

The Curse

By Anthony Davis

Chapter 1: The Mind's Own Prison

It was raining in Pinesgrove. Adam stood over his brother's grave. The stone read: *In Loving Memory of Hudson Berg, 352 ADD - 376 ADD*. Adam was now the eldest in a parentless home. Their mother had died a long time ago giving birth to Ashley, and their father was away in the army. Who knew how long it would be until his father even knew of his son's passing?

His sister Ashley cried into Mrs. Cindy's dress. Ashley managed a mousey "It's not fair" as they lowered his casket into the ground.

The townsfolk embraced Adam one by one. Warily, he listened to their words. Try as he might, his mind was wandering somewhere else. Somewhere dark, cold, and hollow.

As everyone left, it felt like the rain was the only thing keeping him from spiraling too far. It was a constant reminder that this was real. This wasn't just a nightmare.

He shivered and looked down at his best set of clothes. "*Hudson would be so upset at me for ruining these.*" A tear built in his eye. He'd managed to go this long without crying. He clenched his fist as the tear rolled down his cheek.

Adam felt a hand on his shoulder. From the corner of his eye, he saw a thin older gentleman wearing all black. His dark hair was nearly replaced by the grey of old age. "Hello Adam. I'm sorry for your loss."

Adam numbly stared at his brother's grave as another tear rolled down his face. He attempted to speak, but it came out wrong. He cleared his throat. "Thank you for everything. We couldn't have afforded to bury him without your help."

"He was a good man. He deserved to at least have a decent burial."

"We won't be able to pay you back anytime soon."

"Don't worry about that. I wouldn't accept even a half piece anyway. This town has lost enough as it is."

Adam nodded.

The old man seemed to mumble to himself. "This can't happen again." He glanced at Adam and smiled as if he'd just remembered he was not alone. "I'm sorry. Forgive an old man for rambling. Come now, let's get you out of the rain before you catch a cold." The old man accompanied Adam as they left the graveyard.

“I overheard Mrs. Cindy offered to keep you and your sister in her home until your father can come back for you both. Since her children have already moved away, she was more than happy to keep you two.”

Adam nodded again as he listened. In small towns like this everyone knew everyone else's business and word always moved through the grapevine with ease. He didn't look the old man in the eye and kept his gaze on the horizon. “I'll help my sister pack soon but I'll stay in my family's house. I don't need a keeper to watch over me.”

The old man gave a small smile noticing the attempt at maturity. “Yes. Well, if you change your mind, I'm sure Mrs. Cindy would love to have you.”

The rest of the way to Adam's house there was a silence broken only by the rain. Adam thanked him one last time and they departed. As soon as Adam was inside, and he heard the door close, he fell to his knees. His eyes welled with tears and his mouth began to quiver. He couldn't hold his tears back anymore so he didn't try. He let his bravado crack and fall as he slumped against the door. There was no point in holding a brave face now. He felt waves of sadness overtake him.

Chapter 2: What Once Was Whole

All he wanted now was to live in the memory of a happier time, not that long ago. There had been a nice cool breeze, perfect for a picnic. Ashley was setting up the blanket, Adam tended their fire, and Hudson went to fish for their lunch. It had been a family tradition to step away from the farm after the plants were in the ground, and most of the work had been done.

Adam watched as Ashley put three sets of silverware at each plate. It seemed she was going for an elegant setup. She had even gathered some flowers. “Ash, I only need one fork and spoon.”

“Adam, you can eat your fish like a barbarian with three knives sticking out of it,” she said matter-of-factly. “We civilized few will enjoy our meal with a bit of class.”

Hudson must have caught their conversation as he brought two decent sized salmon back. “Adam, you know better than that.” Hudson started the process of skinning and picking the bones out of the fish just far enough from the blanket. “To properly eat like a barbarian, you need at least five knives. I'll give you two of mine.”

Ashley shook her head. “Boys will be boys. I suppose I should have seen this coming. Well, if you need me, I will be picking some fresh berries for our cake.” Ashley took a small bowl with her.

“Adam, come here. We need to talk.” That was never an enjoyable conversation starter.

Adam dropped off the fourth armload of firewood and brushed himself off. “What's up?” As he approached the smell of fish was intoxicating.

Hudson carefully separated the fish from its skin with his knife. “I’ve been thinking. We aren’t really living. We’re just surviving as it is. If I hadn’t found Sileen when I did, our crops would have died before the season was out.” Hudson passed one freshly skinned and deboned fish to Adam. Adam took it to their campfire’s grill.

“If I sell great-grandfather’s shield, and combine that with the money we’ve saved, I could pay for an apprenticeship under one of the traveling smiths. Any town will pay good money for a smith, especially in a real town. It would be two years of training, and then two more years before I could open my own shop, but it will work. We could leave this place in four years and never look back.”

Adam slowly approached Hudson. “What about father?”

Hudson stopped midway through the last salmon. He continued skinning the fish after a moment. “What about him?”

“He stops in from time to time to check up on us. What do you think would happen if he knew you had left us?”

“The last time father was around was for Ash’s tenth birthday. That was six months ago. If tradition continues, we have four and half years before he comes back.” He started picking the tiny bones from the salmon. “That means we have just enough time for me to finish my apprenticeship, pack up, and leave. He’ll never know I was ever gone.”

Adam was silent for a long moment. They had all grown up here. Mom died here. The thought of leaving was more than Adam wanted to consider. Hudson put the fish down on the cutting board. He walked up to Adam and put a hand on his shoulder. “I want better things for you and Ash. You’re both so smart but if you don’t have options, we’re going to waste your lives on a farm in the middle of nowhere. Besides, I don’t think you want to harvest beans, vegetables, eggs, and lemon myrtle for the rest of your life.

Adam nodded. “Yeah. Even as creative as we are, I’m getting pretty tired of beans.”

“It’s settled then. Next week, I’ll sell great-grandfather’s shield and find a traveling smith. You’ll be the man of the house till I get back. We can tell Ash when...” Hudson got a little choked up. “...when she gets...” Hudson had a coughing fit, and he only got worse after that.

Chapter 3: Man of the House

Adam gained a part of his composure with a shaky breath. Whether he liked it or not he was the man of the house now. Adam walked to his parent’s door. Another tear fell down his face. Without a glance at the door knob, he grabbed the handle and entered his parents' room.

Adam walked through the door, taking the space in. They weren’t allowed in this room ever since their mom died. It was just like he remembered it. It was a simple bedroom: a bed fit for two, a nightstand on either side, and a dresser large enough to share. One window let in light through the few cracks in the shutter. He reached for his boot and pulled out his piece of flint and his knife. With one strike across his flint, he lit a candle.

His mother's nightstand held a single vase with two flowers. Ashley had picked them on their last family outing with Hudson. The Lemmikki flowers sat in the light let in by the shutters. The pink and blue flowers were the only thing in the room with color.

"Hudson must have put them here. They are as beautiful as the day Ash picked them," he thought with a smile. *"Even after all this time, he was still putting flowers in mom's vase."*

Adam felt someone watching him and turned towards the door. Ashley stood there, first looking confused, then frustrated. "Adam, what are you doing in here? You know we're not allowed to be in here. I'm going to tell... I'm..." He saw in her face the cold realization of what she had tried to say. She started to cry.

Adam ran to her and knelt on one knee. "H- hey. I know that..."

Before he could finish, she wrapped her arms around him in a hug. She wept into his shoulder. "Don't leave me. Please don't ever leave me. I can't..." Her words faded as she wept.

His eyes filled with tears as he hugged her back. "I won't." He suppressed the urge to cough.