

CAULIFLOWER

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"You know it's true God hates this place."

– SLAYER

"He who doesn't take risks, never drinks champagne."

– RUSSIAN PROVERB

TOTAL DARKNESS.

A cavernous void. Tiny hairs come into focus. Yellow wax.

We pull back slowly to reveal...

We're looking at a TEENAGE BOY'S ear. Pink. Hints of red.

But this is not an average, healthy boy's ear.

It's a WRESTLER'S ear. Marked by combat.

He places an ear-bud in the snug interior. A MAN'S DEEP VOICE EXPLODES ON THE SOUNDTRACK. The sound of authority.

DIRK IRONSIDE (O.S.)
Dirk Ironside Podcast. Episode 488.
Blood and Conquest. Today on the
show we're talking discipline.

Pull back further to reveal...

The ear belongs to ADAM KARR (14, scrawny), a wrestler with a buzz-cut. Like a Cub Scout pretending to be a Marine.

He stares straight ahead. Unmoving. Pure determination.

The ear-bud gets YANKED out of his ear.

We now see Adam is on a

SCHOOLBUS - AFTERNOON

An older wrestler, JASON RODRIGUEZ (17, 170 pounds), holds Adam's headphones in his hand.

Jason, commanding and charismatic, slides next to Adam.

JASON
Coach said you're almost at 110. We
got a bigger, better guy at the
next weight class. We need you at
106. If you want to wrestle today,
you need to cut weight. Now.

Jason unfolds a tiny crumpled paper cup -- the kind you'd see at a dentist's office. He hands it to Adam.

JASON
Spit.

Adam obeys. Spitting in the cup.

Jason slips Adam a red Jolly Rancher.

JASON (CONT'D)

You run out of spit, suck on this.
 No water. Keep spitting till we
 make it to the meet, then the real
 work starts. You know you're
 dropping weight when you can shit
 through the eye of a needle.

Adam nods and pockets the candy.

Jason stands up to leave but notices Adam's damaged ear.

JASON

Don't let your ear get fucked up.

Jason walks away. Adam spits.

He puts the earbud back in his ear. A desolate Illinois winter passes in the window as Dirk Ironside GROWLS.

DIRK IRONSIDE (O.S.)

Everyday I wake up and there are
 two words driving me: "GET SOME."

INT. LOCKER ROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam opens a locker and sets his bag down. He takes out his wrestling singlet and peels off his Slayer sweatshirt.

JASON (O.S.)

Fuck you doing?

Adam stops. He lowers the sweatshirt and sees Jason.

JASON

Put all these on over your sweats.

Jason tosses him sweatshirts, sweatpants, and a winter hat.

Adam obeys. He's now wearing four hoodies, three pairs of sweatpants, and a hat. He looks ridiculous.

Jason checks the time on his phone.

JASON

25 minutes before weigh-in at 4:30.
 Prepare to die.

INT. WORK-OUT ROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam runs "suicides" as Jason watches. He sprints in 10 yard increments, touching the ground and returning each time.

JASON
10 minutes.

Panting and dripping sweat, Adam sprints harder.

INT. SHOWERS - AFTERNOON

Jason turns all the knobs on the showers so they're scalding. Adam, still in his sweats, stretches in clouds of steam.

JASON
5 minutes.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - BATHROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam attempts to shit on a toilet. We hear a SINGLE DROP.

JASON (O.S.)
1 minute.

INT. WEIGH-IN ROOM - AFTERNOON

C/U on the CLOCK: 4:30

AN OFFICIAL (50, gruff) puts down his CLIPBOARD. Adam and Jason rush into the room, both gasping for air.

JASON
We're here.

Jason helps Adam out of all the layers of his soaking-wet sweats, revealing a frighteningly skinny frame.

Finally, Adam removes his briefs. He steps on the scale completely naked. No fat. Pockets of developing muscle.

The Official adjusts the weight bar. It bobs and lands exactly at...

OFFICIAL
106 pounds.

Adam PUMPS HIS FIST. Jason helps him off the scale.

Jason, grinning, guides Adam to a bench. He opens his own gym bag and hands him a GATORADE and a SNICKERS bar.

Adam inhales the candy bar and chugs the Gatorade.

JASON

You got this, man. Don't let that
Travis motherfucker get in your
head. He's a rich bitch.

Adam looks across the room at his opponent: TRAVS HYDE (15,
preening rich kid), a junior with bleached blonde hair.

ADAM

He made it to State last year,
right?

JASON

Don't think about that shit, man.
You're a wrestler now.

Adam returns Travis's gaze. He's ready.

INT. BARRINGTON HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - AFTERNOON

Adam wraps his arms around Jason and another wrestler in a circle with the rest of the Varsity Squad, coaches and wrestlers. The boys all bow their heads in prayer.

COACH KNUDSON (40, sturdy-build) kneels in the center of the circle. He's the head coach. A fair, decent man.

COACH KNUDSON

In the name of the father, the son,
and the holy spirit. Dear God,
protect these young men as they put
their bodies on the line for your
glory as we begin this wrestling
season. And keep a special eye out
for our newest Varsity team member,
Adam Karr. As some of you know, we
haven't had a freshman on the squad
in over a decade. Let's make him
feel welcome.

Adam glances up -- Jason pushes his head back down.

COACH KNUDSON

We wrestle in your name, Jesus
Christ. Amen.

WRESTLERS

AMEN.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BARRINGTON HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - LATER

A SERIES OF QUICK-CUTS OF ADAM'S MATCH: The crowd CHEERS as Adam scores a take-down against Travis.

He puts Travis in a half-nelson. Driving him against the mat.

But his energy drops. The SNICKERS only put so much fuel in the tank. Adam loses control of the half-nelson.

Coach Knudson shakes his head in frustration.

COACH KNUDSON
HOOK THE LEG.

Adam doesn't listen. He reaches for Travis's arms instead.

Travis REVERSES the move, flipping Adam onto his back.

Too tired to fight, Adam rolls over on his belly. Travis hooks his arm and drives him against the mat.

Adam stares helplessly out at Coach K. Total humiliation.

TIME STOPS: Behind Coach K, a MYSTERIOUS OLDER COACH (71, scraggly and frail) watches Adam with a terrifying intensity.

Adam makes eye contact with the Older Coach, who stares right into the depths of his soul. Cowardly, Adam LOOKS AWAY.

THEN: A SLAP against the mat.

The boys shake hands. The ref raises Travis's arm in victory.

Adam is a fucking loser. He RIPS off his headgear.

Coach K inspects the side of Adam's head.

COACH KNUDSON
You should get that ear checked
out. Could get infected.

Adam approaches where the older wrestlers sit. Tears form in his eyes. He sniffles. Tries to hide his true feelings.

Jason, cold before, gives Adam a big hug.

JASON
You almost had him. You know what
you need? A Pancake Party.

INT. IHOP RESTAURANT - EVENING

Adam observes Jason, RYAN (17, wise-ass, 145 pounds), and STEVE (17, gentle giant, 220 pounds) as they devour piles of syrup-covered pancakes and LOUDLY ARGUE like teen boys do.

JASON

No one could take Volkov when he was young. I bet he was a beast.

RYAN

He did have top-secret Soviet training. *Rocky IV* shit.

STEVE

I bet McGregor could make him tap.

RYAN

It's a stupid hypothetical. You can't compare fighters from different eras and different sports. What do you think, freshman?

Adam is surprised to be asked a question.

RYAN

You think you can beat young Volkov's Russian ass?

ADAM

(embarrassed)

I don't know who he is.

JASON

(to Ryan)

He's a freshman. Of course he doesn't know Volkov.

Jason zeroes in on Adam.

JASON

Who is the toughest, hardest guy in the world?

ADAM

There's this ex-Marine Dirk Ironside. You guys know him?

The other boys laugh.

JASON

Ironside? Of course. I heard you listening to his podcast on the bus. I always recognize that deep-ass voice.

RYAN

(imitating Ironside)

"Get some."

STEVE

I love those IG videos he does.

Adam takes his last bite and pushes the plate forward.

ADAM

Thanks for including me, guys.

JASON

You think you're done?

ADAM

Uh, yeah.

JASON

You know where we are?

ADAM

IHOP.

JASON

Steve, tell him what that means.

Steve slides more pancakes onto Adam's plate.

STEVE

All you can eat pancakes. Whoever eats the smallest stack picks up the check. Team tradition.

ADAM

I only have 10 bucks.

STEVE

Then you better eat up, fat boy.

RYAN

(still doing Ironside)

"Get some... syrup."

Determined to not lose twice in one night, Adam slices into the pancakes. Shovels a HUGE CHUNK down his throat.

EXT. IHOP RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Adam VOMITS into a bush. Finished, he wipes his mouth.

Jason pulls up in his beat-up Ford pick-up truck. "BUILT NOT BOUGHT" bumper sticker. Rolls down the window.

JASON
Everybody pukes.

Adam looks up from the bush, embarrassed.

JASON
Get in the car, bro.

INT. JASON'S CAR - NIGHT

Jason drives fast. Cannibal Corpse ROARING from the stereo. Adam eyes him with wonder and a little skepticism.

JASON
You like metal?

Jason turns down the music a bit.

ADAM
Yeah, it helps me block out
everything.

JASON
You're a determined little dude.

ADAM
I gotta focus to win State.

JASON
Damn. State as a freshman?

ADAM
My dad did it. I'm gonna do it.

JASON
Not if you keep fucking up your
weight. What's your diet look like?

Adam shrugs.

JASON
Don't worry. I'll hook you up.

Jason makes a sharp turn.

INT. SUPER MARKET - MEAT SECTION - NIGHT

Adam pushes a shopping cart filled with fruits and veggies. Jason drops more food in it. Chicken breast. Turkey meat.

JASON

Here's a tip, bro. There's more to wrestling than working out and eating right. You gotta develop mind, body, and spirit. What's the word? "Holistic." Coach Volkov taught me that.

ADAM

I saw him at the end of my match tonight. He was staring at me. He's like an assistant coach, right?

JASON

More than that. He reshapes your life. Teaches technique. Ups your grades. Rewires your brain.

ADAM

I don't get it.

JASON

He was in the Russian military. He'll make you a real warrior. If that's not enough, he'll make you the type of guy girls wanna fuck.

ADAM

What about Coach K?

JASON

Coach K is a decent head coach. But Volkov is why this school sends kids to State every year. He's the secret weapon.

Jason tosses a can of almonds in the cart.

ADAM

I can't pay for all this.

JASON

Dude, I work at this store and I get a fucking sick discount. Don't worry. I got it.

Adam is touched but also a little suspicious.

ADAM

Why are you being so nice to me?

JASON

You got an older brother?

ADAM

No.

JASON

I do. Luis. Used to beat the fuck out of me. He got kicked out of school. Now he's locked up on some drug shit. Every day I ask what would Luis do? Then I do the opposite. So when I see a kid like you, someone who needs a friend, I try to *not* be Luis.

(beat)

And you listen to metal.

Jason grabs more food. He nods to ANOTHER STOCK BOY with the swagger of a teen who runs his shit job like a king.

ADAM

How do I get Volkov to coach me?

JASON

He only works with juniors and seniors. You just gotta wait. In the meantime, eat your fucking Wheaties, bro.

INT. ADAM'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Adam stocks up the fridge with his new food.

His mother JULIA (45, chipper, a bit paranoid) watches the local news on the kitchen TV and surveys the grocery haul.

JULIA

I just saw this fascinating news segment about teens using this drug Kratom. It's plant-based and used to treat pain, but it can be really dangerous. Have you heard about it?

ADAM

What? No. That sounds made up.

He finishes putting the food away. Closes the fridge.

JULIA
Lotta food there.

ADAM
Yeah.

JULIA
How'd your match go?

ADAM
Don't wanna talk about it.

JULIA
I know you're not used to losing,
but this is Varsity. It's not
middle school anymore.

ADAM
I know.

JULIA
Don't be so hard on yourself. It's
about getting better.

ADAM
I don't want to "get better." I
want to be the best.

Before she can respond, Adam heads for the stairs.

INT. ADAM'S HOUSE - DAD'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Adam enters a room stacked with inspirational business books. Adam's dad, PETER (46, a bookish ex-athlete), types at his computer and takes sips from a non-alcoholic beer.

ADAM
Coach Volkov noticed me.

PETER
That's great, buddy.

ADAM
He's the elite coach. Once he
starts training me, I won't lose
again. He'll get me to State.

PETER
I've got work to do right now. Can
we talk later?

Adam charges ahead, hungry for feedback or advice.

ADAM

When you wrestled, how did you know what to do? In the locker room I picture the match in my head. But then I get on the mat and there are too many options. I panic.

Peter turns around from his computer.

PETER

You have to learn to trust yourself. Listen to the voice in your head. What does it tell you?

ADAM

It tells me to win.

PETER

That's a start.

ADAM

It says "win State."

Peter laughs at this.

PETER

I won State. It turns out there's more to life than State. That's why that inner-voice is so essential.

ADAM

Sometimes I try to listen to the voice and I hear nothing.

PETER

Gotta listen harder. What's it saying now?

ADAM

"Keep annoying dad."

PETER

Mine says, "Shut the door."

Adam closes the door and leaves his dad to his work.

INT. ADAM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Lying in bed, stares at his phone. Posters of Dirk Ironside, UFC fighters, and college wrestlers decorate the walls.

He opens YouTube and pulls up a video.

ON THE PHONE SCREEN: Ex-Marine DIRK IRONSIDE (47, buff, stern) lectures his millions of subscribers. He wears a tight black t-shirt and sits in front of a microphone.

DIRK IRONSIDE

Take a leadership position in your own mind and lead yourself in the direction you want to go. You're on The Path of fire and adversity. The Path of blood and sweat and suffering. The Path of discipline, which leads to freedom.

Adam rolls off the bed and reaches for his gym bag.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

QUICK CUTS: Adam runs the streets. Sprinting as hard as possible. Like he's trying to escape his own body.

DIRK IRONSIDE (V.O.)

Go out there and get after it.

INT. ST. JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

A bell RINGS as students pass by in uniforms. Adam's clothes looks billowy on him. He wears a belt with extra notches to keep his pants up. Rushes to class, books piled in his arms.

INT. ST. JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

Adam draws super-jacked arms in his notebook. No torsos. No heads. No legs. Just a full page of menacing buff biceps.

Other students struggle to pay attention as FATHER MONTGOMERY (60, a slightly mischievous priest) reads from the Bible.

FATHER MONTGOMERY

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

He looks around the classroom. Zeroes in on Adam doodling.

FATHER MONTGOMERY

Adam, care to explain this passage from Ecclesiastes?

Adam panics. Pushes his notebook to the side.

ADAM

I went to a public school, so I'm new to all this, uh, Bible stuff.

FATHER MONTGOMERY

You have plenty of time to get better at this "Bible stuff."

Adam reads over the passage in his Bible.

ADAM

"Do it with all your might" makes me think the writer is saying "go out there and get after it."

Some kids giggle at this. Adam is embarrassed.

Another student, LUCIA (14, argumentative, wry), raises her hand. She's clearly smarter than everyone else in the class.

FATHER MONTGOMERY

Yes, Lucia.

LUCIA

The writers of the Old Testament planted their own crops and survived under harsh conditions. They were probably in great shape.

FATHER MONTGOMERY

You're suggesting the writers of the Old Testament were jocks?

LUCIA

The point of this book is there's nothing new under the sun. Adam is right. Basically, it *is* saying "go out and get after it."

Adam flashes Lucia an appreciative smile. She rolls her eyes.

The bell RINGS.

Adam packs up. He looks up for Lucia, but she's already gone.

INT. WRESTLING PRACTICE ROOM - AFTERNOON

A sweaty after-school practice. Coach K stalks the perimeter of the room as paired off wrestlers grapple on the mats.

Adam kneels in referee's position. Jason slips behind him.

JASON

I want you to try a switch. Get a little separation on me and then use my momentum to hit the switch.

Adam nods.

JASON

Go.

Adam crawls forward and attempts to hit the move. But Jason presses down on Adam. Locks him in a hold. Then lets go.

JASON

Gotta be faster.

Adam returns to referee's position. As Jason resets, Adam looks up and again sees the Older Coach.

Clearly, this is VOLKOV. Black moles spot his face. Big belly. Thin legs. A limp. His LEFT EAR is gnarled and ghastly, like a rare mushroom. Adam observes his every move.

Jason SNAPS his fingers.

JASON

Forget him. Just hit the switch.
Use my momentum.

Adam nods.

JASON

Go.

Adam crawls forward. This time, when Jason attempts to use his weight, Adam is ready. He hits the switch, turning his body and gaining control of Jason from behind.

JASON

Good, good.

The two stop wrestling. The lesson complete.

Adam looks up, hoping to see Volkov. Maybe get a nod of approval. Some form of acknowledgement.

But the mysterious coach is gone.

EXT. ST. JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL - DUSK

Adam texts his mom in the almost empty school parking lot.

ADAM
yo where r u? practice is over

Across the parking lot, he spots Volkov pulling a LARGE BAG to his car. It's a sad image. He looks frail and weak.

Adam sprints towards Volkov's busted Chevy.

ADAM
 Coach Volkov. Let me help you.

Volkov drops the bag and gestures for Adam to pick it up.

VOLKOV
 Let me see you "help" me.

Adam tries to lift the bag with both hands. Turns out it's INCREDIBLY HEAVY. Can't even get it off the ground.

VOLKOV
 You're about to throw out your back, my boy.

ADAM
 What's in here?

VOLKOV
 Kettlebells. For my home gym.

ADAM
 I saw you watching me.

Volkov waves Adam away -- returns to dragging the bag.

ADAM
 If you train me, I'll get stronger.
 Then I'll be able to lift the bag.
 Then I'll win State. I'm a
 freshman, but I'm mature for my
 age. I'm on Varsity. I'm working
 with Jason. Getting stronger.

VOLKOV
 So wrestling is about strength?

ADAM
 No. It's about being "holistic."

Volkov smiles at this. His teaching getting fed back to him.

VOLKOV
 I only train juniors and seniors.
 That's a rule.
 (MORE)

VOLKOV (CONT'D)

If I make an exception, it's no longer a functioning rule. All the other underclassmen would know. I'd be revealed as a hypocrite.

ADAM

You could train me in secret.

VOLKOV

Besides being over-eager and a bit rude, two qualities I do not admire, you do not seem special to me. You lost your first match.

ADAM

I wasn't coached properly.

VOLKOV

Failure to take responsibility for one's actions is a sign of poor character.

ADAM

Coach K is a nice guy but he's not an elite coach. Not like you.

VOLKOV

Now you insult my colleague.

Adam shuts up for a second. This is not going well.

ADAM

I can be a jerk. I'm trying not to be. I need your help to get on The Path.

Volkov pops the trunk of his car.

VOLKOV

See this trunk?

Adam looks in the cramped trunk. Junk everywhere.

VOLKOV

If you can fit all these kettlebells in this trunk, you get one private training session.

QUICK CUTS: Adam lays kettlebells out on the pavement. Pushes the stuff in the trunk to the side. Shoves the weights in.

Too much. Trunk won't close.

Volkov LIGHTS A CIGAR and watches. Shakes his head.

MORE QUICK CUTS: Adam removes ALL THE CRAP from the trunk.
Lays it out on the pavement.

Puts kettlebells in first. Puts the junk in, next.

Still won't close. Like unwinnable *Tetris*.

Volkov's cigar is now shorter. It's getting dark.

ADAM
It's impossible.

VOLKOV
For you? It appears so.

In the background, Adam's mom pulls up in her Ford Escape.
She waves to Adam. He waves back.

ADAM
Hold on, Mom.

Adam glances at his mom's Escape. Looks back at Volkov's
Chevy. He takes a few steps back. Really thinking.

For the first time, he takes in the WHOLE SHAPE OF THE TRUNK.

ADAM
I got it.

Again, Adam removes all the items from the trunk. Then he
STRIPS OUT THE PADDING AT THE BOTTOM.

Bingo.

There's a FALSE FLOOR to the TRUNK. He opens the compartment.

Loads the kettlebells in, closes the false floor. Piles the
rest of the stuff in. Triumphantly, SLAMS the trunk closed.

Adam grins at Volkov. Points to his head.

ADAM
Mind and body.

Volkov puts out his cigar. Hands Adam a slip of paper.

VOLKOV
Go to this address on Saturday
morning at 9:00 AM.

Adam takes the paper and rushes off to his mom's car. He
holds the slip of paper like it's his GOLDEN TICKET.

INT. JULIA'S CAR - SATURDAY MORNING

Sitting in the front seat of his mother's car, Adam searches for an address on the houses that line the street.

He sees the house he's looking for.

ADAM
That's it! Stop.

Julia stops the car.

Adam opens the door to get out of the car.

JULIA
Hold on.

He freezes.

JULIA
There's an adult here, right?

ADAM
Coach Volkov is in charge. All the guys will be here. I told you all this last night.

She gives him a suspicious look.

JULIA
I've got a shift at Pottery Barn later so you'll have to find a ride home with one of your buddies. Or call your dad.

ADAM
OK.

Adam slams the door and walks towards

EXT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE

Carrying his gym bag, Adam approaches a battered, modest one-story house. Unkept trees scatter the property.

Adam walks up to the door and rings the doorbell. No answer.

He waits for a moment and rings again. No answer.

He looks in a window but the shades are drawn.

He takes out his phone and considers calling his mom back. But then he hears a THUD from the backyard.

He walks towards

COACH VOLKOV'S BACKYARD

He sees a large OAK TREE in the backyard. As he looks closer, he notices the BLADE OF A KNIFE sticking out of the trunk.

He walks towards the tree then hears a CLICK.

Another BLADE shoots through the air and STRIKES the trunk of the tree. Right above the other knife blade.

Startled, Adam turns around and sees Coach Volkov.

He holds the bottom of a BALLISTIC KNIFE, the type you can shoot a detachable blade from by pressing a trigger.

Volkov approaches the tree and pulls both BLADES out.

VOLKOV

Come inside. Watch me eat
breakfast.

INT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Coach Volkov slices eggs and sausage with the blade of one of the ballistic knives. Adam sits across from him. Not eating.

VOLKOV

What are you looking to achieve
here?

ADAM

Schaumburg meet is Monday. I figure with your help, I'll pick up a win there. Get my streak going again. Then I'll be on the path to Sectionals. After I win Sectionals, I'll win State. That'll put me on the radar of college recruiters. I'm sure you have connections there. If I'm recruited to an elite school, Olympic Trials won't be too far off. I'd prefer a Gold Medal.

Volkov takes a big sip of coffee. Silent for a moment.

VOLKOV

I meant today.

ADAM

Oh.

VOLKOV

That desire to always think 30 moves into the future will hurt you. You must learn to adapt.

ADAM

I've been thinking a lot about The Path. That's what Dirk Ironside calls it.

VOLKOV

I know Dirk Ironside.

ADAM

You watch his videos?

VOLKOV

I trained him.

ADAM

Holy shit. Did you compete in the Olympics?

VOLKOV

We're not here to discuss the details of my biography. I know all the rumors. I was Special Forces. KGB. Russian mafia. They create an aroma of mystery, which is useful for attracting ambitious young athletes. But I am simply a man with a high tolerance for pain and a low tolerance for immaturity. Nothing more.

ADAM

I just want to win.

VOLKOV

You are not sitting across from me because of your desire to win State. You're only here because I sense genuine potential beneath your obvious arrogance.

ADAM

What do you get out of this?

VOLKOV

I aim to cultivate greatness. The process is its own reward.

Volkov removes two small pills from his pocket. PAIN-KILLERS. He pops them in his mouth and takes a final swig of coffee.

VOLKOV

I'm finished. Time to go to the dungeon.

INT. THE DUNGEON - MOMENTS LATER

Adam follows Volkov down the stairs to "The Dungeon": a basement converted into a training area.

As Volkov walks down the stairs, his limp is more noticeable.

VOLKOV

This is where we work.

Weights in one corner. A full-size body dummy in another. A rolled up wrestling mat leaning against the wall.

There's a large, spindly CRACK in the center of the floor.

VOLKOV

Get the mat.

Adam picks up the mat in the corner. He unrolls it so that it covers the crack in the floor.

The mat doesn't look like it's been properly cleaned in over a decade. Visible sweat stains and mildew marks everywhere.

Adam GAGS from the stench of it.

VOLKOV

I want to work on your technique. You have speed, which is important in your weight class. But without proper technique your speed is wasted. You will lose your energy against intelligent opponents.

Adam unzips his gym bag and removes his headgear.

VOLKOV

What are you doing?

ADAM

Putting on my headgear.

VOLKOV

You don't need it.

Adam looks at the disgusting mat. He knows he should be wrestling with headgear. But he's too afraid to talk back.

He puts the headgear back in the bag.

VOLKOV

There's one rule you must follow.
Never try to take me down. You see
how bad my knees are? It would be
easy to cut on me. But you would
pay a heavy price.

Adam nods.

VOLKOV

Good. Now show me your stance.

Adam gets into the proper wrestling stance. Balls of his feet. Knees bent. Elbows in. Hands forward. Head up.

VOLKOV

You look stiff as a board. Shake it out. Get loose.

Adam jumps up and down. His skinny limbs bouncing around.

VOLKOV

Good. Now get back in your stance.

Adam hits the stance.

VOLKOV

Let's see some motion.

Adam moves a bit forwards and backwards.

VOLKOV

Never backwards. Never backwards.
Do you know why?

ADAM

Makes you vulnerable.

VOLKOV

Exactly. Puts you on your heels.
You're smarter than you look. So
why did you move backwards?

ADAM

I don't know.

VOLKOV

Circle for me.

Adam moves in a circle.

VOLKOV

Never say, "I don't know." You have
the answers.

(MORE)

VOLKOV (CONT'D)
 Why did you move backwards when you
 knew it was wrong?

ADAM
 I was nervous.

VOLKOV
 Why?

ADAM
 I'm afraid.

VOLKOV
 Of what?

ADAM
 You.

VOLKOV
 Stop.

Volkov leans in super-close to Adam, cradling his head in his arms. Cheek to cheek. Gnarled ear to gnarled ear.

VOLKOV
 (whispered)
 I'm not a threat. Save your fear
for the monsters outside.

Volkov affectionally pats Adam on the head.

VOLKOV
 Enough talk. Time for drills.

INT. THE DUNGEON - MOMENTS LATER

QUICK CUTS: Adam and Volkov circle each other. Adam duck crawls. He flips a dummy. SLAMMING it on the filthy mat.

Close on Adam's face: Sweat dripping off his nose and a pleased look in his eyes. He's learning.

He's on his hands and knees with Volkov behind him. They're working "the switch," the move Adam drilled with Jason.

VOLKOV
 Go.

Adam attempts to move forward and hit the switch, but Volkov flattens Adam with his belly. He locks Adam in a hold.

VOLKOV
 Again.

They reset with Adam in the bottom position again.

VOLKOV
Go.

Adam gets pancaked by Volkov's belly. Again. This time his face is pressed against the revolting mat.

VOLKOV
Again.

Instead of returning to the bottom position, Adam stands up.

ADAM
I hit the switch with Jason at practice this week. You were there.

VOLKOV
He let you hit it. I'm not letting you. Your opponents won't let you.

ADAM
They won't be as heavy as you.

VOLKOV
If you want to go to State, you need to hit a switch.

ADAM
You're too big.

VOLKOV
Do you think your father made excuses like that when he was winning State as a freshman?

ADAM
How do you know about my dad?

VOLKOV
I do my research before I train someone. I ask around. But it's all on your face anyway. That desperate need for a parent's love. You couldn't be more of a cliché.

Adam bristles at this -- not sure how to respond.

VOLKOV
Again.

Adam resets in the bottom position.

VOLKOV
Go.

This time, Adam gets some momentum, but as he tries to spin his body, Volkov GRABS his arm and LOCKS him in a hold.

SLAM.

Adam's face gets pinned to the mat. Tears form in his eyes. Volkov presses down.

ADAM
(gasping)
Help.

Volkov releases Adam.

VOLKOV
Pathetic.

Adam SLAPS the mat in frustration.

VOLKOV
Don't treat my mat like that.

Adam looks up and GLARES at Volkov. Tears spilling out.

VOLKOV
Why did you disrespect my mat?

ADAM
I don't know.

VOLKOV
Don't say that.

ADAM
I don't know.

VOLKOV
This is why I don't coach freshmen.
You are still a child. Come back
when you learn discipline.

Humiliated, Adam watches Volkov slowly stand up.

It's a struggle for the old man.

He was immovable a moment before. But now he's vulnerable.

Volkov turns and faces Adam and --

Adam STIKES.

He SHOOTS directly at Volkov's knees.

WRAPS his arms around them and LIFTS Volkov OFF THE MAT.

A TEXTBOOK TAKEDOWN.

Volkov GASPS.

But Volkov shifts and brings down ALL HIS WEIGHT on Adam.

CRUSHING HIM.

SPLAT.

Volkov's belly presses Adam's face into the mat.

VOLKOV

I told you... Never take me down.

Volkov pushes himself up, releasing Adam from underneath him.

But suddenly Volkov FREEZES.

His eyes widen. He clutches his chest.

And falls right back onto Adam, CRUSHING him again.

ADAM

Get off me.

Volkov's body pins Adam to the mat.

Volkov CONVULSES. HEART ATTACK.

He struggles to breath. Everything trembles.

ADAM

COACH.

Volkov stops convulsing. His raspy breaths stop. It's over.

VOLKOV IS DEAD.

Adam, all 106 pounds of him, is TRAPPED beneath the corpse.

Fully consumed by Volkov's FLESH.

We can't even see Adam.

We hear a GASP. A skinny arm emerges. A sign of life.

His hand searches for anything to gain traction. CLAWING.

Finally, his fingers find an INDENT in the mat. He digs in.

He gets a strong grip and PULLS.

But Volkov's body, this dead mass of a man, moves with Adam.

There's a RUMBLING in Volkov's stomach.

Volkov unleashes a wretched death-rattle of a FART.

Adam GAGS. Closes his mouth.

Trying to not breathe in the stench.

But he GAGS again. HARD.

Adam VOMITS on the mat. Puke pools around his face.

He DIGS his fingers into the INDENT and pulls harder.

He pulls himself across his own VOMIT. Leaving a streak.

ALMOST FREE.

Adam GROANS as he PUSHES Volkov off his legs.

FREEDOM.

ADAM

Fuck.

He wipes vomit off his face. Adrenaline spiking.

What the hell did he just do? It was all a freak-accident, right? He didn't do anything wrong -- did he?

He looks across at Volkov's body. Still. Silent. Peaceful.

DEAD.

Adam crawls to his gym bag and plucks out his phone.

Dials 9-1-1. Holds the phone to his RIGHT EAR.

Then, we zoom in on Adam's LEFT EAR, the one pressed against the mat earlier. It's inflamed. We get CLOSER and CLOSER.

UNKNOWN VOICE (V.O.)

STOP.

Adam takes the phone down from his RIGHT EAR and presses the red button, cancelling the call.

He stands completely still. Confused. Overwhelmed. Terrified. *Where did that voice come from? Was it real? In his head?*

UNKNOWN VOICE (V.O.)
RUN.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Adam sprints down the street. Running away from Volkov's house. Moving as fast as possible.

INT. ADAM'S BATHROOM - LATER

Adam pulls back the shower curtain and turns on the hot water. Scrubbing. Washing hair. Cleansing himself.

INT. ADAM'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Adam examines his LEFT EAR in the mirror. It's red. Tender.

He takes a Q-TIP from a drawer. Digs out wax. He switches ends of the q-tip and sticks it back in. He pauses.

We hear a soft RUMBLE.

Like water being pumped from a hole. It gets LOUDER.

He PUSHES the q-tip into his ear. *Further. Further.*

He's about to really JAB the q-tip into his ear canal, anything to make this sound stop, when suddenly there's a --

KNOCK at the door.

Adam removes the q-tip and tosses it in a trashcan. He pulls the door open and sees his dad, Peter.

PETER

I didn't hear you come in. Did you get a ride home with a friend?

ADAM

What friend?

PETER

From wrestling. Mom said you had a team breakfast.

ADAM

Yeah.

PETER

How was it?

ADAM

Fine.

Adam gives his dad a "leave me THE FUCK alone" look.

PETER

Didn't mean to interrupt.

He turns to leave.

ADAM

Dad...

Adam wants to say something about what happened at Coach Volkov's house. But he can't find the words. He's ashamed.

PETER

Everything alright?

ADAM

You going to Mass tomorrow?

PETER

Every Sunday.

ADAM

Can I come?

PETER

Sure.

Peter leaves and closes the door.

Adam looks in the mirror. Checks his ear -- still red -- but the rumble has ceased. Quiet. He's alone with his thoughts.

He ITCHES his ear. Hard.

INT. CHURCH - SUNDAY MORNING

Adam ITCHES his ear in a church pew. The ear is even redder.

He gazes at a HUGE STATUE OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS. BLOOD OOZES FROM THE WOUNDS ON HIS HANDS AND HIS FEET. PURE CARNAGE.

Adam shifts his attention to the PRIEST (50, gray beard and genial) giving his homily.

PRIEST

Christ is like the voice on a GPS,
calling out instructions for you to
bring you to your desired
destination.

(MORE)

PRIEST (CONT'D)
 But when so many voices are calling
 out for your attention, how do you
 know which one to listen to?

Intrigued, Adam leans forward.

PRIEST
 Will you know it when you hear it?

INT. CHURCH - SIDE-ALTAR - LATER

Mass is over. Adam lights a tealight candle in front of an ALTAR. His dad watches him from the side.

PETER
 These votive candles are for the dead. Don't just light one to pray for your match tomorrow. Really try to close your eyes and hear God.

ADAM
 I know.

Adam CLOSES HIS EYES AND EVERYTHING GOES BLACK.

He opens them and HE'S ALONE IN FRONT OF THE ALTAR. He looks around and sees his dad and the other parishioners are gone.

INT. CHURCH - LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

He can hear a soft GURGLE in the distance. He follows the sound to a BAPTISMAL FONT at the front of the building.

He approaches it and sticks his fingers in to get a drop of water and cross himself. But when he removes his fingers, he sees the BAPTISMAL FONT is FILLED WITH BLOOD.

Then he sees COACH VOLKOV'S CORPSE FLOATING in the FONT.

Adam leans forward. The corpse is still.

As he leans away, a HAND REACHES OUT AND PULLS ADAM INTO THE BAPTISMAL FONT OF BLOOD. ADAM FLAILS IN THE BLOOD. THE HAND PULLS AT HIS LEFT EAR AND A PIERCING NOISE RINGS OUT.

INT. CHURCH - SIDE-ALTAR - DAY

Peter rubs Adam's buzzed head. Then checks out his EAR.

PETER

Maybe you should light a candle for
that cauliflower ear. Looks brutal.

ADAM

It's not too bad.

PETER

What does the "elite" coach at your
school say about that ear?

ADAM

He doesn't say anything.

PETER

What was his name again? Voltron?

ADAM

Volkov.

PETER

I had coaches like that when I was
your age. Guys I would've killed
for. Then I got older and, with
some perspective, their behavior
looked psychotic.

ADAM

You don't know Volkov.

PETER

I know the type. He gets his claws
in you and then he takes over your
whole life. You forget who you are.

ADAM

He's not like that. You haven't
been to any of my matches anyway.
So how would you know?

PETER

Listen, you know I've been looking
for work and that's --

ADAM

"A full-time job." I know.

Peter feels the tension. Rubs his son's buzz-cut again.

PETER

Don't let him get in your head.

Adam tosses away the match and watches the candle burn.

INT. SCHAUMBURG WEIGH-IN ROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam steps up to the scale with confidence. The balance moves. AN OFFICIAL adjusts it.

This time he's exactly 106 pounds. Adam grins.

INT. SCHAUMBURG HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - AFTERNOON

A WHISTLE blows. Adam's match is the first match of the meet because he's the lowest weight class.

Adam snaps on the headgear as Coach K gives him the run-down.

COACH KNUDSON

I know how your opponent Josh operates. Don't try to take him down. That's what he wants. Wait for him to shoot on you and then use your speed to reverse it. If you shoot on him, he'll crush you.

Adam nods.

COACH KNUDSON

OK, let's wrestle.

INT. SCHAUMBURG HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - MOMENTS LATER

We jump right into the match. Adam and JOSH (16, wiry) circle each other. Tentative. Trying to punk each other out.

Seeing a potential opportunity, Adam almost shoots on Josh's legs, but pulls back at the last second.

He looks to Coach K for guidance.

COACH KNUDSON

NOT YET.

Josh DIVES at Adam's legs and SCOOPS him off his feet.

Startled, Adam scrambles in mid-air. Lands on his stomach.

Josh tries to take control of his legs, but Adam darts away, using his speed to ESCAPE.

The two boys are again on their feet. But Adam is winded and nervous now. The swagger he had earlier is gone.

They circle each other. Again, Adam looks to Coach K, who shakes his head. It's still too risky to shoot.

Adam looks at Josh's legs. He's not circling right. Josh is moving back and forth -- just like Volkov said not to.

Suddenly, Adam HEARS VOLKOV. Coming from his LEFT EAR.
ONLY HE CAN HEAR IT.

THE EAR (V.O.)
SHOOT NOW.

He GOES FOR IT.

Adam shoots on Josh and scores a TAKE-DOWN. Josh FLIPS to his stomach and gets on his knees, but Adam controls his leg.

THE EAR (V.O.)
ARM AROUND THE NECK.

Adam follows the instructions.

He wraps Josh from the side in a cradle hold.

"THE EAR" knows exactly what Josh will do. It's a version of Spider-sense: THE EAR gives Adam heightened intuition.

Now, Adam has control of an arm and a leg. He can almost cradle Josh, but he needs to--

THE EAR (V.O.)
LOCK YOUR HANDS.

Like he's being moved by puppet strings, Adam locks his hands. He now has TOTAL CONTROL of Josh.

THE EAR (V.O.)
DRIVE. DRIVE. PUSH.

HE DRIVES. HE PUSHES.

The REFEREE (38, balding) leans in close to the boys. One shoulder is down... Two shoulders are down.

The Ref SLAPS THE MAT.

The match is over: Adam pinned his opponent.

The crowd CHEERS in approval.

Adam releases his hold on Josh. Dazed and bewildered, he stands up and shakes hands with Josh.

Then, the Ref lifts Adam's arm in victory.

Still reeling, Adam stumbles over to a stunned Coach K.

ADAM

I know you told me not to shoot.

COACH KNUDSON

Sometimes you gotta trust your gut.

ADAM

What if it wasn't my gut?

COACH KNUDSON

Whatever it was, you just beat one of the best wrestlers in the State.

Coach Knudson pats him on the back. Looks at his ear.

COACH KNUDSON

You're gonna wanna ice that ear.

INT. ADAM'S BATHROOM - EVENING

Adam presses ice wrapped in a paper towel against his ear.

He opens Instagram. Likes a selfie of Jason flexing.

Likes a photo of Dirk Ironside. Caption: "**get some**"

Scrolls past Lucia, posing with an ice cream scooper at work at Cold Stone Creamery. Caption: "**scoop troop**"

His finger hovers over the "heart" button. *Should he like it? Is that creepy? Cool?* He accidentally presses the button.

ADAM

Shit.

Panicking, he immediately "unlikes" Lucia's photo. *What a fucking idiot.* He closes Instagram and puts down his phone.

He removes the ice from his ear. Instead of looking better, the ear actually looks worse. Redder. More inflamed.

Then he notices a SMALL BOIL at the top of the lobe.

Was that there before? Or did it just show up?

He picks up a Q-tip. Decides he needs a more effective tool. He opens a drawer and pulls out a pair of TWEEZERS.

Slowly, he brings the tweezers towards the boil.

He locks the tip of the boil in the grip of the tweezers.

Ready to lance this mother-fucker.

He squeezes the tweezers. They PUNCTURE the boil.

Puss OOZES from the wound.

THE EAR(V.O.)
STOP. NOW.

Adam drops the tweezers, which CLANG against the floor.

It's the same voice he heard during the match.

He picks the tweezers off the floor. Rinses them.

He brings the tweezers CLOSER and CLOSER to the boil...

His PHONE BUZZES. It's a DM on Instagram from Lucia.

LUCIA
u decide u don't like my ice cream?

He types a message back.

ADAM
lol i'm more of a Dairy Queen guy

They trade DM's in quick succession.

LUCIA
**don't be a hater. u should come by
and get some ice cream. way better
than DQ**

ADAM
lol ok when do u work next?

LUCIA
im working right now dude come by

ADAM
ill run there

LUCIA
sounds good [ice cream emoji]

Maybe he's just in a better mood, but his ear doesn't look so bad anymore. He puts the tweezers away.

His phone BUZZES again.

LUCIA
see u in a bit wrestling boy

Adam smiles the biggest, dumbest smile ever.

EXT. COLD STONE CREAMERY - LATER

Adam picks at the bottom of an ice cream cup with Lucia on a bench. She's got headphones on and Adam's phone in her hand, watching a D^IRK I^RONSIDE video that he pulled up.

DIRK I^RONSIDE (O.S.)
 Don't give into the immediate
 gratification that is whispering in
 your ear. *Shut that down.* Do not
 listen to that little voice.
 Instead, go through the motions.
 Lift that weight. Sprint that hill.

She pauses the video and removes the headphones.

LUCIA
 This Dirk guy is old.

ADAM
 He was a Marine.

LUCIA
 So what? I got a cousin that's a
 Marine. He ain't shit. Trust me.

ADAM
 He gets me psyched up. When I
 listen to him, I feel like I can
 run through a brick wall.

LUCIA
 So you gonna join the military?

ADAM
 After the Olympics. The key is to
 stay on what Dirk calls "The Path."

LUCIA
 What's The Path?

ADAM
 The Path of constant self-
 improvement. Always choosing the
 thing that makes you stronger.

LUCIA
 Got your whole life figured out.

ADAM
 Not really. You can only plan so
 much. Gotta learn to adapt. That's
 what Coach Volkov tells me.

LUCIA

Dirk. Volkov. You keep talking about what all these other dudes say but I'm here with you. What do you think? What's like an "Adam thought" that someone else didn't give you?

This stumps Adam for a second.

LUCIA

If that's too tough for you, you could just ask me questions.

ADAM

Play any sports?

LUCIA

Soccer.

ADAM

You good?

LUCIA

What kinda question is that? I'm not like "Olympics good," but I'm good. I got skills.

ADAM

What kinda videos you watch?

LUCIA

See that's a good question. You're getting better. Let me show you something really dope.

She types on Adam's phone and pulls a make-up tutorial. It's a YOUNG WOMAN applying an old school, glamorous look.

LUCIA

I watch her all the time. This shit is wild. She's so talented.

Lucia and Adam each share a headphone bud and watch some of the video. He's impressed. This shit *IS* wild.

The headphone is in his right ear. We move to his left ear, which looks red and inflamed. As we zoom on the ear, we hear a soft, wet whispering sound. *It's LIPS touching.*

THE EAR (V.O.)

KISS HER.

Adam isn't startled this time. He trusts the voice.

Lucia scoots closer to him as they watch the video.

Adam looks down and sees she's HOLDING his hand. He removes the earbud from his right ear and turns to her.

ADAM
I got an "Adam thought."

LUCIA
Let's hear it.

ADAM
Can I kiss you?

The two share a slightly awkward, mostly sweet first kiss.

Adam grins ear to ear. *This is actually happening.*

But then he notices Lucia's face: She looks WORRIED.

LUCIA
Your ear.

Adam touches his ear. He looks at his fingers and sees BLOOD.

The bump on his ear BURST. Blood oozes out.

HOW FUCKING EMBARRASSING. He covers his ear.

ADAM
It must be from the match.

LUCIA
Let me look.

ADAM
No.

LUCIA
Please.

He relents, uncovering his ear. She takes a closer look.

ADAM
I don't know why this is happening.
I just can't let my coach find out.

Lucia pulls a make-up pad, concealer, and foundation from her purse. She wipes away the blood, cleans the wound, and applies make-up to the infected ear.

LUCIA
Trust me. I'm good at this.

Patiently, Adam lets her apply the make-up to his ear.

LUCIA

Done.

Adam uses his phone's camera to look at his ear. It does look way better now.

ADAM

Thanks. Can I, uh...

LUCIA

Have my make-up?

She hands him the make-up.

LUCIA

On our next date, I'm taking you to Sephora.

ADAM

So, this is a date?

She cracks up. Then, leans into kiss him again.

MATCH CUT TO:

Adam getting his mouth SLAMMED into a guy's sweaty armpit.

A CROWDED GYMNASIUM

Adam turns away from his OPPONENT's armpit. The opponent gets Adam ON HIS BACK. Not pinned, but almost.

Then he hears the voice:

THE EAR (V.O.)
FLIP. THROW THE LEGS.

Adam pushes off the mat with his legs. Throws them wildly.

He's vertical -- like he's doing a head-stand -- and he uses the momentum to REVERSE his position on the other guy.

Now Adam is IN CONTROL.

QUICK CUTS: The REFEREE slaps the mat. The boys shake hands. Adam gets his arm raised.

INTERCUT: Adam RAISING his hand in history class to answer a question. The teacher calls on him.

We zoom in on the ear and hear the voice:

THE EAR (V.O.)
1854.

ADAM
1854.

The teacher nods approvingly. Adam grins.

MATCH CUT TO:

Adam grinning as a wrestling match starts.

A DIFFERENT GYMNASIUM

He grapples an OPPONENT, their heads knocking against each other. In the heat of conflict, ADAM's headgear gets knocked off and flies across the mat.

A WHISTLE blows. The match stops.

INTERCUT: *Adam in the bathroom at home, applying make-up to his infected ear.*

Back in the match, Coach Knudson hands the headgear to Adam.

Adam puts the finishing touches on the make-up.

Coach Knudson looks at Adam's ear and doesn't notice anything suspicious. He helps Adam strap the headgear back on.

Suddenly, we hear the voice again:

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW.

QUICK CUTS: Adam pins another WRESTLER. Then ANOTHER. And ANOTHER. The referee raises his hand each time.

INTERCUT: *Adam raises his arm to WAVE to a CROWD of his fellow students at a pep rally. He's standing next to JASON and the rest of the VARSITY WRESTLERS in school t-shirts.*

Adam points to Lucia, who smiles at him in the crowd.

CUT TO:

Lucia, cheering for Adam in:

A BIGGER GYMNASIUM

Adam circles another OPPONENT at the beginning of a match. He's looking at his opponent's feet, watching them move. He's transfixed, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

INTERCUT: Adam looks at Lucia's legs as they move across the dance-floor at a HIGH SCHOOL DANCE. She sways to the music. Awkwardly, he imitates her moves. It's sweet.

Then we hear the voice:

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW.

Adam DARTS at the other guy's legs and executes a perfect FIREMAN'S CARRY, picking him up and SLAMMING him down.

The crowd CHEERS.

EVEN QUICKER CUTS: Adam pins five WRESTLERS in a row at different matches occurring over the next few weeks. The referee raises his hand each time in victory.

With each win, we zoom closer on THE EAR, which now resembles Volkov's own battered appendage.

There's a cut on THE EAR where a drop of BLOOD OOZES OUT.

SMASH CUT TO:

KETCHUP OOZING OUT OF A SMALL PACKET. FRESHLY RIPPED.

INT. INDOOR SOCCER FIELD - STANDS - NIGHT

Adam watches as Jason drizzles ketchup all over his french fries. The boys cheer on a girls rec soccer game.

JASON
You want some?

THE EAR (V.O.)
NO.

ADAM
Gotta watch my weight.

Jason munches on the fries and watches the game.

JASON
Hear anything about Volkov lately?

ADAM

What? I don't even know him. Why would I have heard from him?

JASON

I said heard "about." Like a rumor. Guys talking maybe.

ADAM

I don't hear shit, man.

JASON

Chill, dude. I'm just asking. He hasn't been around and Coach K is being real quiet. It's like the old Russian just slipped away.

In the soccer match, Lucia takes control of the ball. But another girl steals it from her.

ADAM

He never coached me anyway. No freshmen, remember?

JASON

Bro, you don't even need him. I watch you out there and it's like you already know everything Volkov would've taught you.

Adam simply nods -- not wanting to give anything away. He notices Lucia chasing down another girl with the ball.

ADAM

Shit. She's got her. Strike.

Lucia runs just behind the girl. If she wanted to, she could execute a risky slide tackle. But she holds back.

The other girl shoots and SCORES.

ADAM

Fucking bullshit.

EXT. INDOOR SOCCER FIELD - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Adam carries Lucia's soccer bag to her DAD'S CAR. In the background, we see parents talking with the coach.

ADAM

You had her.

LUCIA
I just gotta get faster.

ADAM
You needed to strike.

LUCIA
I hesitated.

ADAM
Dirk says, "Hesitation is the enemy of instinct."

LUCIA
You need to chill with this Dirk stuff. For real.

Adam plops the bag down next to the car.

ADAM
I just want you to be great.

LUCIA
Soccer is fun. I play with my friends. I'm not deluding myself into thinking I'm the next Megan Rapinoe.

ADAM
You think I'm delusional?

LUCIA
That's not what I'm saying. I watch your matches and there's no joy. Even when you win, you don't even smile. You look like a Terminator.

Lucia notices her dad approaching.

LUCIA
I gotta go.

She pecks him on the cheek. He offers up a wan smile.

LUCIA
See you later, robot boy.

INT. WRESTLING PRACTICE ROOM - NEXT DAY

WHISTLE BLOWS. Coach K stands in the center of the mat, with the wrestlers around him. Adam sits in the front row.

COACH KNUDSON

Good practice, guys. Normally I like to end on a high note, but unfortunately I've got some tough news to share. Coach Volkov has disappeared. He's not answering his phone. He's not at his house. If you've seen him recently or have any knowledge of his whereabouts, please speak with me or one of the other coaches. And, of course, keep him in your prayers. In fact, let's say a quick prayer now.

Adam, clearly nervous, bows his head.

COACH KNUDSON

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Adam prays with the other boys.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - LATER

Adam applies deodorant and gets dressed. Coach Knudson appears around the corner, startling Adam.

COACH KNUDSON

Adam, I need to see you in my office.

ADAM

Sure thing, Coach.

He heads to the office as his EAR chatters away.

THE EAR (V.O.)

DENY. DENY. DENY.

INT. COACH K'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Adam enters the office and sees a DETECTIVE sitting in front of Coach K's desk. Coach K gestures for Adam to sit.

COACH KNUDSON

Adam, this is Detective Grayson and he wanted to ask a couple questions.

Adam tenses up.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

There were signs at the house that Coach Volkov had a visitor recently. Possibly a student wrestler stopping by for a training session. His gym downstairs looked like it had been used.

THE EAR (V.O.)

HE'S GOT NOTHING.

Adam stares back stone-faced.

COACH KNUDSON

You know anything about that, Adam?

ADAM

Coach Volkov only trained with upperclassmen.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

And...

ADAM

I'm not an upperclassmen.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

I'm aware. But were you ever at Coach Volkov's?

ADAM

No.

COACH KNUDSON

You're not a senior, but you've been spending a lot of time with upperclassmen like Jason, Ryan, and Steve. Did any of those guys talk about spending time at Volkov's?

ADAM

Ask them.

COACH KNUDSON

I'm asking you.

ADAM

They don't tell me what they do.

COACH KNUDSON

So you don't know?

ADAM

I don't know anything.

THE EAR (V.O.)
GOOD. GOOD.

Adam fidgets in his chair.

ADAM
Can I go now?

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
You may not know anything now, but
if you hear something, don't
hesitate to call.

Detective Grayson hands Adam a card.

COACH KNUDSON
Get out of here.

Adam gets out of the office as fast as possible.

INT. ADAM'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Adam removes make-up from his ear with a washcloth. It looks worse than before: red, sore, and inflamed.

Even worse: His make-up supplies are dwindling.

THERE'S A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

PETER (O.S.)
Hey, your mom and I wanted to talk
to you.

Adam hides the make-up.

ADAM
Yeah, I'll be right out.

THE EAR (V.O.)
DENY. DENY.

ADAM
(under his breath)
Shut up.

PETER (O.S.)
OK.

INT. ADAM'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Adam enters the kitchen, where his mother has prepared a plate of cookies. She pushes them towards him.

THE EAR (V.O.)
NO.

ADAM
I'm good thanks.

Adam sits down. Peter and Julia both look concerned.

ADAM
What's up?

JULIA
I know we've been really busy
lately and haven't had time to make
it to your meets. I've been working
double-shifts.

PETER
And I'm still looking for work,
which is --

JULIA
"A full-time job."

PETER
Exactly.

JULIA
We just want you to know that we
care about you.

PETER
And your interests.

JULIA
So I looked at your browser history
and --

Adam snaps to attention.

ADAM
You spied on me?

JULIA
No, not at all. I did a little
harmless snooping.

ADAM
That's bullshit.

PETER
Don't talk to your mother like
that. We pay for that phone.

ADAM

She pays for the phone. You don't pay for anything.

PETER

Excuse me?

ADAM

How long are you gonna use the same excuses for not finding a job? Maybe you have no discipline? Ever think of that?

PETER

You need to learn a little respect.

ADAM

You gonna beat my ass?

PETER

No. I'm not a Neanderthal. We don't solve problems with violence in this family.

ADAM

Maybe you should. Then you wouldn't be such a fucking pussy.

Julia SLAMS a box down on the table.

JULIA

ENOUGH. BOTH OF YOU.

She shoves the box across the table towards Adam.

JULIA

I looked at your browser history because I wanted to surprise you with a gift for making it to Sectionals. Open it up. NOW.

Adam opens the box. Inside, he finds a HOODED SWEATSHIRT with a heavily stylized portrait of Dirk Ironside's face on it.

Two words printed across the front: "**GET SOME.**"

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - SECTIONALS - DAY

Banners hang for the Sectional Tournament. Larger crowd than usual. Four mats spread out across the floor so multiple matches can happen at the same time.

Wrestlers stretch out on the mats. Jason, Ryan, Steve, and the other wrestlers are all there.

But not Adam because he's in the

WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL BATHROOM - DAY

Wearing his new Dirk sweatshirt, he pulls down the hood to examine his infected ear in the mirror.

He looks around to make sure he's alone.

As he's examining the ear, it whispers to him:

THE EAR (V.O.)
CAREFUL. BEHIND YOU.

There's a LOUD FLUSH. Quickly, Adam PULLS the hood up to cover his ear.

Coach Knudson walks out of the bathroom stall. He approaches the sink and washes his hands, giving Adam a suspicious look.

COACH KNUDSON
You should be warming up. You've got a real shot at State. Not a lot of Freshman get to wrestle in Sectionals.

Knudson gives Adam a pat on the back.

COACH KNUDSON
You got this. Nice hoodie too. You order this online, Slim Shady?

Knudson PLUCKS the hood off Adam's head.

Adam moves to cover the ear.

But it's too late. Knudson can see the infection.

COACH KNUDSON
What the fuck, man?

ADAM
It's just cauliflower ear.

COACH KNUDSON
Come here.

Knudson moves closer to Adam, who backs away.

COACH KNUDSON
How long has it been like this?

Adam makes a break for the door, but the coach has a serious weight advantage and blocks his path.

COACH KNUDSON
How long?

ADAM
A few weeks.

COACH KNUDSON
Jesus fucking Christ.

Knudson shakes his head in frustration.

COACH KNUDSON
I can't let you wrestle with an ear like that.

ADAM
What about State?

COACH KNUDSON
Forget it.

Adam's whole world is falling apart. He was so close. So close. *How could you be so stupid?*

But then he hears a calming voice:

THE EAR (V.O.)
CRY FOR HIM.

Adam's eyes fill with water. He quietly SOBS.

Quickly, Knudson's anger turns to compassion. He remembers the pressure. He wraps his arms around Adam in a bear hug.

Again, Adam hears the voice:

THE EAR (V.O.)
THE FATHER. WORK THE FATHER.

Adam looks up at Knudson with wet, innocent eyes.

ADAM
(whispered)
I have to wrestle. If I don't, my dad... He'll kill me.

Knudson shudders with recognition. He knows what it's like to have a father's disapproving eyes on you at all times.

ADAM

He used to be a great wrestler -- a State champion. And he's coming to see me today. I don't want to disappoint him.

That's all Knudson needs to hear. *It's the twist of the knife.* He takes a big breath.

COACH KNUDSON

OK. You can wrestle. But I'm talking to your mom tonight. She's gotta take you to a doctor.

ADAM

I understand.

COACH KNUDSON

Now suit up.

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - LATER

Adam makes quick work of his FIRST OPPONENT (15, a weak beanpole), slamming him to the mat and scoring a PIN.

The REF raises Adam's hand.

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - LATER

Gasping for air, Adam struggles against his SECOND OPPONENT (14, a resourceful brawler). The match teeters on the edge of chaos. The Second Opponent swings his legs and Adam hears --

THE EAR (V.O.)

BANANA NOW.

Adam executes a BANANA SPLIT, a complex move that involves hooking and pulling apart the legs of your opponent.

THE EAR (V.O.)

YES. MAKE HIM BEG.

Again, Adam scores a PIN.

The Ref raises Adam's hand. He stares blankly ahead.

In the stands, Lucia watches with worry in her eyes.

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - LATER

From the bench, Adam CHEERS for Jason, who is losing to a RED-HAIRED WRESTLER (17, a dominant athlete). The Red-Haired Wrestler almost has Jason pinned.

ADAM
Come on, Jason.

A SLAP AGAINST THE MAT. Jason lost.

He's been eliminated from the Sectionals Tournament. No trip to State for him. His wrestling season is officially over.

Jason shakes his opponent's hand and walks to the bench. Adam pats him on the back.

JASON
This whole season was fucked. No Volkov. How was I supposed to get to State without him? That was the plan. Get coached by him. Get a scholarship.

ADAM
(quoting Volkov)
Failure to take responsibility for one's actions is a sign of poor character.

JASON
Are you serious?

ADAM
Like Dirk says, "Stay disciplined."

JASON
You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. This was my shot. If Volkov didn't get snatched up by the FBI or Putin or whatever the hell happened, I'd be going to State. I hope wherever he is, that sick old murderous fuck is happy.

ADAM
You think Volkov killed people?

JASON
You don't get that look in your eyes by winning wrestling matches.

Adam isn't sure how to respond.

JASON

You're lucky. You don't even need to be coached. I watch you out there. It's like God's pulling the strings.

ADAM

I just follow my instincts.

JASON

You better follow those instincts to State. Do it for the team. Beat Travis's bougie ass.

ADAM

I'll destroy him.

Adam eyes Travis Hyde, the blonde rich boy wrestler who beat him at the beginning of the movie, across the gymnasium.

It's on.

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - FINAL MATCH

Once again, Adam faces off against Travis, who has gotten smarter and stronger since they last met. The two circle each other. Looking for an opportunity for a takedown.

Adam eyes Travis's feet.

THE EAR (V.O.)

SHOOT. NOW.

Adam dives at Travis and scores a takedown. But Travis gets onto his knees. Adam catches his wrist and chops his arm.

THE EAR (V.O.)

SLIP THE ARMBAR.

Adam gets Travis on his stomach and controls his arm. He leans on the elbow and pushes the shoulder into his ear.

THE EAR (V.O.)

GOOD. GOOD.

Adam is in total control.

THE EAR (V.O.)

NOW BREAK IT. SNAP IT LIKE A TWIG.

Instead of snapping it, he lets it go. Travis scurries away from Adam and stands up, scoring an easy escape.

The buzzer RINGS out. It's the end of the period.

Shaken and dazed, Adam walks over to Coach Knudson.

COACH KNUDSON

What was that? You just let him go.

ADAM

I had to.

COACH KNUDSON

You had him. Just hit that arm bar.

ADAM

Yes, Coach.

Adam places his hands on his head. Like he's trying to shut out the world. *Just focus. Focus. Focus.*

INT. WHEELING HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - LATER

Adam scores another takedown on Travis. Adam gets wrist control and has Travis in position to execute an arm bar.

Coach Knudson yells at him.

COACH KNUDSON

Get the arm.

Adam hesitates.

THE EAR (V.O.)

BREAK IT.

ADAM

(to himself)

No.

As Adam talks to himself, Travis regains control and FLIPS Adam onto his back. Adam SCRAMBLES.

THE EAR (V.O.)

DO IT.

ADAM

I won't.

Travis almost has Adam PINNED, but, at the last second, Adam REVERSES Travis's hold and gets him trapped in a half-nelson. Adam pushes and pushes. He gets Travis's shoulders down.

THE EAR (V.O.)

BREAK HIM.

ADAM
NO.

The Ref SLAPS the mat. The crowd CHEERS.

Then, the sound DROPS OUT.

PLUNGED INTO TOTAL SILENCE.

Immediately, Adam breaks the hold on Travis and RIPS his headgear off. He claws at his left ear, which looks ENGORGED.

He rolls on the mat in agony. Bucking like a wild animal.

The SOUND CUTS BACK IN.

ADAM
LEAVE ME ALONE.

Jason and Coach Knudson run out onto the mat. They grab Adam by the shoulders. Lucia is with them, running from the crowd.

JASON
Dude, calm down. Calm down.

COACH KNUDSON
ADAM. LISTEN TO ME. ADAM. ADAM.

LUCIA
Adam, what's wrong?

Adam is gone. Lost in a trance.

COACH KNUDSON
ADAM. ADAM. ADAM.

CUT TO BLACK:

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
ADAM. ADAM. ADAM.

INT. DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

Adam sits in a waiting room with his mother, Julia. He wears the DIRK HOODIE so his face is almost hidden.

The RECEPTIONIST sticks her head from behind the desk.

RECEPTIONIST
ADAM KARR. The doctor will see you now.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

C/U on the EAR: Gnarled and purple. Cauliflower on steroids.

DOCTOR BECKER (58, calm and slightly aloof) removes an OTOSCOPE from the inside of Adam's ear.

DOCTOR BECKER

Typically, cauliflower ear occurs because of trauma to the ear. Basically, blood clots and blocks the flow of nutrients to the cartilage. That's why you get these lumps and bumps.

She puts the otoscope away and looks sternly at Adam.

DOCTOR BECKER

But this is not typical. Honestly, I've never seen anything like it.

ADAM

I didn't know it was that bad.

Skeptical, Doctor Becker scribbles on his notepad.

DOCTOR BECKER

We need to talk about your weight. When I gave you a physical this summer you weighed 116 pounds. Right now, you're 105. That type of fluctuation is irregular, and, frankly, irresponsible.

ADAM

I have to stay at 106.

DOCTOR BECKER

There can be mental health side effects, too. Your mother said you were hysterical after your match.

Adam shrugs. Looks at the floor.

DOCTOR BECKER

Adam, are you hearing voices?

ADAM

No.

DOCTOR BECKER

Your mother said you were screaming.

ADAM

I was just in the zone.

DOCTOR BECKER

I'm going to write you a prescription for a cream. And refer you to an ear specialist. But, in my opinion, you really need to talk to a counselor.

Adam looks up.

THE EAR (V.O.)

SAY THANK YOU DOCTOR.

ADAM

Thank you, Doctor.

Doctor Becker tears a PRESCRIPTION off her notepad.

INT. CVS PHARMACY - LATER

Adam and his mother wait for his PRESCRIPTION to be filled. Adam fiddles with his phone as his mother examines his ear.

JULIA

Is it sore? I don't want you to be in pain.

ADAM

It's fine.

Julia reaches out to touch it, but Adam flinches.

PHARMACIST (O.S.)

Rodriguez.

Adam looks up and sees Jason, approaching the counter. Adam springs out of his chair to get away from his mother.

ADAM

Dude.

Jason spots Adam and gives him a big nod.

JASON

Yo, dude, you feeling better? You gotta be ready for State. Next weekend, man.

ADAM

I know, I know.

JASON

Don't let that stuff at Sectionals
bother you. Just move on. Keep
fighting.

Julia stands up to introduce herself to Jason.

JULIA

You must be... Jason?

He's very courteous to her. Despite his tough exterior and
Slayer t-shirts, Jason is a sweetheart to moms.

JASON

Great to finally meet you.

JULIA

Good to meet you, too. Thank you
for driving Jason around. I like
how close the team is. Going out to
dinners, lifting together, having
team breakfast at your coach's
house.

JASON

Team breakfast?

JULIA

Yeah, at... Adam, what was the
coach's name?

ADAM

Volkov.

Jason can tell Adam told his mom a lie at some point. But
he's not going to call him out now.

JASON

Yeah, it's an important tradition.

The three stand in strained silence for a moment.

PHARMACIST

KARR.

Julia goes to sign for the prescription at the counter.

Adam pulls Jason close to him.

ADAM

We gotta talk.

JASON

No shit.

ADAM
IHOP parking lot. Tonight.

EXT. IHOP PARKING LOT - NIGHT

This is no Pancake Party. Adam and Jason both ran to the parking lot. Now they jog around as they talk.

ADAM
I trained with Volkov right before he disappeared.

JASON
I knew something was up.

ADAM
It was just one session.

JASON
Must've been a good session. You got his moves down.

ADAM
Listen, there's something else.

JASON
You got Volkov locked up in your basement?

ADAM
No.

JASON
What is it?

ADAM
He's... he's in my head.

JASON
Yeah, I can't look at a clock without hearing Coach K screaming at me to keep driving.

ADAM
It's not like that. I literally hear his voice. It's like he's telling me what to do as I do it. And he's never wrong.

Jason stops jogging. Adam jogs in place.

JASON
What are you saying exactly?

ADAM

It's in my left ear. He had a
fucked up ear and now I hear him in
my fucked up ear.

JASON

You on medication?

ADAM

No.

JASON

Maybe you should be.

ADAM

What's that mean?

JASON

It means it sounds like you're
fucking losing it. Like you don't
have perspective any more.

Adam finally stops jogging in place.

ADAM

I have perfect perspective. My
grades are up. I'm going to State.

JASON

If you're so squared away, why
can't you be honest with anyone?
Lucia said you're dodging her
texts.

ADAM

You're hitting up my girl now?

JASON

She texted me to figure out what
the fuck is going on with you, man.

ADAM

Dude, the only reason I brought
this up is the voice is getting
meaner. Telling me to do shit I
don't want to do. If I knew more
about Volkov, I could control it.

JASON

I know I told you wrestling is
important, but it's not worth this.
Yeah, I wanted State and a
scholarship. But I'll be OK.

(MORE)

JASON (CONT'D)
I'm not getting locked up like my
brother. I'm on The Path.

ADAM
I'm on The Path, too.

JASON
Are you? It sounds like you think
you've got a demon in your head.
What's it saying right now?

ADAM
Nothing.

JASON
So, how does it work? It only
possesses you during wrestling?

ADAM
Not exactly.

Jason looks around the parking lot.

JASON
Let's test it out. You think you
can beat me to that stop sign?

ADAM
I don't wanna race.

JASON
Let's go. On my count. 3. 2. 1.

The boys TAKE OFF. Jason has longer legs but Adam is fast.
As they run, Adam spots a patch of ICE ON THE GROUND.

THE EAR (V.O.)
THE ICE. PUSH HIM TOWARDS THE ICE.

Adam nudges Jason with his elbow.

THE EAR (V.O.)
YES. ELIMINATE THE THREAT.

Approaching the ice, Adam suddenly GRABS JASON BY THE ARM,
pulling him AWAY FROM THE ICE.

JASON
Dude, what the fuck are you doing?

THE EAR (V.O.)
WEAK. WEAK.

Adam clutches his ear. Groans in frustration. Like he's getting stabbed with a dagger.

ADAM
The ice. You were gonna slip.

JASON
You need help, man.

ADAM
I can control it.

JASON
Tell Coach K. Or your parents. Or I will.

ADAM
Just wait until after State.
Promise me you won't tell anyone until then. It'll be our secret.

JASON
I don't know, man.

ADAM
That's what brothers do, right?

Adam holds out his hand. Jason shakes it, begrudgingly.

INT. ADAM'S BEDROOM - LATER

Back from Jason's house, Adam SLAMS the door to his bedroom. Stressed, he itches his infected ear.

He grabs the BAG he got from the pharmacy and removes the CREAM the doctor prescribed. He squirts a DROP on his finger and rubs it on his ear. It stings.

Looking at the infection in the mirror, he recoils in disgust. It's hideous. *What the fuck?*

He notices a cauliflower-like BUMP on his neck.

He removes his t-shirt, revealing his bony, emaciated frame. On his ribs, he notices similar cauliflower-like BUMPS.

Slowly, he unzips his jeans. He notices similar clotted BUMPS on his pelvis. It's spreading.

Then, he hears the ear:

THE EAR (V.O.)
GO THERE. NOW.

He pauses. Looking at himself in the mirror, he nods. He knows exactly what he needs to do.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Dressed in a sweat-suit, Adam runs through the frigid Illinois night. We see his breath as he sprints.

EXT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Adam approaches Coach Volkov's house. In the dark of night, it looks menacing. No lights on. No car. No sign of life.

The steps CREAK as he walks up the porch. He's about to reach for the front door when he hears:

THE EAR (V.O.)
THE CELLAR DOOR.

He turns and heads around the back to

THE CELLAR DOOR

After brushing away branches that keep it hidden, Adam sees there's no lock on the door and opens it with ease.

Using the flashlight on his phone, he illuminates the steps in front of him and walks into

THE DUNGEON

He casts his light around the space.

Volkov's basement is how Adam left it: mat rolled out, nothing on the walls, and equipment pushed off to the sides.

But there's one crucial difference. No corpse.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Adam notices a flicker of GREEN LIGHT coming from beneath the dirty wrestling mat.

Slowly, he approaches it. *What the fuck?*

The Green Light FLICKERS from a gap in the wrestling mat. Right above the CRACK in the floor where water was leaking.

As he gets closer, Adam notices his phone is malfunctioning. The screen goes BLACK. The flashlight GOES OUT.

Adam reaches down and pulls back the wrestling mat to see the source of the GREEN LIGHT.

It grows BRIGHTER, like a beam from a lighthouse.

He hears unnerving, unidentifiable sounds.

SQUISH. SLURP. SLAP.

Like the guttural cries of a Lovecraft-ian creature trapped underground. Begging for freedom.

Adam reaches out towards the CRACK in the floor.

Then he hears:

THE EAR (V.O.)
UPSTAIRS. NOW.

Green light bathing his face, Adam turns. He has more urgent matters. Whatever was down there will have to wait.

He moves the wrestling mats back, covering the crack in the ground, and heads towards the stairs to

A HALLWAY

He crouches in a wrestling stance as he moves through the house in stealth-mode.

THE UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Like he's being guided by a tracker beacon, Adam passes through the darkness towards

VOLKOV'S BEDROOM

A small, spare room with an unmade single-bed.

He looks up and above the desk sees a framed photo of YOUNG VOLKOV, clad in a wrestling singlet and wearing a medal.

Is it from the Olympics? A national tournament?

He leans in closer to look but there's an interruption:

THE EAR (V.O.)
THE BED. UNDERNEATH.

Adam turns around and sees the bed. He walks towards it. His heartbeat POUNDS with every step.

He lowers himself down to the ground. Terrified of what he might discover. A body? A monster? Something even worse?

He looks UNDER THE BED and...

He breaths a SIGH of relief.

It's just a duffle bag. The type a soldier would carry.

Adam pulls the bag out and unzips it.

There's A BOX inside. Adam opens the box up, removes a layer of polyester protective cloth, and discovers TWO MILITARY-GRADE BALLISTIC KNIVES. He closes the box and sets it aside.

He looks in the bag again and pulls out a LARGE PLASTIC BAG OF PRESCRIPTION PAIN PILLS.

THE EAR (V.O.)
PROTECT YOURSELF.

Adam places the PILLS and the BOX OF KNIVES back in the duffle bag and ZIPS it up.

He pauses, awaiting further instructions.

The house is silent.

Then, he hears it:

THE EAR (V.O.)
BURN IT DOWN.

Adam hesitates.

ADAM
Why?

THE EAR (V.O.)
LEAVE NO TRACE.

INT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE - KITCHEN

QUICK CUTS: Adam turns the GAS up on THE STOVE. Grabs MATCHES and a canister of LIGHTER FLUID. Douses the kitchen.

He STRIKES a match. And sets it all ABLAZE.

EXT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

With the duffle bag over his shoulder, Adam runs away.

Smoke rises. Orange FLAMES flicker in the dead of night.

INT. ST. JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL - LIBRARY - DAY

Adam works on math homework at a round table.

Across from him, Lucia reads a copy of *THE STRANGER* by Albert Camus and plays footsie with him.

THE EAR (V.O.)
CUT TIES. FOCUS. NO DISTRACTIONS.

He pulls his feet back.

ADAM

There's something we gotta talk about. I know I didn't text you this weekend.

LUCIA

At Sectionals you were losing it. I thought you were having a seizure.

ADAM

I've been under a lot of pressure and I just think the smartest thing we can do right now is break up. I need to focus on winning State. I can't have any distractions.

LUCIA

I'm a distraction?

ADAM

After State, I need to train even harder. Get a college scholarship. Go to the Olympics.

Lucia glares at him, tears forming in her eyes.

LUCIA

I thought you cared about me.

ADAM

I do. I just care about wrestling more. You wouldn't understand.

LUCIA

'Cause I'm not a psycho about high school sports?

ADAM

'Cause you're not on The Path.

Lucia gets up and STORMS OUT of the library.

Adam watches her go. Through the glass door, he sees a different DISTURBANCE going on in the hallway.

Other students gawk, but Adam looks down at his homework. He already knows what's going on.

INT. ST. JOSEPH'S HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

A German Shepard BARKS as it stalks through the halls of the high school. On a mission. It stops in front of a locker.

Father Montgomery and a POLICE OFFICER (36) stand in front of the locker. Montgomery slips a key into the locker. The Police Officer pulls the door open to reveal...

Volkov's DUFFLE BAG, unzipped so the pills are on full display, lodged in the locker.

Jason approaches the locker.

FATHER MONTGOMERY
Jason, this is your locker, right?

JASON
Yeah. But those aren't my pills.

FATHER MONTGOMERY
That's what your brother Luis said.

Jason is shocked. *What the fuck is happening?*

THE BELL RINGS. In the background, Adam exits the school library and walks to class. Head down.

But Jason spots him.

JASON
He did this. Adam. Adam. You little piece of shit.

Jason tries to run after him but Father Montgomery and the cop restrain him. Adam quietly slips away to his class.

INT. PRACTICE ROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam walks in with his training gear on, but no one else on the team is there. Coach K stands in the center of the room, obviously waiting for Adam.

COACH KNUDSON
Practice is cancelled today.

ADAM
Coach, State is this weekend. I gotta train.

COACH KNUDSON
Unless you can be completely honest with me, I'm going to pull you from the tournament.

ADAM
You can't do that.

COACH KNUDSON
I'm the fucking coach. I can kick you out of this school like THAT. So you better answer my questions. Did you know Jason was dealing?

ADAM
I had no idea.

COACH KNUDSON
Cops found pills and a knife in his locker. You know nothing?

ADAM
I swear.

COACH KNUDSON
Father Monagombery got an anonymous tip to search his locker this morning. The same morning I got a call from the fire department saying Coach Volkov's house burned down. I assume you don't know anything about that either?

ADAM
No.

COACH KNUDSON
Good. Then you won't have any trouble driving to the police station with me and talking to Detective Grayson. Remember him?

ADAM
What am I supposed to talk to him about?

COACH KNUDSON

Everything you don't know. Unless
he's satisfied, you're not going to
State.

INT. POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Adam DRUMS his fingers on a table. Room is cold and quiet.

Detective Grayson, carrying a file folder and a coffee,
enters the room. Grayson settles in across from Adam.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

Thanks for coming.

Detective Grayson reaches into his jacket and pulls out the
BALLISTIC KNIFE. The one Adam found at Volkov's.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

Can you identify this knife?

Adam looks at it -- shakes his head "no."

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

It's a ballistic knife. Spring-
loaded so you can shoot the blade
at an enemy.

Detective Grayson picks up the knife and takes it apart. He
separates the blade from the base, showing Adam the spring
mechanism inside the base. Then he puts it back together.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

You ever see a weapon like this?

ADAM

No.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

I'd be surprised if you had.
They're illegal in the U.S. You can
go to prison for 10 years for
possession. That makes them
difficult to obtain, especially for
a high schooler in Illinois. So,
how did one of these knives end up
in your friend Jason's locker? The
pills check out. We bust kids with
Oxy all the time. But this knife?

Detective Grayson spins the knife on the table.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
This knife doesn't fit.

He stops spinning it so the blade points at Adam.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
Jason says you planted the pills
and the knife.

ADAM
I didn't do it.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
That's what I thought. Kids always
make up stories when they get
busted. Blame each other.

Grayson takes a long sip from a coffee. His mood shifts.
Suddenly, he's more aggressive.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
But the knife doesn't fit. So I did
some research. Turns out people
online call a knife like this a
"Spetsnaz." Does that word mean
anything to you?

ADAM
No.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
Me neither. So I did some more
research, and it turns out
"Spetsnaz" is the word used for the
Russian Special Forces.

Adam's INFECTED EAR twitches. Flexing like a muscle.

THE EAR (V.O.)
GET OUT.

Grayson opens the folder on the table. He pushes forward a
PHOTO of men in MILITARY FATIGUES. One of the faces is
circled. It's a YOUNG COACH VOLKOV, strapping and jocular.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON
Coach Volkov was a member of the
Russian Special Forces.

ADAM
I didn't know that.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

Volkov was rewarded US citizenship for selling state secrets. He was what the federal government would call a "protected asset." They brought him over and had him train Marines for a decade.

ADAM

Like Dirk Ironside?

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

That YouTube guy? Maybe. I never really watched him. Too intense for me. Plus I hate all those ads. Always trying to get me to buy protein drinks.

Grayson puts the photo back in the folder and closes it.

Adam's ear continues to TWITCH.

ADAM

Why are you telling me all this?

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

Jason told us you visited Volkov before he vanished. He said you've been hearing voices.

Adam is sweating. Trying desperately to keep his cool.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

This is your chance. All that pressure that's building up inside of you. Let it go.

THE EAR (V.O.)

KILL HIM.

Adam closes his eyes, waiting for The Ear to give him better advice. Something less drastic. Less violent. Calms himself.

THE EAR (V.O.)

THEY'VE GOT NOTHING. PHONE CALL.

Grayson SNAPS his fingers to get Adam's attention.

DETECTIVE GRAYSON

Are you listening to me?

Adam opens his eyes.

ADAM
Can I call my dad?

EXT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Without talking or even looking at one another, Adam and his dad, Peter, approach the Ford Escape. They get in the car.

INT. BLUE FORD ESCAPE - NIGHT

Peter puts the key in and quickly turns off the radio. Adam throws his gym bag in the back and shuts the door.

ADAM
This is all bullshit.

Peter reaches across the car and SLAPS his son across the face. HARD.

Adam is shocked -- his dad's never done anything like this before. He doesn't know how to react.

PETER
I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. We should... I need you to pray with me.

Peter puts the car in DRIVE and they exit the parking lot.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Adam and Peter enter the church together. A small prayer group is gathered in the foyer. Peter stops in front of a holy water font and crosses himself.

ADAM
You gonna make me do confession?

PETER
I'm not going to make you do anything. Follow me.

INT. CHURCH - SIDE-ALTAR - MOMENTS LATER

Adam and Peter again light tealight candles in front of an altar. After his outburst, Peter tries to control his anger.

PETER
Coach K told me you're officially suspended from wrestling.
(MORE)

PETER (CONT'D)

After Sectionals, the lying about your ear, and what happened with Jason, he says you no longer reflect the values of the team.

ADAM

I have nothing to do with what Jason did. If they had any real evidence I'd be back at the police station.

PETER

You're lucky you didn't get kicked out of that school. Do you realize how much your mother and I are paying to send you there?

ADAM

I never asked for that.

Peter stares into the light of the candle.

PETER

If I don't get a job soon, we'll have to pull you out of private school. Sell the house. Honestly, I'm worth more dead than alive.

Adam feels his ear TWITCHING.

THE EAR (V.O.)

LET HIM DIE.

Peter grabs Adam's hand.

PETER

Pray with me?

THE EAR (V.O.)

HE'S WEAK.

ADAM

Sure.

PETER

Close your eyes. Dear God. Listen to us.

Adam closes his eyes and EVERYTHING GOES DARK. SILENT.

Adam opens his eyes and he's now ALONE IN THE CHURCH. HIS FATHER IS GONE. THE CANDLES HE LIT ARE OUT.

He looks around the DARK, CAVERNOUS CHURCH.

ADAM

Dad?

He walks away from the side-altar towards the seating area. He moves towards the front of the Church, where the priest normally stands. All nerves.

ADAM

Coach Volkov?

He touches his ear. Hears nothing.

ADAM

God?

Then he hears a voice.

UNKNOWN VOICE (O.S.)

HELP.

At first, Adam thinks it's coming from his ear. But it's not.

He turns around and faces the STATUE OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS.

BUT INSTEAD OF CHRIST HE SEES DIRK IRONSIDE WITH BOLTS THROUGH HIS HAND AND FEET. BLOOD RUNNING DOWN HIS BODY.

DIRK IRONSIDE

Adam. Help me.

Adam rushes up to Dirk. Takes in the severity of his wounds.

ADAM

I don't know what to do.

DIRK IRONSIDE

Focus. Pull the bolts out.

ADAM

With what?

DIRK IRONSIDE

Your hands. Get after it.

Adam pulls at the BOLT through Dirk's feet. Summoning all his strength, he removes it. BONE CRUNCHES AND BLOOD POURS.

DIRK IRONSIDE

That's it. Remember: Discipline equals freedom. You can do it.

Adam removes the BOLT in Dirk's left hand. Then the right. He lowers Dirk's muscular frame from the cross.

ADAM
Dirk. What happened?

Dirk struggles to breath. Blood flowing from his wounds.

DIRK IRONSIDE
You don't remember?

ADAM
Who did this?

DIRK IRONSIDE
You did.

Adam is ashamed. On some level, he understands.

ADAM
I didn't follow The Path.

DIRK IRONSIDE
You betrayed me.

Dirk COUGHS UP BLOOD.

ADAM
I'll recommit to The Path, I swear.

Adam cradles Dirk's head. Then he notices: Dirk's LEFT EAR IS INFECTED JUST LIKE VOLKOV'S WAS. JUST LIKE HIS IS NOW.

DIRK IRONSIDE
You must listen to him. He trained
me. Made me great. He'll do the
same for you.

Dirk's ear gets more INFECTED AND ENGORGED. TURNS PURPLE. THE BUMPS SPREAD ALL OVER HIS BODY AND HIS FLESH DECAYS. A BLACK LIQUID OOZES FROM HIS EAR. STAINS THE GROUND. HIS VOICE NOW SOUNDS JUST LIKE VOLKOV/THE EAR.

DIRK IRONSIDE
LISTEN TO ME BOY. THERE IS NO GOD.
ONLY ME. REMEMBER THAT. NOW SAY
AMEN. AMEN. AMEN. AMEN.

INT. CHURCH - SIDE-ALTAR

Adam and his dad pray together.

ADAM
Amen.

We hear the opening riff of Slayer's "Disciple."

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

With Slayer's Tom Araya singing "God hates us all" on the soundtrack, Adam prepares for the State Tournament by running through his neighborhood.

INT. WEIGHT ROOM - MORNING

Adam deadlifts, building up his strength.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

Adam walks through the crowded halls of his school without talking or acknowledging anyone. He's on a warpath.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Adam runs faster. FASTER. FASTER.

INT. WEIGHT ROOM - MORNING

Adam deadlifts again with even more weight. The veins in his neck bulge out and he CRIES OUT as he lifts.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Back in religion class, Father Montgomery writes "BELIEF + DISCIPLINE = FAITH" on the blackboard.

But Adam, sitting in the back, isn't paying attention.

He watches a YouTube video on his phone. It's a video titled "CAULIFLOWER EAR DRAINAGE BEST COMPILATION."

In the video, we see an extreme close-up of a BULBOUS EAR getting drained with a syringe.

Adam doesn't look away.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Adam hands cash to another wrestler, Ryan, who passes him a bag. Adam checks the bag and exchanges a fist-bump with Ryan.

INT. ADAM'S BATHROOM - LATER

As the Slayer song builds and builds, Adam pull a SYRINGE from the bag. He applies disinfectant to the end of the needle and rubs his ear with alcohol.

Just like he saw in the YouTube video, he inserts the syringe into the most inflamed part of his ear.

He grimaces.

Looks close in the mirror to make sure the needle has fully punctured the rough, damaged skin.

Then, he pulls back the plunger on the syringe and slowly drains BLOOD AND FLUID from the ear.

The barrel of the syringe fills up.

INT. WEIGHT ROOM - MORNING

Adam approaches the weights with headphones in, but one of his earbuds GETS PULLED OUT.

It's Coach K.

COACH KNUDSON
That ear looks better.

Adam prepares the weight and Coach K spots him.

COACH KNUDSON
You know you're still suspended
from wrestling, right?

ADAM
Yeah.

COACH KNUDSON
So why work out every day? Why not
sleep in? Take a break?

ADAM
This is who I am.

Coach K nods and takes that in.

COACH KNUDSON
I shouldn't be telling you this but
I spoke with Jason last night. He's
out on bail waiting for a juvie
hearing. His story about you...
(MORE)

COACH KNUDSON (CONT'D)
I don't believe it. I should've
trusted you.

ADAM
Thanks.

COACH KNUDSON
See you at practice tonight. We've
got a State Championship to win.

Coach K walks away. Adam lets himself enjoy the victory of
getting back on the team for one second, then BACK TO WORK.

INT. PRACTICE ROOM - AFTERNOON

Adam drills moves with other wrestlers. Coach K looks on,
impressed at Adam's increased speed and agility.

INT. SUPER MARKET - MEAT SECTION - EVENING

Adam pushes a shopping cart for his mom. She surveys the meat
offerings while he looks at his phone.

JULIA
We should eat something special the
night before State.

ADAM
My Last Supper.

JULIA
Something healthy, of course. Maybe
a nice salmon.

As Julia looks over the fish options, Adam notices a FIGURE
lurking in the frozen food aisle. Someone watching him.

ADAM
Mom, I'm gonna go grab a frozen
pizza. For after State.

INT. SUPER MARKET - FROZEN FOOD AISLE - MOMENTS LATER

Adam stalks the frozen food section. Doesn't see anyone.

In the distance, he spots a DOOR SWINGING CLOSED that heads
to an off-limits section for employees.

Adam moves towards the door.

INT. SUPER MARKET - BACKROOM

Adam steps through the door and gets STRUCK with the STICK-END OF A MOP. KIDNEY PUNCHES. KICK TO THE MID-SECTION.

He looks up and sees Jason standing over him.

JASON
You fucking ruined my life.

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a SWITCH-BLADE.

JASON
That ballistic shit wasn't mine,
but I got one of these. My brother
left it for me before he went
upstate. Told me I might need it
'cause the world is full of snakes.
I didn't believe him. Turns out he
was right.

Adam holds up his hands.

ADAM
Listen, I--

JASON
Shut up. I'll fucking carve you up.

Jason is nervous. Hasn't thought through this plan all the way. Eyes twitching. Hand twitching.

THE EAR (V.O.)
THE BROTHER. WORK THE BROTHER.

ADAM
You could still get charged as a
minor. Go to juvie. You kill me?
You'll get locked up for life. Just
like Luis.

JASON
Don't say his name. You don't know
my brother.

ADAM
You're right. I don't know him. But
I know you. And you're not a
killer.

Jason hesitates.

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW.

Adam GRABS JASON'S WRIST, TWISTS, AND DISARMS HIM. THE SWITCH BLADE CLATTERS TO THE FLOOR.

The door to the back OPENS and Julia sticks her head in.

Adam kicks the SWITCH BLADE underneath a SHELF.

JULIA
What's going on?

Adam and Jason glare at one another.

ADAM
Nothing.

JASON
Nothing.

Julia doesn't believe them. Can tell they were fighting.

JULIA
Adam, we're going.

EXT. SUPER MARKET - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Adam helps his mom load bags of groceries into the car. She's clearly shaken up, struggling to find the right words.

JULIA
This is all a bit much, honey. The ear infection. Now Jason.

ADAM
I got it under control.

JULIA
What if you don't?

Julia takes the last bag from Adam and arranges it just so in the car. Like her son, she's meticulous.

JULIA
I've never told you what I did before I met your dad and we moved out to the suburbs.

ADAM
I know. You were a segment producer for ABC 7 in Chicago.

JULIA
That was my job. But what I really wanted was to be an anchor.
(MORE)

JULIA (CONT'D)

I used to obsess over them. There was this one anchor, Cheryl Powers. She was perfect. One night I followed her home. I noticed she didn't lock her back door, so I slipped in and tried on her clothes while she was sleeping. It wasn't just competition or envy. It was something deeper. I took a bottle of her perfume and wore it to work the next day. Cheryl could smell it on me. They could never prove anything but I was still fired. Started going to Church again. Met your father a week later.

Adam closes the trunk. Looks his mother right in the eye.

ADAM

I didn't break in anywhere.

JULIA

I believe you. Sometimes you have to remove that competitive part of yourself. It's painful. But it's worth it.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CAMPUS - STATE FINALS

Flags decorate the campus for the IHSA STATE WRESTLING TOURNAMENT. The facilities are bigger and shinier than any of the high school gyms we've seen so far.

Adam, Ryan, and Coach Knudson march through the PARKING LOT towards the large ACTIVITIES AND RECREATION CENTER (ARC).

INT. UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ARC - LATER

Adam GASPS as he enters the gym, with its pristine mats and banners hanging from the rafters. The space is huge. Like a coliseum for high school wrestling.

Adam removes his earbuds and soaks it all in. It's quiet for a moment, but then he hears:

THE EAR (V.O.)
IT'S YOURS. TAKE IT.

He shakes his head, trying to quiet the voice.

COACH KNUDSON
Forget all that stuff with Jason.

He glances at Adam's ear, which is less inflamed. Almost normal. As gruesome as it was, the drainage worked.

COACH KNUDSON
Cauliflower's looking better.

THE EAR (V.O.)
COCKSUCKER.

ADAM
Must be the medication.

COACH KNUDSON
All that matters is what happens
out there on that mat. Close your
eyes.

Adam CLOSES HIS EYES.

CUT TO BLACK:

COACH KNUDSON (V.O.)
You're a winner.

THE EAR (V.O.)
AS LONG AS YOU LISTEN TO ME.

Adam OPENS HIS EYES. We see he's in the middle of

STATE TOURNAMENT - ROUND ONE

His FIRST OPPONENT (15, ferocious and quick) has him in a hold, pressing the side of his face into the mat.

THE EAR (V.O.)
ROLL HIM. ROLL HIM.

Going along with the order, Adam ROLLS his opponent, using his momentum to gain control.

THE EAR (V.O.)
HOOK THE ARM.

Adam hooks the arm, drives him on his back, and SCORES THE PIN. A first-round win. But they won't all be that easy...

THE EAR (V.O.)
GOOD. GOOD.

Adam turns over onto his back and CLOSES HIS EYES.

CUT TO BLACK:

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW.

Adam OPENS HIS EYES.

He DIVES HEAD FIRST at a pair of legs during

STATE TOURNAMENT - ROUND TWO - QUARTERFINALS

Adam TAKES DOWN his SECOND OPPONENT (16, frantic and nervous) and administers a HALF-NELSON hold.

THE EAR (V.O.)
SNAP THAT ARM LIKE A TWIG.

ADAM
Shut up.

The Second Opponent gives Adam a shocked look. *Did this dude just tell me to shut up? In the middle of a match?*

Adam responds by pushing even harder on the half-nelson and getting his Opponent on his back.

As he pushes harder, scoring the pin, Adam CLOSES HIS EYES.

CUT TO BLACK:

THE EAR (V.O.)
CONTROL.

Adam OPENS HIS EYES and stares at the banners in the rafters as his body SOARS THROUGH THE AIR DURING THE

STATE TOURNAMENT - ROUND THREE - SEMIFINALS

Adam's THIRD OPPONENT (15, calm and collected) slams him to the mat. Adam attempts to regain control, but he's dazed.

THE EAR (V.O.)
SPRAWL.

Adam struggles to get out of bounds. The WHISTLE BLOWS.

Adam stands, sweating and breathing hard. Scowling.

There are only 50 seconds on the clock in the third period.

THE EAR (V.O.)
BEST DEFENSE IS A GOOD OFFENSE.

ADAM
(quiet)
Fuck off.

THE EAR (V.O.)
JUST LIKE IN THE BASEMENT.

Adam gets on all fours in referee's position, the same position he was working on with Volkov when he died.

THE EAR (V.O.)
YOU REMEMBER. YES. YOU DO. YES.

The opponent lowers himself behind Adam.

The REFEREE blows his WHISTLE.

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW.

Just like they practiced in the basement, Adam gets momentum and SPINS on the Third Opponent, who is unable to keep his control. Adam perfectly executes the reversal.

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOW DRIVE. YOU NEED THE PIN. YOU'LL
LOSE BY POINTS. GET THE PIN.

Instead of driving, Adam lets his opponent go.

THE EAR (V.O.)
WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WE DON'T HAVE
TIME FOR GAMES.

Adam doesn't want to play the ground game. He wants to shoot.

THE EAR (V.O.)
LISTEN TO ME.

Avoiding the ear, Adam SHOOTS and scores a take-down.

The clock ticks down. 10... 9... 8... 7...

Completely in control, Adam SCOOPS UP HIS OPPONENT with a basic INSIDE CRADLE. He gets one shoulder down...

THE EAR (V.O.)
LISTEN.

6... 5... 4... 3...

Then the SECOND SHOULDER down...

2... 1...

The Referee SLAPS THE MAT right before the BUZZER.

Adam got the PIN.

The crowd ROARS in excitement as Adam stands up and RIPS OFF HIS HEADGEAR. In doing so, he BREAKS the chin-strap.

He grips his infected ear and pinches it, like he's trying to fold it in on itself. Or tear it off.

He shakes hands with the Third Opponent.

The REFEREE raises Adam's hand in victory.

Winded, Adam stumbles towards Coach Knudson.

COACH KNUDSON
One more win and you're State
champ. Stay focussed.

ADAM
Do you know if my dad made it?

COACH KNUDSON
Not sure.

Adam looks into the crowd and spots his mother, Julia, in the stands. But no sign of his dad.

Adam tries not to look too disappointed.

THE EAR (V.O.)
DADDY NEVER LOVED YOU.

Behind Julia, he sees Lucia in the stands, looking at her phone. She doesn't return his gaze.

THE EAR (V.O.)
SHE NEVER CARED ABOUT YOU. NEVER
EVEN FUCKED YOU.

Then, Adam sees Jason across the gym, brooding.

THE EAR (V.O.)
JASON WILL KILL YOU IF YOU DON'T
KILL HIM FIRST.

Coach Knudson guides Adam out of the gym and towards the locker room.

COACH KNUDSON
We need to get you new headgear.

Adam nods, relieved to get away from the frenzy of the crowd.

As the two move towards the exit, Adam sees Detective Grayson standing in the doorway. Grayson sips a coffee and smiles at Adam. *You're screwed, you little freak.*

Adam stops, terrified the Detective is about to end his State Championship run.

THE EAR (V.O.)
STICK A KNIFE IN HIS NECK. NOW.

Adam walks towards the doorway and Grayson steps aside. Knudson and Adam enter

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ARC - LOCKER ROOM

Coach Knudson rubs Adam's shoulders to relax him as they walk through the spacious locker room area.

COACH KNUDSON
I've gotta go watch Ryan's match.
You good? You brought extra
headgear?

ADAM
Yeah, Coach.

COACH KNUDSON
You look spooked.

ADAM
I'm OK.

Knudson leaves and Adam is alone in the locker room.

He opens the locker where he stored his bag. He pulls out his the gym bag and removes the SECOND PAIR OF HEADGEAR.

Before he can put it on, his infected ear starts to TWITCH. VIBRATING. PULSATING.

THE EAR (V.O.)
YOU THINK YOU KNOW BETTER THAN ME?
I MADE YOU, LITTLE BOY.

ADAM
Shut up.

THE EAR (V.O.)
WITHOUT ME, YOU'RE NOTHING.

ADAM
I know how to win a wrestling match
without you.
(MORE)

ADAM (CONT'D)

You're trying to turn me into a killer but I'm not one. I'm a wrestler, a once in a lifetime talent, and I'm on The Path. Without you.

THE EAR (V.O.)

OF COURSE YOU'RE A KILLER. YOU KILLED ME IN MY DUNGEON.

ADAM

You had a heart attack, old man. I don't need you anymore.

THE EAR (V.O.)

YOU CAN'T JUST TURN ME OFF. I'M NOT A VIDEO ON YOUR PHONE. I'M A PART OF YOU.

Then, Adam sees it: THE SECOND BALLISTIC KNIFE from Volkov's house lays in the bag. Adam reaches in and grabs it.

THE EAR (V.O.)

YES. KILL THEM. KILL THEM ALL.

ADAM

You're right. You are a part of me. But parts can be removed.

Adam holds the knife close to his infected ear, the blade digging in right below his ear lobe. Slowly, he moves the blade, DRAWING BLOOD from beneath his ear.

THE EAR (V.O.)

NO.

As he cuts, Adam hears FOOTSTEPS behind him.

VOICE

Adam, what are you doing?

Adam turns around and sees his dad rushing towards him.

Adam moves the knife away from his ear and, startled, FIRES THE BLADE of the ballistic knife at his father.

It pierces Peter RIGHT IN THE GUT.

PETER

Adam...

Peter crumples to the floor, blood pouring from his belly.

THE EAR (V.O.)
GOOD BOY.

Stunned, Adam leans down to comfort his dad. He tries to push back the tears and the pain, the flood of guilt and shame.

ADAM
Dad, I didn't mean to.

Adam examines his father's wound. He rips away the bloody cloth of his t-shirt. The blade is lodged in Peter's belly.

Slowly, Adam STICKS HIS FINGERS in his father's stomach and REMOVES THE BLADE from the wound.

Adam wipes blood off the blade with a nearby towel.

He reattaches it to the BASE of the knife, which he still has gripped between his fingers.

ADAM
It's OK, Dad. I'll fix it.

He holds the knife to the infected ear, which now looks engorged and warped -- more like an alien organ than a normal ear -- and SLICES INTO HIS FLESH.

THE EAR (V.O.)
NOOO.

A mix of blood and pus SPRAYS across the nearby lockers.

Adam moves the blade UPWARD, disconnecting the EAR from the side of his head.

He drops the KNIFE on the floor and places the INFECTED EAR in his father's outstretched hand.

ADAM
See, I fixed it.

Peter stops breathing. He's DEAD. Adam closes Peter's palm around the severed INFECTED EAR. Then grabs his headgear.

Adam takes a deep breath. He CLOSES HIS EYES.

Adam OPENS HIS EYES.

STATE TOURNAMENT - ROUND FOUR - THE FINALS

The audio DROPS OUT as Adam, now wearing new head-gear and showing no signs of having been in a bloody struggle, walks to the center of the wrestling mat.

The Referee talks, giving a pre-match rules run-down, but Adam doesn't hear any of it.

He shakes hands with his FINAL OPPONENT (16, steely and undaunted), who mouths "good luck." Adam hears nothing.

Then, for the first time, Adam hears his own inner-voice.

ADAM (V.O.)
YOU'VE GOT THIS.

The referee BLOWS his whistle -- and the audio CUTS BACK IN.

The match is underway. Adam circles his Opponent, looking for an opening. The Opponent has perfect form.

ADAM (V.O.)
WAIT FOR HIM TO MAKE THE MISTAKE.

Adam stops moving -- the other boy DARTS at his legs. Adam DROPS DOWN and gains control. He's right: He's got this.

QUICK CUTS: The Final Opponent runs out of bounds. Adam on top in referee's position. The other boy reverses a move. End of first period. Adam scores a take-down.

ADAM (V.O.)
DRIVE. DRIVE.

Adam pushes and pushes until he gets the opponent on his back. He's got one shoulder down. Then another down.

The Referee SLAPS THE MAT.

Adam scored the pin. He's STATE CHAMPION.

He stands up and looks around as the crowd CHEERS.

He unhooks his headgear and removes it -- revealing the area where his left ear used to be.

The crowd GASPS. There's near total silence in the arena.

Coach Knudson runs out to congratulate Adam, but stops.

COACH KNUDSON
Adam -- your ear.

Adam reaches up towards his ear.

But there's NOTHING there.

The wound hasn't healed properly. Instead, he now has a silver-dollar sized HOLE IN THE SIDE OF HIS HEAD, exposing the white part of his skull.

Adam's opponent, still lying on the mat, lets out a SCREAM.

Coach Knudson grabs Adam's shoulders.

COACH KNUDSON
What did you do?

Adam covers the wound. But that does nothing.

ADAM
It's Volkov. Volkov. Volkov.

Blood and pus OOZE from hole on his head.

It sprays Coach Knudson in the face.

Terrified, Adam looks to Coach Knudson for support.

ADAM
I won. Tell Volkov. Tell Dirk. Tell them all. I won.

Adam COLLAPSES in the center of the mat.

INT. HOSPITAL - PATIENT ROOM - DAY

Adam opens his eyes and sees a beige ceiling above him. There's an IV in his arm and medical equipment around him.

He's still alive.

Immediately, he reaches up to where his ear was and feels a bandage over the wound. *Did they fix it? Close the hole?*

Someone GRABS HIS HAND. It's his mother, Julia.

JULIA
Don't touch the bandage.

Adam struggles to form words.

JULIA
You're safe, Adam. It's over. We know you've been under so much pressure. You don't have to worry anymore. After the match, I spoke with that Detective and told him how I dropped you off at that Coach's house.

(MORE)

JULIA (CONT'D)
He clearly made an impression. You
were screaming his name after the
match.

ADAM
Why was the Detective at State?

JULIA
They found the body.

ADAM
(terrified)
What body?

INT. COACH VOLKOV'S HOUSE - BASEMENT - FLASHBACK

A team of FIREFIGHTERS and DETECTIVE GRAYSON follow a glow of GREEN LIGHT emerging from beneath the collapsed ceiling.

JULIA (V.O.)
Volkov.

They pull away a burnt wrestling mat to REVEAL a manhole. Inside, there's a LANTERN with a green filter hanging.

The Firefighters discover Volkov's BODY, fried to a crisp.

INT. HOSPITAL - PATIENT ROOM - DAY

Adam is stunned.

JULIA
Just be glad we have the ear.

Adam's brain is moving a mile a minute. *Wasn't his dad dead? Didn't he watch him die? What happened to the knife?*

JULIA
Your cauliflower was so bad that most of the blood circulation was cut off from your ear. The doctor says if you didn't cut it off when you did, you would have had a brain aneurism. Honestly, I can't believe the surgery worked.

INT. SURGERY ROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK

A SURGEON and a team of NURSES open a cooler, where the severed ear is being kept on ice. They remove it.

JULIA (V.O.)
 I don't know how you wrestled.
 You'll end up in a medical textbook
 someday. At the very least, it's
 something you'd see on the news.

INT. HOSPITAL - PATIENT ROOM - DAY

Adam touches the bandage, realizing his ear was reattached. He SNAPS his fingers next to it. He hears the sound.

He looks at his mother with fear and guilt in his eyes.

ADAM
 So dad... he's ok?

Peter walks into the hospital room.

He's completely normal -- no signs of being stabbed in the gut or dying. Just a concerned father in a winter coat.

PETER
 Adam, you're awake.

Peter, overcome with emotion, rushes to his son's bedside.

PETER
 You scared us so much.

Peter, Julia, and Adam embrace. All three crying and hugging. The family unit restored. Julia kisses Adam's head.

JULIA
 I'll let the doctor know you're
 awake.

She leaves. Immediately, the energy in the room shifts.

Peter reaches into his coat and pulls out a State Championship Medal. He hands it to Adam, who looks at it with pride and a little confusion.

PETER
 Coach Knudson wanted me to give you
 this.

Adam holds the medal to his chest.

PETER
 I'm so sorry I didn't see any of
 your matches this year. But that
 will change. I was talking to Coach
 Knudson.

(MORE)

PETER (CONT'D)
I told him about my wrestling
experience and he offered to make
me a coach.

Peter grips Adam's hand.

PETER
I'll be in your corner next season.
Guiding you to victory.

Adam can tell something is wrong.

PETER
Everything is fine. My good boy.

Adam shudders. "Good boy." That's the exact phrase Volkov
used to describe him. It's starting to make sense.

ADAM
But I killed you.

Adam notices his father's left ear is GNARLED. Cauliflower
emerging, not yet in full bloom.

PETER
Yes. Yes, you did.

INT. UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ARC - LOCKER ROOM - FLASHBACK

Adam places the severed ear in Peter's hand. Adam leaves the
locker room. But as he walks out, we zoom in on the EAR.

It PULSATES in Peter's hand. Like it's passing its energy.

PETER (V.O.)
You were always going to be a
temporary host, Adam. I have no
desire to be a teenager. I wanted
to be a man -- not a child.

Suddenly, Peter's EYES SNAP OPEN. He's ALIVE.

PETER (V.O.)
Your father died. But I've been
reborn.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Queasy and terrified, Adam pulls his hand away from his
father, who he now realizes is fully under Volkov's control.

PETER

Isn't this what you always wanted?
 A father with dignity. A leader.
 Don't you understand? I never
 wanted to control you. I just
 wanted to unlock your potential and
 I needed to know you were truly
 great before I made a permanent
 home in your father's body. That's
 why I kept telling you to hurt
 those other wrestlers. To snap
 their arms and break their legs. I
 was testing you and you PASSED. A
 weaker boy would have given into my
 prodding. You were strong.
 DISCIPLINED.

Peter leans in close to Adam, who tries to push him away.

PETER

I'll let you rest.

Peter GRABS both of Adam's wrists and PINS them down.

PETER

Calm down, my good boy.

Peter reaches up to the BANDAGE covering Adam's ear. He peels it away, exposing the ear, which has been stitched back on.

Peter leans in close to the exposed EAR.

PETER

(whispers)

I'll always be here.

Then, he turns and walks out the door.

Fighting back tears, Adam is alone in his bed. He looks at the State Championship Medal and TOSSES it to the floor.

Adam moves the bandage back over the ear.

As he does this, we zoom closer and closer on the ear.

We move through the tightly woven material of the bandage.

Into the TOTAL DARKNESS of Adam's ear.

Then we start to pull back. Follicles come into focus. The inner-ear becomes visible.

We see Adam is, once again, sitting on a

SCHOOLBUS - AFTERNOON

He's separated from the other wrestlers, who joke and play grab-ass. He's focussed. Headphones in. Music POUNDING.

A year has passed and he looks healthy. 10 pounds heavier.

He notices a smaller kid, BRANDON, spitting in a cup in the seat next to him. Brandon stops, looks at Adam.

BRANDON

I heard this helps. I'm trying to cut weight. Any tips?

ADAM

I'm going to give you the one piece of advice that no one else will ever be honest enough to give you.

BRANDON

Cool.

ADAM

Quit now.

BRANDON

But I really wanna be great.

ADAM

You don't have it.

Adam grabs the cup from the kid. Tosses it out the window.

INT. BARRINGTON HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - AFTERNOON

Adam approaches the mat. Peter, now wearing a coach's shirt and tie, waits for him.

Peter rubs Adam's shoulders, whispering in his ear.

PETER

Are you listening to me?

ADAM

Yes.

Adam stares off into the distance. Unblinking.

PETER

What are you looking to achieve here?

ADAM

I'm going to win this match. Go undefeated this year. Then I'll win State again. Win it two more years. Then go to the Olympics. Win Gold. Then I'll come back to America and slit your throat in your sleep. You once told me "save your fear for the monsters outside." I'm telling you this: save your fear for me. I'm the monster, bitch.

Peter smiles at this.

PETER

Sounds like you're ready, my good boy.

A referee WHISTLE BLOWS. Adam marches to the center of the mat and shakes hands with his opponent and the sound of Slayer BLASTS on the soundtrack as Adam dives at his opponent with all the rage and skill and hate and power and fury that the Lord Our God has placed in his tiny wretched body IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT AMEN AMEN AMEN.

CUT TO BLACK.