s fine. I like how I look. Besides, Big Dan was only a bully because he happened to be the first boy in Seventh Grade to grow fuzz.”

“Big Dan’s *sister* is still a bully,” came another girl’s voice, whose rasp was slightly smokier than Kris’.

Ander’s eldest sister, Abby, peeked around the doorframe. Always considered the prettiest of the family, her glistening brown hair, pulled into a perfectly tight ponytail, topped her chiseled face with magnificence. Ander assumed she was manifesting the powerful woman she aspired to be.

“She hasn’t changed since graduation,” Abby continued. “All she does on her MyTube channel is make fun of people.”

“Eavesdropping?” Dad looked at her over his shoulder.

“We’re not supposed to use that word anymore,” joined a final voice—the middle-school pitch of Ander’s younger sister, Grace. She hopped into the doorframe just behind Abby. With her bangs and pigtails she was the personification of innocence. “That’s what they

teach us, anyway." She rustled her thick purple-rimmed glasses into a comfortable position on her tiny nose.

"What word? 'Bully'?" Dad asked. "What are you supposed to call them?"

"Aggressors," Grace replied.

"Like that's better," Kris said, opening the top drawer of the desk.

Ander fidgeted to smoothen his panic. He tried not to make it obvious that he was watching her.

"It's meant to help them," Grace replied. "I guess to make them feel bad."

"Or enable them," Abby added.

"What does that mean?" Grace said.

"It means they use it as an excuse to live into their social identity," Abby said.

"Look at you, Abby," Kris snarked as she rummaged through the drawer. "Learning stuff at college." She gasped and stopped perusing. "My, my...what's this?"

No! I thought I buried it deeper than that.

"What is it?" Abby asked. "There a dead mouse in there?"

Ander's mind raced to explain himself as Kris angrily pulled out an old phone charger.

"This is *mine*," she said.

Relief spiraled into his gut.

She dug into the junk again. "What else you got in here?"

Ander leapt to the desk. "What is this? A family conference?" He slammed the drawer shut. "Everyone out! I need to do homework."

"Sure you do." Kris winked at him while nibbling the cord.

"Have we ever done a family conference?" Abby pried herself off the doorframe.

"You can always talk to me," Dad muttered to Ander. "Whatever it is."

"Wow, that means so much." He hoped his sarcasm wasn't too rude, but he shut the door before his dad's face could show if it was.

He let out a silent moan before dropping onto his bed in a fog. The junk drawer magnetized his attention again.

One day everyone will know.

His insides squirmed at the notion.

When the time is right.

2

Mera

Ander methodically tore an iced sugar cookie in half.

"You know I'm only here for these." He continued to split the cookie into equal fourths. "My asylum from school."

His friend, Nolan, who everyone called Booda, looked squarely at him.

"At another school..." Booda's cheeks pursed his lips without permission. "...to do math?"

"Yes." Ander chomped a quarter cookie. "The Mighty Math Meet meets my needs."

Ander scanned the streamlined, minimalistic cafeteria of the host school. It hummed with activity as three dozen students from five schools chowed processed desserts. The teachers were busy scoring the tests in an adjacent room.

Booda mentioned something about computer programming but Ander's attention was drawn to the girl with caramel hair strolling to the kitchen serving window. The sight coiled his breath, choking him with one unavoidable fact.

The girl I'll never have.

She took a chocolate chip cookie and walked back to her seat, nibbling as she went. Ander noticed the way her lips...he blinked and shook his head, but his insides continued to worm. He cleared his throat and eyed Booda for a distraction; he had apparently just asked a question.

"So that's a 'no'?" Booda said, surprised. He raised a cup of punch and paused before drinking. "I thought you said you were going to Full Sail?"

"What are you even talking about?"

Booda guzzled half his cup, then quickly swallowed to reply. "Computer Science."

"Oh, right. What about it?"

Booda closed his eyes and took in a long inhale—the thing he always did when he was struggling to rein his frustration. He wheezed it out before responding. "Have you decided which laptop to get?"

"No."

"Full Sail uses Apple, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm. You'll have to fork over the money."

Ander chuckled. "That's generally the case no matter what computer I get."

"What about scholarships? Have you applied for any?"

Ander peeked at the girl as she mounted her leg over the bench.

Booda looked away. "All right then, keep your secrets."

"I have a dream." Ander admired her hips. "Don't wake me up with all this real talk."

"Fine. Then you'll just stay in the Matrix."

Ander ate the rest of his cookie, then collected its crumbs off the table by pressing down with his fingertips. "Actually," he said through chomping, "when it comes down to it, the Matrix was better."

"Better? It was an illusion, a dream world."

"The illusion was better than the wasteland."

Booda sipped the last of his punch. "Luckily we don't live in a world like that."

"Maybe we do. Maybe that's all this will be in the end: a broken world that lets you down. Forgive me for wanting something better."

"Like?" Booda's fist compacted his styrofoam cup with a crunch.

"Something unforgettable. An adventure. A new world." He thought for a moment. "The perfect video game."

Booda watched Ander with a flat expression. "Gaming." His tone left no doubt of his opinion.

"Didn't you know? That's what I'm going for: Game Design. Not computer science."

"Escapism is always a good time...until you glitch."

"You're a glitch."

They both glanced down the table where a debate about quantum physics rose to a high volume.

The boy on Booda's side widened his bug-eyes to argue his point about String Theory. "Supersymmetry," he said, clicking his overdue

fingernails with each syllable, "is the only way we're going to find a theory of everything." His curtain of black hair was immovable, held in place by a crust of unknown origin.

The other kid, soft and hamster-like, fired back with cookie crumbs spewing from his mouth. "But you can't measure gravitons!"

"Gravity needs a medium," insisted Crust.

"They said that about the light aether," said the Hamster.

Ander leaned towards Booda. "You think they dream in equations?"

"Affirmative," Booda spoke with a nasal intonation.

Ander slid out of his seat and went to the punch dispenser, wondering if quantum physics could fast-forward him to graduation.

"Hey, Mister," came a familiar girl's voice.

The worm's grip redoubled. "Oh, hey, Mera." He panicked at the collapsing in his throat.

"You said Gunter's was open 'til eight."

He slowly faced her, but kept looking to the ceiling with a finger on his chin. "I did, did I?" He gave a quick look, but it was a mistake.

Her bright eyes enraptured his own, and he nearly gasped. Her curvy, slender eyebrows conveyed an animalistic side that knew how and when to take control. Her soft jawline, framed as it was with shoulder-length caramel hair, was a dais that glorified the rest of her face. The angle of her nose promised dignity, complemented with inviting lips. Neatly binding her features together was skin he wanted to get lost in. She was altogether devastating.

"You okay?" She held out a hand, as if to keep him back from the cookies. Her hand pressed his chest like the first drop of a roller coaster. "Don't puke."

I might.

He gave a playfully sour face. "I think I just ate too many cookies."

"Me, too." She picked up another chocolate chip. "They're my weakness."

You're my weakness.

"Anyway," Mera continued, "I'm not sure when I'll get to Gunter's again, since I have to help my grandpa with his honeybees tomorrow."

"Ew. How do you handle those nasty things?"

"Nasty?"

"Just the way they swarm everywhere. Not to mention the stinging..."

"They don't sting if you just ignore them."

"Don't they cover you?"

"Like fur."

Ander gave her another disgusted face, this time without jest.

"I kinda like it."

"Well, the world needs saving. Save the bees. And I like honey, so there's that. See? I'm a bee person, too."

They smiled and shared a lingering gaze.

"Arum," he croaked without warning.

Her smile grew deadlier. "What was *that*?"

He looked away and slumped his shoulders, pretending to sulk away. "I guess I better get back to my hive. My clique."

"I don't believe in cliques."

"Neither do I." Ander paused to raise the cup to his mouth. "But who's going to change that?" He hesitated enough to awkwardly pivot again.

"Hey, you're something of a woodsman, aren't you?"

"I'd like to think so."

"My dad said there's a tree he can't cut down alone. I think he called your uncle about it."

His neck tensed at the mention of the Wretch. "Oh. Yeah." He soothed the back of his head, trying not to make it obvious.

"You still work for him, right?"

"Kinda."

"Speaking of things my dad can't do," she said, "our internet sucks. Any chance you could tell your uncle to get an upgrade? It's weird because we tested the connection speed and it—"

"We should," he blurted, unsure where his mouth was going, "uh, we should go disc golfing. Before winter."

She blinked to process the suggestion. "We?"

"Yeah. Good exercise. It's chill, fun."

"I don't know...is it?"

Ander smirked with an overblown nod, only meeting her eyes cursorily. "No? Yes?"

"One condition: will your lame friends be there?"

"I hope not."

"So it's a date?"

He put his hands up in defense. "I never said that."

"So you don't want to take me on a date?"

He smiled at the floor. "Stop putting words in my mouth! You know what I mean."

"It's a simple question."

"You can call it a date if you want."

"What do you want to call it?"

He popped a nervous chuckle, still looking down. "I don't know..."

"Maybe your friends should come after all. Then it won't be awkward."

Ander brought his head back up, canting it and trying to study her unreadable face.

"What's wrong with awkward?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

He fluttered. "Yup."

"Just me and you?"

"Yup."

"No friends?"

"Nope."

"Shucks, I really wanted them to see me school you." Her lips held back a smile, quivering.

His own tingled in response. "I guess we're at an impasse."

"Let's keep it that way. Stop talking to me."

He widened his eyes, then nodded his head in silence, repeatedly, like a bobblehead.

Mera imitated him, grinning.

"Better get back to my clique," he said.

"Okay, let's go."

"Huh?"

She grabbed his arm and spun him around. "To your table. Now."

"What are you doing?"

"No more cliques."

She kept her feisty fingers on his upper arm the whole way to the table. Ander didn't realize his face was red until they were seated and Booda made a quip about tomatoes. Ander rolled his eyes but he didn't want to admit how much he enjoyed the Mera-handling. He bemoaned the short distance between the cookies and his table, and he ignored Booda's next remark because he was too busy wondering how he could make her grab him again.

"So, Nolan," Mera began.

"Booda," he corrected.

"Booda." Mera echoed with a flat expression.

"Yes. Like the religion, just spelt differently." He locked his arms in front, closed his eyes and grinned. "Don't you see the resemblance?"

She bobbed her head to the sides. "I guess a shaved head is close

enough to bald, but you're not Indian."

"Come on," Ander insisted. "He's identical to the Buddha. He's basically his reincarnation."

"Isn't that Hinduism?" said the Hamster, who completely ditched his conversation with Crust once Mera arrived.

"Yeah," Ander added quickly, "you know what I mean."

Mera slapped the table in front of Booda. "I need to know: are you the one who unscrewed Sadie's trumpet valves?"

Booda gave a slow, contented nod.

Her eyes closed with bliss. "I owe you my life."

Wow. Calm down.

"I thought you don't like pranks, Booda," Ander said.

Booda didn't take his eyes off Mera. "I made an exception for her."

"Right?" Mera widened her hands in agreement. "Sadie's been driving everyone insane. But the way she freaked out when her instrument fluttered made it all worth it."

Booda grinned. "It was a better show sitting next to her. She kept blaming poor Selene, saying she 'ruined the band.'"

"Yup," Mera said. "Heaven forbid First Chair Sadie misses her solo."

"Ha!" Ander contrived a laugh. "That was so funny."

Booda leaned toward to Mera. "What do you think of Ms. Raither's selections for the Christmas concert?"

What do you think about leaving her alone, Booda?

"Meh." She flicked her head to the side. "No one likes that Jack Frost chestnut song."

Everyone's attention was drawn to the clang of opening doors, which meant the math teachers had finished scoring.

Ander casually snuck a peek of Mera, who already had him pinned with a stare of her own, untamed and gouging without care.

He felt water creep into his vision. His chest ached.

Her cheeks perked and out came the dimples.

Now he had to look away, half-listening to the teachers as they rambled the results. East High won, as usual. The Meet was adjourned shortly after, and the kids mingled in a chaos as each school filed onto their respective buses.

Once Ander was onboard, he noticed Mera sitting alone. He knew all it would take was one final conversation and the date would be set.

Just confirm disc golf.

He lingered by her seat. They locked eyes.

He paused, almost stopping entirely.

She smiled, but said nothing.

Nor did he. No words came. He simply gave a weak smile and let his body pull him onward. Each step reminded him of the inevitable fact.

I'll. Never. Have. Her.

He chose an empty seat near the back, across the aisle from Crust and the Hamster. Booda plopped next to him and immediately barraged the two experts with questions about wormholes.

The bus pulled away and Ander let their cosmology take his mind off the vixen. But the distraction didn't last. He sat up and stared over the seats at Mera. She no longer sat alone, for a girl named Elaina now sat beside her. She was a spidery girl, thin with dark features, who constantly twitched her frizzy hair to the side as she spoke. Mera remained still as she soaked in whatever it was Elaina was saying.

The moment Mera's cheeks folded for a smile Ander collapsed back into the seat.

How can someone be that...

He puzzled at the lack of words. Any attempt to describe her left a terrible gap between the word and the reality.

Beautiful, gorgeous, stunning.

All of them were like stale bread.

"But, like I said," Booda proceeded loudly, rising above the nearby noises, "the bridge model is floppy. It's flimsy."

Ander couldn't resist listening.

"Tell that to Einstein and Rosen," the Hamster countered.

"No," Booda shuffled in his seat. "What I mean is: how can you construct it in the first place? I can't see how to manipulate all that energy, or how to stabilize the tunnel and prevent it from collapsing."

"Alien tech, obviously," Crust said.

Booda rolled his head in frustration. "Come on, I'm serious."

"No, for real," Crust replied. "We don't have that kind of tech yet, but aliens might. They might have found a way to conjure black holes to create the portals."

The Hamster raised a finger. "My cousin—he works at StratuSky—said they just acquired this huge building to develop jets that can go to space."

"No rockets?" Booda canted his head incredulously.

"Hypersonic," the Hamster replied. "Turbojet and ramjet combined."

"Weak sauce," Crust chimed in. "No vessel, alien or otherwise, is strong enough to survive black holes."

"I know what we can do," Ander interjected. "Let's storm Area 51. They've probably already constructed the gate to Mars. Have you guys played *Doom*?"

"Not my taste," Crust said.

Booda leaned back as much as he could for Ander to join the conversation, but his girth only made the seat crinkle.

"It's called a 'theory' for a reason," Crust continued to Booda. "We need negative matter for it to work, but that's all theoretical at this point."

"Call me when you two create the portal." Booda said. "I want to be the first one to Proximo."

"Proxima," Crust corrected. "Proxima B."

"Whatever." Booda fluttered his hand. "How about you two rename it when we land there."

The Hamster raised his finger again. "Bottom line: we just need a source that can control the space between all particles."

"And that'd be God," Booda spoke the words with momentum.

Ander heard Mera cackle and he was back at her, craning over the seats. Her hair shone copper from the backlit sun.

Life-altering.

He smiled at finding the right words. But it was short-lived. His wormy gut fluttered, bringing him back to the world. He dragged his stare from Mera and shoved it out the window. The bus had already merged onto the Interstate and the white birch trees along the ditch filed past like a zoetrope. He was tired of relying on bus windows to give his life a semblance of motion. He wondered how many days he had left until he could leave for college. Then, worse than that, came the realization that he had to actually *do* college.

"That's why traveling to the past is impossible," said Booda.

"Precisely," the Hamster nodded, pleased at Booda's understanding, before continuing to expound Singularity Theory—which lasted until they arrived at school.

By the time Ander rose to his feet, he noticed Mera already outside and strolling to the front doors.

'Disc golf. Let's go on the half-day this Thursday.' That's all I need to say.

The line to exit the bus got clogged somewhere near the front.

Ander leaned to the side and saw Elaina struggling with her backpack. It had apparently gotten caught under the seat.

“Come on, Elaina!” someone yelled. “Get the brick out of your butt!”

Ander glanced to the school doors. Mera had just slipped inside.

Elaina finally pried her backpack free, and the kids burst out of the bus like a wide-open garden hose.

Once to the pavement, Ander weaseled his way through the crowd. He speed-walked through the lobby and rounded the corner into the locker hallway. Students formed a gauntlet as they eviscerated their lockers for the end-of-the-day dash.

Mera’s hair appeared, a few steps ahead. He imagined grabbing her arm.

In a manly way, but not too manly.

She would turn in surprise, then mellow into a smile of recognition. He would speak with confidence.

Let’s go disc golfing. No friends. Just you and me.

Ander melted as if he had already asked her and was currently crumbling under the weight of her answer. But then he hardened again, returning to reality, when a boy sprinted past and brushed his shoulder. Ander huffed at the jolt and glared at the back of the boy’s blonde head as it bounded away through the hallway horde.

He slunk the rest of the way to his locker with his head down to watch the tiles. He then rattled his combination and thunked it open. He tore his hoodie from the hook, put it on, and grabbed his backpack before slamming his locker. He dashed to catch her before she had a chance to escape.

She had already closed her locker and was strolling away.

Ander trotted faster, but then faltered when he got too close. He felt like a creeper now, staggering his pace like a yo-yo.

He opened his mouth to call her name, but his voice failed.

The moment was soon gone, for she disappeared through the doors to the student lot, and he was left standing in the river of kids as they filed behind her.

3

Mom

Ander and his dad sat in the parking lot of Crest View, waiting for Abby, Kris and Grace. The Pontiac was idling rhythmically, massaging Ander's bones. With his ear buds in, he fixed his attention on his phone screen to pass the time. His thumb rhythmically twitched through images while a guy's falsetto, riding the waves of upbeat electronica, pumped into his brain.

The car's windows were down to let the crisp breeze seep inside. The sun, filtering through the clouds, was too weak to compete with its chill.

As the images passed like a promenade, one with the caption "sexiest cosplayers" made him pause for closer inspection. He angled his screen so his dad couldn't see.

A blast from the Pontiac's speakers pummeled Ander's body. He flinched and yanked his buds out. Snarling vocals and bottomless drums penetrated his soul.

"Rock is dead, Dad!"

"Is it?" Dad turned it up even more.

The speakers rattled from years of max volume, now unable to satisfy the greedy bass of the song's breakdown. The vocalist topped it off by gargling snot.

Ander winced. "Did he just *puke*?"

His dad's face brimmed with delight.

Ander turned it down to a background level, looking out the window to see if anyone was watching. "That's embarrassing."

"That's *art*," Dad chuckled with satisfaction, then turned it down. "And it's not rock. It's metal."

"It's all oldies to me."

"Don't fix what isn't broken. Besides," Dad jabbed a finger at the car radio. "It's illegal for these speakers to play music released after 1999. The only exception is Atomship."

Ander rolled his eyes. "Your music is weird."

"As if! Without our generation, you'd all be stuck with either country or rap."

"Our'?"

"Mom and me. Did you—"

An ambulance siren cut him off. They waited for it to fade.

"Did you know that Mom and I wanted to start a band?" Dad said. "She has a bunch of lyrics and I always wanted to play bass."

"You can play?" Ander leaned forward, shocked. Dad never mentioned it before.

"Well, everyone in those days thought they could be in a band. You know, like your indie bands today. Mom could play drums. That's where she got her arms. But it would've been bass for me. Chilling to my own beat, not the center of attention, but noticed when gone."

Ander relaxed back into his seat. "So you just liked the *idea* of it?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I guess," Ander fiddled with his headphone cord. "What sort of music would you have played?"

Dad reached over to open the glovebox, which showcased a bloated collection of Sharpie-scrawled CDs. He mumbled their titles as his fingers clicked through them.

"Wow," Ander whispered. "Compact Discs. So tech-savvy. I didn't think you'd stoop to such a level."

"Hey, now," he paused with a smirk, extracting his selection. "I'm retro, not a cliché." He slid the CD into the player and dialed up the volume.

The opening track began with a creepy beat. The vocalist whispered through gravel for a verse before an electric guitar plucked with somber distortion.

"Grunge," Dad's voice rattled with nostalgia.

"More like *cringe*."

"Right!"

"So were you, what? Emo?"

"Back when it was cool."

"Didn't you meet Mom at a concert?"

He nodded. "Radiohead. My friend brought me, and there she was, a friend of my friend's cousin, just enjoying the music."

Dad looked across the parking lot to the front doors of Crest View. "Mom's always been that way, letting life happen to her, just hopping on for the ride."

Ander looked into the sky as his father spoke.

"She always liked the music that dragged her through Hell," Dad continued. "As long as I've known her, she's always searched for something to scare her. She never found it." Dad stopped himself before saying more.

Until now.

Ander knew that's what he wanted to say.

A rusty rattler whipped into the spot next to them, a hard brake freezing it to a bouncing halt.

"Finally." Ander opened the door as Dad turned the Pontiac off.

Abby immediately burst out excuses about Grace, with Grace in turn protesting the accusations. Kris exited from the back seat with a contented smile, enjoying the display.

"Hey, girls," Dad said, ignoring the argument.

The sisters' quarrel faded to a hush when they approached the front door, but still continued with occasional jabs and extended pauses as they navigated along the off-white and outdated linoleum floor. Its scratches and blemishes were barely hidden by the institutionalized glare of the florescent lights above.

The green walls offered a feeble attempt at comfort, and the various pictures of hazy scenery that spattered its surface were a well-intentioned gesture of homeliness. The paintings were meant to reduce anxiety; but, in reality, they only made otherwise healthy people feel languid by reminding them what sort of building they were in.

The sisters fell silent by the time they rounded the final corner and into the small lobby. Dad went to the closest receptionist and signed the guest clipboard while the kids, as routine, found seats in the waiting area.

Ander noticed the other receptionists giving their familial procession pitiable smiles, as if they lessened the gravity of the visit.

Kris and Abby whispered to each other on Ander's right while Grace sulked on the left. Dad joined them, seating himself on the row of chairs opposite. His face had gone sour.

A nurse strolled by, but then paused. "Hello, Nate," she said. Her tender voice was barely audible.

His face brightened. "Hi, Amy. I see you don't need crutches anymore."

"Yes, indeed." She wiggled her spindly limb. "I'm back at it."

"You're tougher than you look."

She smirked, blue eyes shining. "Tough enough to keep your wife in line."

"Still bad?"

Her eyes widened, overzealous. "She *does not* like me!"

"Better watch your other leg."

"Yikes! Well, I'm on lunch. I'll see you later, Nate. Say 'hello' to her for me."

"Maybe not. I wouldn't want to put her in a bad mood."

She bit her lip with a smile. "Touché."

Dad wished her a good day and watched her walk away.

Ander cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows at him.

Dad glanced over and shrugged. "First name basis around here."

A door opened and the voice of a familiar old lady called their surname.

They stood up in unison. Ander felt his neck tighten, as if he were a dog to an invisible leash.

Dad gave the lady a quick nod. "Hello, Barb."

"Good afternoon, everyone." She seemed to have missed her retirement date with a snail's pace to prove it.

"How is Monday treating you?" Dad asked.

"Good. Two-hours-left kind of good."

Two hours left to live?

"I know the feeling," Dad replied, forcefully kind.

She swiped her badge to open a set of double doors. "She's had a great day." Her voice was too loud for the hall. "She ate all her food."

"Good." Dad kept the strained tone.

The aroma of the wing, conflicting air freshener scents and iodine, choked Ander. It wasn't strong, but the years of visiting made it harder to ignore.

They followed Barb through the hall to Room 34.

She knocked before unlocking it, then cracked it open. "Angie? It's me, Nurse Barb. Your family is here."

She opened the door fully so the family could file in.

Dad stooped beside her for a kiss. "Hi, Ange."

"Let me know if you need anything," Barb said before excusing herself.

Ander lingered in the doorway, concealed behind his sisters as they gave their greetings. But Mom looked beyond them, locking her eyes

onto Ander. Her face gradually melted with pain—the sort of face one has when *witnessing* pain.

“Abby and Kris are here,” Dad said, following Mom’s gaze, “and Ander.”

Abby and Kris stepped forward, exposing Ander even more.

Despite the entire family crowding around Mom, her attention remained on Ander. She lazily reached out to him, fluttering her fingers in a beckoning gesture.

“Come on, Ander,” Dad insisted.

Ander’s legs faltered as if he were approaching a cliff.

She beckoned again.

He inched to her bedside and tried keeping a cool expression.

Her rich, turquoise eyes were blank, rimmed with splotches of red and blue. Her brown hair was freshly washed, but the way its original color had faded gave it the appearance of grime.

Ander had always had two moms: the one in the picture frames at home, and the one who looked nothing like her.

“Hi, Mom.”

She reached up to his face. Her eyes frowned with pain again.

“Ander...” she said.

The instant she brushed his face, his body surged: his eyes seared with light, a deep blast pummeled his ears and chest, the smell of nail polish overwhelmed him, caking his tongue and choking his throat.

He staggered and gagged.

Mom cackled, still fixated on Ander. She didn’t even blink.

“Easy, Ange,” Dad said.

“What’s wrong, Ander?” Grace said.

He looked at everyone in turn. “Wh-what do you mean? You didn’t see or hear any of that? Or *smell* that? Yuck. Nail polish.”

Mom closed her eyes to hoot and howl.

Ander rubbed his face. “There’s glitter in my eyes or something.”

Mom coughed out something incoherent.

“My ears are ringing,” Ander continued, using it as an excuse to slip into the hall.

“Okay, Angie,” Dad said after Mom’s bout subsided. “Change of scenery will do you good. Let’s go to the visitor lounge. Abby, get the wheelchair.”

There was a shuffle and rustling inside. Ander scooted away from the door as his family emerged with Mom. He kept walking to the lounge, without looking back, but he could feel his mom’s eyes.

"Ark," she muttered. "Dar-ka-tuh."

"What?" Grace asked.

"Ander, Ander..."

Ander eyed the bathroom sign on the right and impulsively slipped inside. Walking to the urinal and pretending to pee, he took a moment to breathe. But it wasn't enough—the glitter in his eyes persisted and his ears rang and swelled as if pumped with cotton balls. He went to the sink and cupped water to rinse his face. He'd never fainted before and he wasn't sure if this was how it felt.

He forced himself through it and joined his family in the lounge, which featured gray furniture and picture frames with the same hazy scenes like those in the hallways. Ander surmised the hospital used the same three pictures and just hung them up repeatedly.

They all sat near the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over rolling hills. Dad was trying to get Mom to leave the wheelchair for the couch, and he managed to get her seated as Ander stepped inside the ring of furniture.

He felt her eyes on him.

"Ark," Mom mumbled again.

"What?" Dad asked.

"Dark. Dark touch."

Dad brushed her hair from her face. "What's 'dark'?"

She kept looking at Ander. "Swim in music rock."

"What does that mean?" Abby said.

"Rock music," Grace offered.

"Nonsense," Kris said.

Mom stood and went to the window. Then, turning to Ander, she reached out to the glass. "The dark touch. Rock sound. Feel it."

"Angie." Barb walked up to her. "Remember the rules: we don't put our fingerprints on the—"

Cracks spread like lightning on the pane.

"Mom!" Abby yelled.

Pop!

A shower of shards piled around them, along with the surge of cold air.

Everything descended into chaos. Barb and Dad dashed to Mom before she fell through the open window. Grace went to help but got bumped onto the floor, hands into the shards. She wailed.

Abby grabbed Grace to pull her away while a reinforcement of nurses appeared and, after balking at the site, descended on the scene.

"Move that chair."

"Becky, help me move the couch."

"Get a new wheelchair!"

"Need a broom."

"And tell the maintenance guys."

"Anyone have bandages for the girl?"

Amidst the turmoil, Ander sat still, staring at the glistening glass on his jeans. It wasn't until a nurse clenched his shoulder that he snapped into motion. When he looked to his mom, he noticed a stream of red dripping off her fingers.

"Coming through!" Dad pushed Mom out of the bustle in the new wheelchair.

"Sorry, Mr. Barr," Barb said, "this is...I don't know how this happened."

"Grace!" he boomed. "Get out of the way!"

Ander tried to remove himself, but Mom's eyes tethered him to the commotion.

"Ander," she said. "The dark touch."

Barb awkwardly leaned over as she walked. "Angie, you okay? Nate, stop. I need to look at her wrist."

Dad kept pushing.

"The dark touch of sound," Mom rasped. "And the neighbor..."

"What?" Dad finally stopped the wheelchair. "What about the neighbor?"

Ander noticed a fire in his eyes.

Abby and Kris joined them, both puzzling over this new tension.

"He's not just a neighbor," Mom continued.

"Angie," said Amy, who appeared at the scene with some gauze, "can you hold up your arm?"

"You!" Mom growled at her. "Hussy."

"Ange, what about the neighbor?" Dad pressed.

"She's smelly," Mom croaked. "Stinky human."

"Ange! She's helping you."

Mom sneered at her.

"Scott Lorin. What about him?"

"The sound touches," Mom continued. "He's more than a neighbor."

Amy stretched out the gauze. "Hold this."

Dad looked annoyed as he obliged for her to tape it.

"What are you talking about, Mom?" Abby said.

Kris slapped Abby's shoulder and gave her a glare. "Stop pressing her. She's...you know."

"Crazy?" Mom interjected. "You try swimming in music sound."

"Ange..." Dad said from her side.

Mom shifted her eyes to Ander. "Feel it, Ander?"

Ander squirmed under the weight of her lagoon eyes.

"Feel the sound of the rock?"

Ander finally looked away.

Dad put his hands on her shoulders. "The window broke. We're moving you to your room."

"Just your crazy girl," she looked at Dad, "swimming in the rock music. Music of the rock."

Everyone followed Barb as she wheeled Mom down the hall. Ander took the rear again. He noticed that the glitter in his eyes was gone. His hearing also seemed to be normal again.

"Sounds," Mom said. "Strange sounds."

Kris dropped behind to join Ander.

"She's had a 'great day,' eh?" she said, imitating Barb's voice.

Ander couldn't find the same humor. Spotting a bench in the hall outside Mom's room, he lumbered to it and sat. He could still feel the draft from the broken window.

No one seemed to object to him lingering behind as they all entered the room. After he was left in silence, a few nurses and visitors walked by, but he just kept staring at the bricks across the hall. Movement back in the lounge caught his attention, and he turned to see maintenance men with plastic wrap.

"Everything okay?" came a voice.

Ander rolled his head to see Nurse Amy.

"Yeah."

"What an ordeal!" She sat down beside him. "Your mom is quite the woman."

"I want to be alone, if that's all right." He didn't mean to sound rude, but he didn't bother apologizing either. Nor did he look to see how she took his words.

"I understand." She abruptly stood. "Hope you can still have a good visit."

He listened to her walk away, then waited a few minutes to gather his nerves before taking out his phone. But then he just spun it

between his thumb and middle finger. He listened to his family's mumbling conversation inside but didn't care to understand it.

His sisters suddenly emerged to say they were going back to the lounge to get coffee and to take another look at the scene. Abby and Grace didn't stop, but Kris slowed to ask if he wanted any. He just returned his attention to the bricks on the opposite wall and shook his head.

After another few minutes, Dad came out and sat next to him. "Where did the girls go?"

"How's Mom?" Ander said.

Dad just shrugged.

"Are the drugs working or not?"

"They seem to be, at least a little. But the window! What was *that*? Some serious side effects."

Ander stood and began pacing. "Can we go home?"

"What about seeing Mom?"

"Is that really her?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm tired of all these games, Dad. Her rambling has never gotten better." He looked up at the ceiling to speak to no one in particular.

"We need to be—" Dad began.

"Don't say it. I'm tired of being patient."

"Like Dr. Bannin says, the brain can be a mystery. We don't know how this will play out."

Ander stopped pacing and sat down, head slumped towards the floor. He wanted to bring up the subject that Dad considered taboo. He opened his mouth to ask, hesitating.

Screw it.

"You know what's really bothered me the most?" Ander spoke without looking up. "I've never been given a clear answer on how this all started."

Dad sighed and shuffle. "I've told you: just came out of nowhere."

"Really?"

"Yes. What do you expect from an illness?"

Ander faced his dad squarely. "Then what was all that about Mr. Lorin?"

He sighed again, harder. "What about him?"

"You seemed pretty interested in what Mom said about him."

"What do you mean? That back there?" Dad stuck his thumb towards the lounge. "That gibberish was nothing new."

"She seemed to know what she was talking about."

"Psychotic people," he used the word delicately, "can appear fine, Ander."

"She's never remembered our names before."

"Yes, that is a start. But, like you say, it's a tired game, all this hope and failure."

"But of all things, why was she talking about Mr. Lorin?"

"Like I said, gibberish."

"Dad, you can tell me the truth."

Dad said nothing.

Ander hated to say it, but he needed to push Dad further.

"They weren't...*together*...were they?"

"No! No." He looked away, then turned sharply back to him. His face twisted, offering a glimpse of a beast inside. "Why would you think that?"

Ander shook his head, unafraid of the beast. He knew it was a declawed wildness. "I'm just assuming the worst," he said. "That's what life brings in the end after all, isn't it?"

Dad calmed the beast and sat back with crossed arms. "You're too young to think like that."

"It's true, though. Don't blame me for getting a head start. I mean, come on, school is useless, I'm the only one of my friends to not have a job because I'm too much of a foo-flippin' wuss to get my driver's license. And my mom is a psycho."

And my uncle ruins lives.

Dad nodded slowly, pathetically empathetic. "There are many good things for you to look forward to."

"Like what?"

"Family, friends, memories. Happiness and, uh, what's that word? Fulfillment." He paused, lowering his head like he usually did for some final fatherly encouragement. "Even when things get rough, there's always the hope for something better. It keeps us going."

"And what if it never comes? What if somewhere along the way I make a decision that pulls the rug from so-called 'fulfillment.'"

"Somewhere out there is a version of you that you need to take hold of."

Ander stood up again. "So there's a parallel universe where another version of me is just peachy? Who cares? What about me? *Me*? This is all that I am." He spun around, mockingly showing off. "It would seem all this carcass can hope for is a good grave."

"Oh, Ander, don't be so dramatic."

He stepped away. "I'm just making emo cool again."

"Where you going?"

"Vending machine."

* * * * *

Ander's head hurt as he walked, and he wondered if it were possible to check himself in for a few nights.

Maybe madness runs in the family.

When he reached the main waiting area, he remembered that he didn't have any money for the machine. He thought about bumming some from his sisters, who sat across the room, but they were too busy with their phones and he didn't feel like talking.

He huddled by a window far from the broken one and grabbed National Geographic with a blank stare on the first page he opened to.

Dad was there in an instant, handing him a few dollar bills. "I suppose you need money."

"I'm good."

"I know you don't have any, unless Kris or Abby are giving handouts."

Ander frowned, but couldn't meet his eyes. "It's fine."

Dad waited for a moment before sitting down next to him.

"How did Mom break that window?" Ander said, staring at the plastic as the men taped it over the void.

"All right." Dad slapped his thighs. "I'll tell you what happened."

"What?"

"It was our addresses. That's all it was. That's how it started."

It took Ander a moment to forget the window and listen.

"167 Bear Trap and 167 Parish. Lorin's on Bear Trap Road, we're on Parish Road. An absolutely rotten coincidence of numbers and an absolutely incompetent mailman. Such a stupid reason..." he waved around the room. "...for all this."

Dad took a moment to rub his face.

"All your mom wanted was to bring Scott the mail. Twice in one week his packages were jammed into our mailbox, so she figured she'd just walk it over instead of leaving it for Mr. Illiterate, the mailman. What are neighbors for, you know?"

He cupped his mouth for a moment, then stroked his chin a couple

times before letting his fist rest just beneath it.

"So, taking the package, she went down the road. And at the end of his driveway," he said with a dramatic pause, "she heard him operating machinery in his gravel pit behind the house." He paused to look up at the ceiling with closed eyes. "If she would have just left it in his mailbox...but you know Mom, strolling in, ready for anything."

"Machinery?"

"That's what she told me. It was all she could remember after she came home, feeling dizzy. Figured it was his backhoe or something."

The maintenance men had nearly completed taping the plastic wrap when an old lady's panting came into earshot. She stopped at the couch adjacent to Ander and tossed her purse down, then used her cane to plop into her seat.

"What happened here?" she asked Ander.

"Window broke," he said flatly.

"Oh," she grunted, "and I thought they turned on the air conditioning." She muttered something else as she buried herself in a gardening magazine.

Ander looked out the window with renewed curiosity about Mr. Lorin.

'Machinery'? What was he hammering?

He turned to Dad. "When did this happen, exactly? Growing up, I just remember Mom's mind slipping."

"You were very young. Maybe it was before you were born. Actually, Mom was pregnant. Was she with you or Kris? Anyway, it took a while for the mental fits to take hold. It wasn't until after we had Grace that it got worse—when she got laid off from Marty's Meats. Remember that?"

"Barely. I was four when Grace was born."

"Right. Wow." Dad stared out the window. "She's been here that long?"

"Does Mr. Lorin know he did this to Mom?"

Dad sat lost in thought.

"Dad," Ander said louder.

"Huh?" He spoke in a trance. "Does Scott know what he did? I don't think so."

"Are you saying you didn't even tell him?"

"By the time I realized it was him—or suspected it was him—it was too late. Water under the bridge, you know?"

"But you've never actually talked to him about this?"

Dad lowered his head to the floor. "We don't talk."

"Why not?"

"No one talks to their neighbors."

"Uh, normal people do."

"Sure."

The lady next to them cleared her throat and rustled her magazine.

"Why can't you suck it up and talk to him?"

Dad shrugged roughly. "Because I don't like him."

"Because of what he did to Mom?"

"Not just that. He's always been...I don't know, *off*."

"Off?"

"Yeah. Unapproachable."

"Maybe you're unapproachable."

"Wow." The old lady didn't even hide the whisper to herself.

"For what it's worth," Dad said, "I tried to talk to him."

"Really?" Ander's voice was so incredulous it was barely a question.

"Sort of. When he first moved in, mid-90's, first thing he did was dig up his entire back twenty. I assumed he was going to start a little gravel pit business. Either that, or looking for something underground. Whenever I drove by his driveway, I would peek down to see what he was up to. Sometimes I saw him and waved, but he would just stare blankly at me. His face, even at a distance, was off-putting. It was like just *looking* at his property was trespassing.

"I figured he was just one of those odd, hermit types, so I let him be for a while. Then that winter, when the ground was frozen, I heard him operating his backhoe across the river. You know that patch of reeds in the middle of the pines?"

"Yeah, I always thought it looked out of place."

"That's where he was digging. Whatever it was, he seemed to be going deep."

Ander's head twitched with shock. "Bizarre."

"I waited for him to leave before I crept over to investigate. But all I found was just a big hole. Thought maybe he was digging a pond. Or expanding his agate empire."

Ander cradled his chin, mouth gaped.

"When I turned to go," Dad continued, "there he was, standing in his pit with a look...intense, you know, like a threat. Like cowboy meets shock rock."

Ander crimped his face to imagine the unusual image.

"I apologized, but he said nothing. Shortly after that he put up all

kinds of signs. "Trespass At Your Own Risk." I got the message."

"So...how come I've never heard of this before?"

"Didn't think it was that interesting. The whole situation just made me dislike him even more."

"This makes him more of a legend."

"He's legendary all right. A legendary schmuck."

"Any idea what he was digging? Big bones or something?"

Dad frowned. "That's oddly specific. But, no, I have no idea. The only thing that looked a little odd was the pile of black rocks beside that deep hole."

Ander gaped.

"Thought it weird to be from a swamp. But who am I? A geologist?" he chuckled.

"You never asked what he was up to?"

"I don't care what he was doing. I refuse to care. In my book, he wanted nothing to do with us, so that's why he became a nobody to me."

"Until Mom."

"Unfortunately."

The lady had rested her magazine on her lap, clearly from eavesdropping so hard that she gave up on the facade of reading.

"You're saying you have no idea what made Mom crazy?"

"No idea."

"But the answer could be right next door. This whole time."

Dad looked away and out the window for a moment. "Yes," he finally said, bringing his eyes back to the floor in front of him. "I've thought about asking Scott about that day, of telling him about Mom, but I don't want to dig all that up again. No pun intended."

"Sue him."

Dad laughed.

"I mean it."

His face leveled and he looked squarely at Ander. "If only it were that simple."

"It *is* simple. Mom was fine before she went over to his place. Something happened there and now she's loony. Period."

"Ander," he sighed, "calm down."

"Seriously?" Ander risked a hoarse whisper. "This is fresh news to me. You've had years to calm down about it."

Dad squinted at the ceiling tiles for a moment before responding. "Even if I wanted to sue him, we can't prove anything. Dr. Bannin says

insanity is complicated. We can't know for certain what caused Mom's condition."

"But what if Mr. Lorin's to blame? Shouldn't he pay?"

Dad shook his head and turned away. "No. I went down this path already. I blamed him for a long time. But I love your mom more than I hate him."

"If you love Mom, you'll fight harder."

The beast reared. "You don't get to say that."

The lady threw her magazine down and used her cane to rise to her feet.

"And you—" Ander said.

"Bringing someone to court is no light matter, Ander."

"But it's the right thing to do. Justice. People need to face what they've done."

"What about forgiveness?"

"You're saying you've forgiven Mr. Lorin?"

"If he's responsible? Yes."

"For making Mom insane? Honestly?"

Dad hesitated. "Yes."

The lady shouldered her purse, adjusted her shirt and walked away as fast as her cane allowed.

"You're not just avoiding him?" Ander continued.

"I don't need to talk to him. It's over and done."

"You're saying you have no hard feelings?"

He shook his head.

"Then you'll have no problem talking to him when we get home."

He shuffled on the couch. "I don't need—"

"You're avoiding him."

"What will that even accomplish? 'Hey, Scott, remember when you made my wife crazy?'" He let out a fake chuckle and stood.

"He could tell you what happened," Ander pressed. "Isn't that enough of a reason?"

Dad halted him with his palm and shifted to leave. "I'm done talking about this."

"Maybe Lorin could fix her mind," he said as Dad slipped away.

"Then *you* talk to him," he called back, "I've come to peace with everything."

Ander remained on the couch, recycling his dad's story. It kept buzzing in his brain, even when he blinked himself back to reality and returned to his mom's room.

She had already resumed her usual demeanor—her empty shell—when he walked in. She didn't stare at him anymore, nor did she mutter absurdities. But her tamed form, sprawled on the bed, left him with growing unease.

Mr. Lorin...

5

Handyman

The handyman eased the rattling white van into the shady cul-de-sac. He entered the last driveway and crept past the row of spruce trees lining the front yard. Shifting to park, he nervously unwrapped a caramel candy, waiting a moment to monitor the house's living room window for movement.

He looked at his phone to double-check Boss's message.

The Hannon house will be empty from 1-3. But only Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He threw in the candy and killed the engine. Once he grunted out of the van, he hobbled to the front door. His fingers ran through his bristly tuft of hair as he rehearsed his phony story.

"Looking for my pit bull," he muttered, "wandered off again. Name's Ripper."

He pressed the bell, heart banging. No one answered the door, so he rang it again, waiting in silence. The longer he waited, the calmer he got.

He took out the master key and swiftly unlocked the door for a peek inside.

"Anyone home?"

His ears hummed. He grinned, giddy, and hustled back to his van to fetch a step ladder and tool bag. Bringing both to the house, he dug into his tool bag and extracted his furry disguise: a Sasquatch mask.

"I'm the hairy handyman," he sang to himself, as if a mantra. He slipped the mask on and strolled across the living room. "I'm the hairy handyman. I get your fix."

He set the ladder and bag down before positioning his body like the famous Bigfoot video. Arms swinging, he ventured into the kitchen. He did a little loop, acting ape-like and bobbing his head to the sides. With eyes wide and tongue worming through the mask's mouth, he did a little jig. A cackle erupted in his throat, bringing his clowning to an end. He completed his performance by giving a thumbs-up to the light switch.

"Remember, fellas," he said to the switch. "I'm the hairy handyman. I get your fix." He dashed closer to it, peering at the tiny speck in the middle. "No liking or subscribing required." He winked.

Grabbing the ladder and a microfiber rag from his tool bag, he pattered down the hall to the master bedroom. It greeted him with the must of dirty laundry.

He positioned the ladder below the smoke detector before ambling to the top. He twisted the detector from the ceiling and turned it over to reveal a nest of wires glued to its underside. The device resembled a gutted cell phone. An SD card, battery and circuit board stared up at him. He replaced the battery, refastened the device to the ceiling, before cautiously descending the ladder and slinking into the master bathroom. He delicately stepped into the bathtub.

"Hairy hairy drain...hairy hairy handyman."

He gave the shiny center of the shower-head a quick wipe. Satisfied, he kissed at it through his mask. "That's for all ya filthy fellas." He went serious. "Then what does that make me?" He stooped to clean his boot prints from the tub. "Filthy, *filthy* fella. Ha!"

He gathered his equipment and darted into the hall, but then paused at the next door. It was the forbidden fruit—the morsel reserved for Boss alone.

He cracked it open to let the scent of the teen girl's belongings overwhelm him. He tingled.

A smoke detector, like the one in the master bedroom, peered down at him. He considered how Boss would react if he disobeyed his one rule; so he shut the door, forced his feet down the hall, and slipped outside before he could succumb to the temptation. Yet even after he was out of the neighborhood, his thoughts lingered on the forbidden.