

The Darkness Within

Chapter 1 - The Obscure Vision

It was as simple as finding them. However, as I ran around both my yard and the neighbor's property, I began to run dry on ideas for their hiding places.

The blatant fact plagued me terribly, and I grimaced; considering how much effort I had put into that child's game, it should've been over minutes ago. *How can they hide so well? Picky and Tracy I can understand.... but Pokey can't even fit in the doorway, let alone a decent hiding spot....* I stopped and took a slow gander around, mentally crossing off spots I had already checked. *Behind the bushes... in the flowerbeds... behind the tree grove... Where can they be...?*

With ideas devoid from my mind, I shuffled over to the Minch's property and passed their absurdly large house over to the western side lawn. I rounded the corner of his house to the side yard, only to hear a wild shuffling and rustling of leaves in a bush nearby.

I froze upon reflex, eyes immediately darting to the source. Upon looking, I barely caught a flash of red disappearing into the bush.

Once I processed the sight, I sighed and rolled my eyes. *You've got to be joking....* Quietly, I slid over to the bush, and waited dead silently.

And along with the periodic chirping of birds, I could hear his whispering voice — Pokey's voice — speaking to himself: *"...Switching hiding places when he's not around is the best idea I ever had! As long as he stays this dumb, I'll be sure to win!—"*

He cut off when I yanked back a branch abruptly. He stared back, flushed in the face. "Wh— What!?" Pokey frowned, the redness of rage coming to his face. "How can this be!? I practically ensured my success!!!"

I stared down at him and replied dryly, "I would say that if you were hiding within the boundaries we set."

Pokey sneered at me as he clenched his fists. "Rules are made for breaking, Ness! I can't have any fun if I have to follow dumb rules."

"And neither can anyone else when you disobey them," I added clearly, folding my arms. *Especially when I'm put at an useless disadvantage....*

"Whatever!" He growled as he threw his hands up in frustration. "Doesn't matter anyways!....." His voice faded as he began his effort to get back up. I was then forced to watch him rock back and forth as he struggled to get himself upright. Pokey grunted several times before giving in and holding out a hand to me. "C-Can you help me up? I'm a little stuck here..."

I let out a brief sigh. *Oh... Now he asks for forgiveness....* Knowing there was no reason to turn him down, I grabbed his fat, sweating hand and hauled him to his feet. "You need to be more careful..." I murmured.

Pokey haughtily clambered over the fence and landed on the ground with a heavy thump. "I know *dang* well I need to be careful!" He barked loudly, "I knew what I was doing; I'm smarter than you think, Ness..."

Or perhaps what you did says otherwise.... I thought subsequently, meandering away to my own side yard. "Well," I began, slowly changing the subject, "I still have to find Picky and Tracy, so—"

"What!!!!? How can Picky be better at this than me!?" Pokey interjected subtly, almost stepping on my heels as he followed close behind. "He's— he's just a shrimp that never knows

what he's doing!" He tried his best to degrade his younger brother, even though nothing changed — including his loss.

As I ignored his pointless remarks, I crossed over to my front yard, slipping over the low fence. Pokey himself, however, stayed put on his lawn and watched me tediously from the other side. He muttered under his breath as I walked away, "*I hope he never finds them...*"

I passed by my house, spotting the sleepy dog slumbering on the front porch. *At least King doesn't have to worry about numbskulls all day... all he does is worry about his food and when his next nap is...* A light grin crossed my face, but it soon faded, turning my concentration back to the game. I stepped around the corner and followed the siding of the wall down to the drainage barrel on the far side.

The closer I got to it, the more apparent a sound became; Some sort of childish giggling came into earshot, and I tensed up a little. *They can never keep themselves quiet, can they...?*

I stepped even closer, but a twig snapped crisply under my foot.

"*Shh-hh!!*" Tracy shushed, stifling her giggles. "*I can hear him! He's-s right there! Quit making me laugh!*"

I heard Picky laughing as well, but he didn't say anything in response. *Oh, boy....* I used the tip of my finger to lift the lid up, seeing Picky and my younger sister huddled shoulder to shoulder in the bottom of the bone-dry barrel. Tracy lifted her head and glanced up at me, red in the face from laughing. "Oh... Hi Big Bro," She greeted me casually as she held it in, "Looks like you found us."

"I sure did," I said with a smirk, propping the lid against the barrel's side.

Picky finally lifted his head up too, his stringy hair covering his eyes. "You're so good at seeking," He confidently, "To be honest, I think you're the king of seeking."

Just that comment alone managed to tug at my heartstrings. *King of seeking...* "I... I just know all the places to look," I said as I backed away. *Since there's only so many places to go in the first place....* "Now get out of there so we can jump right into the next round."

Picky reached up and grabbed the lip of the barrel tightly and hauled himself up to his feet, watching himself as he crawled out carefully. Once he was out, Tracy stood up and clambered out with the help of my stable hand.

I came back to the eastern lawn where the two properties met by a white fence, and Pokey greeted me with a sour face and folded arms across his chest. "*How can he even manage to hide longer than me...*" He mumbled, yet as soon as I approached close enough, he snapped out of his grouchy behavior and watched me and the two children trailing behind.

"You finally found everyone," Pokey said, his tone stagnant. "Now let's get a move on so I can finally be the seeker!"

I turned up my chin and glared at him. "Do you even remember any of the rules we all set right before we started?" Yet I went on without letting him answer, "No matter who is found first or last, the winner of the rock-paper-scissors match is the seeker."

"F-F— Fine then!" Pokey snapped, his face going red again, "Then let's do a round of rock-paper-scissors!" He put his hand under his fat fist, his face extremely red as he was more than determined to win that game.

I rolled my eyes at him and held my hands in place. *Here we go...*

He gave me one last stare before he provoked me to begin counting.

We began bouncing our fists and slapping our open palms, and I finally got set and called out, "Rock, paper, scissors—"

While my hand was still in the form of a fist, his hand had his two fingers splayed out and the rest tucked into his palm.

"Rock beats scissors," I announced with a sigh, "And that means I get to be the seeker."

“WHAT!!!!?” Pokey bellowed and blew me back with the power of his voice. “That isn’t fair!! That’s the eighth time you won — in a row!!”

I opened my mouth but his mouth ran right on: “I don’t care if you won this *stupid* game of rock-paper-scissors!!!” He spat, drilling a chubby finger into my chest. “I’m the seeker this round, whether I’m breaking rules or not!”

I gave him a harsh glare, my brow scrunched. I waited a moment to ensure he was finished before reminding him, “I already told you..... I won rock-paper-scissors, so I’m the seeker.” Anger slowly began to boil deep down in my gut, his incompetence only fueling the fire. His reaction was expected from him, but that didn’t change my mood.

“You got to be the seeker last time,” Pokey huffed sternly, “And all the times before that....” He cocked his head and scowled. “Can’t you at least let me — or someone else — do it for once? Just once?”

Tracy shook her head as she butted in, “Rules are rules: If Big Bro won, then he won, and he’s the seeker this round....” Her tone turned sheepish. “Even if he’s been the seeker since the dawn of time.”

He growled and looked away, quite embarrassed by the entire altercation. Yet he just couldn’t let it go. “But it isn’t fair!!!” Pokey repeatedly roared, stomping his foot childishly. “Y— You have to be cheating or something!” He pointed at my face, more or less getting right up in it. “I— I can just see you doing something like that to me!”

“*Oh, Pokey,*” Picky muttered under his breath, “*For an older brother, you are quite disappointing....*”

I truthfully couldn’t agree more, I thought subsequently. *But just let him do it so he doesn’t have to whine about it anymore....* “...Fine....” I mustered after a minute. “I’ll let Tracy be the seeker this time....” I glanced down at her, and she smiled back. *Anyone besides Pokey... knowing him, he’ll be the one peeking if he’s the seeker....*

Pokey glanced away as if uninterested. “Fine....” He muttered, “Just as long as you aren’t the seeker....”

As things came to a consensus, Tracy covered her eyes and began counting: “One.... Two.... Three.... Four....”

Before long, we dispersed; Pokey and Picky headed back towards their side of the yard and over the fence, while I went into our own backyard.

I picked out a spot where none of them had hid in the last round: Inside a bush in the back corner of the yard. I crouched down and crawled in, pushing the thin branches out of my way as I sat down. *I’m positive she’ll never think to look all the way back here....* I snickered quietly with a hand over my mouth.

Minutes passed of silence before Tracy’s voice rung out, “Ready or not!! Here I come!!!”

And the seeking began.

I squashed my body into myself to make me as compact as possible, making chances even less that she would find me. *She always tries too hard....* I brushed some of my black hair from my eyes, catching a glimpse of her crossing the fence and into our neighbor's yard. *...She can take her sweet time... I thought, resting my chin on my bare but dirt-crusted knees.*

The longer time passed, the more bored I became just sitting there by myself in a bush. From the looks of it, she found both Pokey and Picky quite easily, but was calling out my name in hopes that I would respond; “Big Bro! Come out, come out, wherever you are!!!”

She better start looking a bit harder if she wants to win, I let out a hushed sigh and prepared to rest my eyes for a bit.

While I began to tip my head down, a terrible twinge snapped in the back of my head. I winced, screwing my eyes shut in excruciating pain. *What the?....* An obscure, awful, pounding

headache hit my head, worse than a hammer to glass. I frowned and clutched my temples, resisting the urge to cry and whine. No matter how hard I tried to suppress it with the pressure of my hands, it still panged on and on. My vision clouded, starbursts popping up everywhere I looked. Panic settled in fast, and sweat dotted my face while my heart quickened its pace. *Wh-- What on earth is going on?!*

With the best of my ability I withdrew from the bush in an agonizing crawl, my shirt tugging as it got stuck a bit. I stood up once I was out, the starriness continuing as I meandered across the back lawn. Each and every step being in heavy cinder block feet, I maneuvered sluggishly yet tensely towards the front of the house all while I tried to maintain my sanity and wellness. *I have a feeling this won't last very long with a headache like this...*

Tracy was looking around, and when she heard me groaning, she whirled around, pointing at me. She giggled and called me out, "I found you!"

Her yelling made the pain sting and pang twice as hard, and I hissed rudely at her, "Not now, Tracy! I-I'm not feeling too g-good..." I tripped over the stoop and went on to the front door, heading inside with a weak push of the door. *I-I gotta lay down...*

She followed me close behind, leaving Pokey and Picky behind. "Wait, Ness, what's wrong?" She said quietly as not to disturb the soreness in my noggin. "I d-didn't mean to hurt you, if that's what I did..."

"It's okay, I just—" I winced at the pain, and it caused me to interrupt myself. *Never mind...* I just tried my best to refrain from talking to her on any level as I hobbled through the living room, dragging my feet.

However, while I was internally suffering, Mom was already there to greet me with one of her staple mom-bear hugs. "How's my lil' man?" She asked and trapped me in her arms before I could breathe.

I squirmed a bit when she squeezed me, tightening the pain in my head. "Stop, Mom—" I mustered and turned my head a little. "I— I have a headache..."

"Oh, no..." She loosened up her hug, but still held me close to her. "Are you getting sick? It isn't really that time of year though— Are you getting allergies? But... you don't have any—"

A harsh pang banged around in my head, and I cringed. "J-Just let me lay down," I muttered, the drum still pounding. It worsened as she guided me to the couch, the thumping soon prolonging and intensifying itself. *It hurts so bad, just please let it stop....!*

Mom helped me lay down slowly, soon pressing the back of her hand against my head to check feverishness. "I'll go and get something to help ease your headache..... my poor baby..." She stood up straight and went right off to the kitchen.

Tracy stopped by and I barely saw her out of the corner of my eye. "I'll go and find the others and tell them that we're done. Don't worry, Big Bro. I got your back."

And she left, back out the door to tell them that the game was finished.

I— I don't mind, I thought weakly, closing my eyes to rest them. *I just need to get rid of this headache!* Unfortunately the more thoughts I generated, the more and more the ache grew unbearable, pounding and stinging nonstop. *I don't even know where... or why....*

The shuffle of my mother's slippers on the floor supposedly woke me back up, and she crouched down next to me with a pea-sized pill in her flat palm. "This should help ease it.... if it's really, *really* bad then I can get you a second—"

Before she even finished her sentence, I sent her off to get me an extra pill. And if it was allowed, I would've asked for maybe a third and possibly even a fourth one, but she would've had the upper hand in saying 'no' to that.

As she fetched me another one, I just stared up at the ceiling, watching my vision get starry with dark starbursts and strange waving blotches of the bizarre substance. Sooner rather

than later, I let my eyes close themselves allowed them to rest. *What am I supposed to do with this headache? I haven't had the flu or a virus in the past month! Hey, I haven't had one at all this year!*

However, not only was I beginning to see sparks and stars on the inside of my eyelids, but an obscure, mystic yet fairly distant voice made its way into my head. The problem was it sounded like no one I had ever spoken with in my lifetime, and it gave me a hard time understanding what they were trying to say. The words were extremely fast and rushed, making the comprehension twice as hard. I tried my best to listen to what I was being told, but it was too distorted to make out anything.

The odd green and purple starbursts in my vision morphed and shifted to create something different — something to resemble that of a very young woman's face. I felt uneasy as I met her face of pure distress with her brow furrowed in worry, her eyes wide and gushing with tears.

By the shape of her moving, gaping mouth, she had appeared to be calling my name. No matter how much I tried to respond, she kept calling out endlessly:

"Ness!...

.....Ness!...

.....Ness...

.....Ness—" Until she finally began to fizzle from view, a pixelated dark vortex swallowing her whole. Strands of dark blood red swirled about in the hole where she once was, and she soon disappeared entirely.

I became overwhelmed with a stressful blast of hot air and heat, causing me to sweat immensely. The more things progressed, the more of a hard time I had keeping track of what was going on inside my aching head and my throbbing mind.

As soon as I thought it couldn't get any more mind-boggling and fear-inducing, another strange face appeared — white eyes, white mouth, white eyebrows. They stared at me, their mouth stretched wide in a grin. Yet the longer I looked, the more it came off as menacing.

I clenched my teeth together, coming face-to-face with a dark mass. They refused to look away, refused to blink no matter what it took. I merely broke the stare, only to spot two massive hands of the same dark substance rise up from behind, possibly out of their back.

My eyes grew wide in terror as their hands lunged forward, shrouding me in its pitch blackness. I screamed my loudest, even if it may have been that no one was able to hear me.

I jolted abruptly, the darkness disappearing in the blink of an eye; Within an instant, I appeared sitting upright on my homely couch. My heartbeat slowed as I let everything settle back in: mainly, the idea I was back at home, safe and sound for the time being. *...What....?* I glanced down, and everything was there: my feet, my legs, my body, my chest, and my pain-free head, too. *I feel better, but I didn't take any pills or anything yet..... However, after seeing what I saw, I'm not sure if I'm fine either way...*

I shot a look out the window and it was already dark out, the sky and the outdoors asleep. I ran a trembling hand under my cap and through my hair, swinging my legs to the edge of the couch. "What just happened?..." I muttered at the peak of exhaustion.

Nonetheless, I stood up and wandered into the kitchen, spotting King sleeping by the doorway. After seconds of glaring at him, I foolishly prodded him with my tired foot and woke him up.

He lifted his head, prying his tired doggy eyes to merely glimpse at me. "*....Ness?*" King yawned, "*You're finally awake?...*"

I nodded and balled my fists to rub my eyes. "Yeah.... I'm awake." *After seeing the most abhorrent sight in my entire life....*

“Are you doing alright...?” He grumbled lowly, *“You came in and lied down on the couch and didn’t move for.... hours....”*

“H... H... Hours?” I echoed what his mind had said. “How long was I out for...?” I threw a look over my shoulder at the microwave clock, and I had just about jumped out of my socks once I realized it was around two-fifteen in the morning.

“You were out for almost twelve hours,” King’s ears flicked. *“I don’t understand how any human could sleep so long in one sitting... and I thought I was the best napper...”* He added quietly.

“That’s not the point, you dumb mutt,” I growled under my breath. “That headache literally hit me outta nowhere... and so did that lady....” *And that.... thing....* The white-lined face appeared in my mind right after that woman, and a shudder crawled under my skin. *No... I can’t...*

“Well....” The dog began, shifting his paws around, *“I’m beginning to wonder why you were asleep for so long.”*

“I would tell you, but I don’t even have the foggiest idea.”