

How LJ And Rom Saved Heavy Metal

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To the adventurer: Whether it be physically, mentally, or spiritually, may you never stop adventuring. And to the others that stopped or simply never started, don't let your dreams die

CHAPTER 0

In a universe vibrant with energy and more coincidental than our own.

Gravel slid and rolled under each tire equally. A 4G63 engine drove power down through the axels to all four tires. The rally car was a far out, vamped up, metallic grey Mitsubishi Lancer WRC. Mountain Dew held a logo on the door panels of each side along with a mirage of small sponsor logos of every color. The body of the rally car was slightly jacked up via its racing suspension and featured a pewter burrito as a hood ornament.

The rally race, a series of *stages*, took place in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. A combination of pavement, gravel, dirt, straightaways, and various shaped corners laid out the course.

“Left five over crest. Then straight,” said Rom, reading off the pace notes just after the Lancer jumped a ditch, narrowly escaping a collision with a tree.

“Again? You just left out the fact that there was a jump after that corner! What kind of codriver are you?” LJ said. Rom snickered under his breath at his own prank. LJ’s top lip quivered, and the look on his face signaled impending doom.

LJ drove with a sweet finesse despite the fact that he was in a sour mood. His attitude was more often than not this way lately due to various things such as Rom giving him a hard time and the increase in boredom with his racing career. Even though he had achieved one of his dreams in life, becoming a highly successful rally racer, something was still missing. It became a sinking feeling you get when you just aren’t where you are supposed to be, the universe pulling at you like an anvil tied to your foot while trying to swim in the ocean on a stormy day. In the back of his mind, LJ knew that a fork in the road was coming soon, and while his sour mood sat steadily in the back of his mind, he was on the lookout for what was to come.

LJ jerked the volume knob of the illegal stereo system a bit louder. The stereo was illegal in the race, not in state or federal law. LJ and Rom ignored the rules often; they did this because they felt like an exception. As they continued through the race stages, they were fueled by the blasting double bass drums and machine gun-like guitar riffs of heavy metal, like a full-on assault aimed right at their eardrums. The adrenaline pumping through their veins got them through the next corner, a hairpin turn that almost beat the brakes square off of the AWD axles.

“Crap,” muttered LJ. “I just remembered I left the coffee pot on at the hotel.”

“So? Is that your OCD kicking in again? I thought you were over that,” Rom replied. “Ugh, another bump.”

“Stop talking. Turn is getting clo—” LJ exclaimed. They both switched their mics back on in between conversation.

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“Left three, small straight to finish.” Rom flipped his radio back off again. “It’s a good thing I really gotta pee. Eyes are floating.”

LJ laughed lightly as they crossed into the last straightaway of the blocked-off, linear racetrack. Into the flying finish they went. They slammed the brakes hard, and the car came to an abrupt stop.

Eighteen girls screamed in unison at the finish as if LJ and Rom were the whole Beatles band reincarnated. Crew members rushed in to soak up the spilled fluids that dripped on the ground. Pressing the gas and the brake in accord with yanking the steering wheel had achieved the best win possible.

Not all competitors had finished yet, but LJ and Rom finished a half second faster than their last win on this course, which was a record time, so they counted on the win.

LJ and Rom exited the Lancer, removing their helmets gracefully.

“Fourteen straight wins now. I’m sure nobody can beat that time. Good job, guys!” said Kate, the race crew leader.

The winning ceremony was filled with a roar of talking; loud, spontaneous laughter; and active bodies. The Mountain Dew soft drinks were handed out and drunk in celebration. Three people simultaneously popped confetti trumpets half as big around as basketballs. Ribbons and multicolored paper pieces shot up and floated down through the air onto the ground as the celebration continued for some time.

CHAPTER 1

Three hundred and ninety horsepower was the output of the Lancer they were inspecting. Trunk-lid spoiler, body kit, and carbon fiber hood were just a few of the upgraded exterior features of the custom-import tuner car.

LJ and Rom started the inspection. They talked quietly, joking about taking the team's car for a joyride on the street and off to a local tourist town to pick up some women. Rom thought for a moment, and the gears turning in his mind discovered that the joke had some real weight to it.

“Hey, LJ. Aren't you getting tired of this? It's not even a challenge anymore. I mean, even though we are champions in rally racing, don't you feel like there is more out there for us? Maybe we can do something bigger and better than just beating record times on the rally tracks? Let's *really* take the car, get out of here, hit the open road, and do whatever we want. Work for what we want in life, work for ourselves instead of just feeding half our winning race money to the team owner,” Rom said.

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Rom's energy turned into that of a stalking butler. He eyed LJ as he waited for an answer, continuing the inspection of the Lancer.

Rom's physical connection with reality and what was beneath the visible light spectrum was a strong one and was often in sync with what was going on in the universe, even sometimes with things that weren't near. The inclination he got about taking the team's rally car and getting the heck out of Dodge was more than just a good feeling.

"You are crazy, Rom! Ha. You really think we should?" LJ responded. His mind was already open to the idea, exciting him as he focused on the way out of boredom.

LJ and Rom were still on the underside of the rally race car, inspecting, when LJ's girlfriend Victoria rang his cell phone.

"Where are you?" Vic said, halfway between a shout and a laugh. Vic wasn't being mean, just random. She was like this especially after some time away from LJ, like a withdrawal symptom.

"At a race," LJ responded.

"What?" Vic said, possibly double-checking his story.

"Finishing a race. We're almost done," LJ repeated himself.

"Hey, meet me at Donna's for dinner? We are having your favorite, babe. Peppered grouper, brown rice with salsa, and spinach salad with olive oil. Seven thirtyish. Is that cool?"

"Uhhh, okay," LJ said. He didn't enjoy talking on the phone and would rather be focused on what was in front of him and the random thoughts in his brain.

"Seven thirty tonight, LJ," Vic said, sourcing the air from her belly, out of her lungs, and through her vocal cords. She already figured they would be late.

“Okay, thanks. Bye, Vic,” LJ said. He loved her but didn’t have to say it; the feeling was unexplanatory.

He hung up the phone.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Rom questioned.

“Dinner. Seven thirty. Donna’s,” LJ said.

“Who’s Donna?” Rom said. He was skeptical. Not that he didn’t trust LJ, just skeptical since this “Donna” was a mystery to him. A second thought told him that if LJ and Vic were friends with the lady, then she must be fine.

“Everybody stop what you are doing. We can finish this tomorrow. Go home,” Rom ordered the crew.

Kate walked up and scoffed, feeling powerless to stop Rom’s charge. When the team’s owner wasn’t around, Rom had seniority—he could tell Kate what to do and get away with it. The race crew left LJ and Rom in the pit with the Lancer.

LJ and Rom quickly installed the back seat into the Lancer WRC and took off with it, not saying a word to anyone. The racing days were over. They stole the team’s rally car, didn’t care, and had earned the team so much money that they figured no one else at the end of the day would either. These guys were not only rally racers but best friends fueled on adrenaline and Mountain Dew. A dangerous combination mixed with the fact that they thought the rules simply didn’t apply to them.

CHAPTER 2

An oblong spheroid of ambulatory energy soared and skated down the path to pick up Vic. LJ put his trucker hat on, labeled “Mullets Rule.” The label on the hat was a large, brown, rounded, sewed-on patch. Rom reached under the passenger-side bucket seat and pulled out a copy of *Guitar World*. He flipped through the pages rather quickly, murmuring things about a close friend he missed that owned the wheel company the rally team was sponsored with.

“Hey, LJ, check this out,” Rom said, pointing down to the magazine article. “Dom Railer. He isn’t doing good. It says right here: attention span is fading, other band members getting frustrated. That’s a major issue, and I’m not talking about magazines,” Rom told LJ, inserting a spontaneous joke into his statement.

LJ let out a long breath of air through his nostrils. “Damn!” He was devising a plan in the back of his head amongst the perception of there always being a problem in front of his face. While LJ thought about his friend Dom’s

predicament, his concentration widened and spanned several dimensions and perspectives at one time.

“Machinehead” by Bush played on the radio as they pulled to a stop.

“Vic!” LJ and Rom coordinated a greeting overtoneing the loud exhaust. Both of them rolled the windows down as they pulled up and let the beautiful woman into the car. In the back of his mind, LJ often associated Vic with the Greek goddess Athena. Her skin was slightly darker than the last time LJ saw her. She wore a black shirt that had a graphic band label, bright images for an emerging neo-thrash band named Nocktious with a flannel shirt tied onto her waist, black jeggings, and Converse All Stars.

“Hey, guys,” Vic said, releasing a drawn-out, melodic statement as she got into the back seat of the car.

“Hey, babe. Donna’s house isn’t far from here, Rom. You guys are gonna love her cooking, promise,” said LJ, smiling.

Sometimes LJ felt a tiny tinge of jealousy when Vic was around him with other guys, but he kept it well at bay. Both Rom’s and Vic’s eyes opened widely, jokingly. They were all full of positive, exclusive energy.

The Lancer WRC eased down the freeway toward Donna’s direction in the suburbs south of Cleveland, Ohio. The three of them talked while miscellaneous genres of music played from the car’s stereo system.

They filled Vic in about the trouble with Dom and his band. They concluded that something was dead wrong about the situation, and it probably wasn’t like the media was making it out to be. The three of them could feel it in their bones; it was weighty, but it was hard to bring the spirits of these folks down. They all individually knew that something had to be done and were in this together, all

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without saying it or communicating their importance to each other.

Vic took over control of the Bluetooth and blasted the song “Vicarious” by Tool, a controversial, hard-hitting track that could only be played at a loud volume. Unspoken doctrine stated that no talking was allowed when the volume was up, at least while Rom was in the car. Last time LJ was talking over the loud stereo, Rom yanked the e-brake in the Fiesta, and LJ almost lost his lunch. Besides, loud music was best with meditation for these three. Paradoxical.

The energy was at large as they pulled into a subdivision called Onlooker’s Cove.

CHAPTER 3

Donna's abode rested back in the cut of a cul-de-sac. The neighborhood featured one-to-two acre lots with variously styled houses. Rolling, soft hills filled the surroundings. It felt like the top of the world. Her house was one that normally would not be noticeable unless you were looking for it. Majestic, clean energy radiated from the house, unlike the other houses in the same neighborhood.

They pulled into the driveway, approaching the state of hangry.

"Bout time," Rom said under his breath, not speaking to anyone in particular.

"No doubt," replied Vic.

As they walked down the short bit of driveway, LJ agreed with his eyebrows tense, scrunched, and high. Vic noticed a man cutting grass in the neighbor's yard with his shirt off, all sweaty. She also motioned toward a stump that had a design in it. The stump looked like the side silhouette of a cat's head. An atmosphere surrounded Donna's house that gave you a magical feeling like when you were a child and

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most things were unknown. There was something magical about everything when you knew very little about it.

Donna was a middle-aged woman that knew how to cook. She had been doing it for ages. Rom liked her even more after noticing the fireplace with a mini cauldron brewing on top of the fire in the living room. Large, dark wood accents filled the inside of her house that bordered all the cream-colored walls. Dinner was hot on the table, steaming when they walked in. Surprised with hot saki and unsweetened tea to drink, the four discussed sparingly as they ate. Vic didn't particularly enjoy the healthiness of the meal, but Donna cooked for LJ's tastes and no one else's.

At first, what seemed like a casual dinner turned into an agreeable discussion about the current media's views on gun control. Vic agreed against gun control even though she had a putrid look on her face.

"Stomach hurts," Vic said as she pulled out a couple of Nutty Bars from her purse.

LJ let out a brief one-huff laugh. *Hypochondriac*, he thought.

The trio got restless as the fire turned a hot blue in the fireplace. It roared with a burst. The oversized sticks were stacked unevenly but fell into position to create a shift in energy.

"Dominic isn't doing well," Donna said, sounding disappointed. "Maybe alcohol and weed binge, something else entirely. I'm not sure. He's putting it over his band practice and daily responsibilities, whatever it is. Going against the contract, and the band has a tour coming up. Something bad is going to happen if we don't do something. I just know it, guys."

She and Dom grew up together and looked out for each other, but time had separated them. Agreeably, LJ mentioned the article Rom had read in *Guitar World*.

Round, soft wind filled the openly designed house. One gust of smoke reversed and came down the chimney. Everyone paused in silence while Rom adjusted the choke on the fireplace.

“Hey, Donna. I think your house has a mind of its own,” Rom called out after getting the choke adjusted so that the fireplace wasn’t spewing smoke anymore.

They did a toast with their second shot of hot rice liquor. The joy of being together and their seriousness about Dom’s situation filled the air and their thoughts at the same time. The four talked about good memories of Dom and then discussed visiting him in south Florida. It had been almost a year since anyone had seen him.

“We need to be taking a hands-on approach if necessary, ha,” LJ proclaimed. “Duke it out with him if need be, coldly.” LJ was mostly terrible at jokes. “He might need a good, old-fashioned ass whooping to straighten up.”

Everyone looked at LJ as if they had seen a ghost and then they all busted out laughing.

The thinness of the air combined with the ambient energy seemed to consume the whole room. Nothing existed outside the four walls. Short mini clips of Dom doing various things appeared on the walls in the shadows. It wasn’t difficult to tell that most of the things that Dom were doing were positive and should cause him no reason to be leaving the band. Why did he seem so out of touch though? The images that had appeared in the shadows of the house ended with a hot, thundered thighed Viking woman riding a flying unicorn across all four walls through the shadows.

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“That . . . was weird,” LJ said. LJ wasn’t too startled though. If you looked up paranormal in the dictionary, his picture was probably sitting right next to the definition. Lots of strange, unexplainable things like this had happened in his past, and it was better to just take them at face value than to freak out or question the vein of what reality really was and what it wasn’t.

Several ideas ran through LJ’s mind. He was trying to think of what might be going on with Dom. How could they help him? Surely there was something they could do. He had seen similar things in the past with other friends, but something just wasn’t right about all this.

LJ glanced over at Vic and noticed how heavy her eyelids were becoming.

“I’m tired,” Vic said.

Donna exited the room. Her voice drifted back. “Guys. How could I almost forget? One more thing for tonight. It’s important.”

She returned with a medium-sized, semicircular crystal ball resting in the middle of a sleeping dragon. She set it on the middle of the rustic dinner table. Its weight easily stabilized its position.

Donna spoke compassionately. “I’m gonna show you all something that you must keep in confidence, something that I hope motivates you to do what is needed to save Dom’s life, because that is what is at stake here . . . I also fear the downward spiral of heavy metal as a whole along with Dom’s life if we don’t save him. Once each of you agrees, do not speak of what the crystal ball shows you, and do your best also to not ever envision it in your mind after you see it. Now, if you agree, each of you state so.” Donna waited in grave anticipation for the responses.

“I do.” LJ gave his response awkwardly.

“Yes,” Vic said lowly.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Rom said, giving his half-baked answer.

“I need everyone’s complete, uninterrupted concentration on the crystal ball. Scrying is a sacred practice. Now, here we go.” Donna wasn’t just wasting words.

She laid her hands, spread out, slightly cupped with the cusps of her index fingers and thumbs around the sleeping dragon that held the semicircular crystal ball. She smacked it one good time. “Have to make sure the batteries in this thing have contact. Technology is nice . . . when it works.”

Multicolored, iridescent bubbles formed at the bottom of the crystal ball, sending swirling, purple, ribbonlike smoke through the dense glass. A short-fused burst of electricity surged on the inside and popped in miniature sparks along the outside of the glass on each side, starting at the bottom equator and moving upward along the outside, joining at the top. The energy fused together in a swirling mass, untangled, hissed into the inside of the glass, and fell like ribbons descending through the air to the base where the black velvet lined the crystal ball.

An image appeared inside the crystal ball as if they were looking into another place through a hidden camera.

They were viewing, from the top down, a concert. Dom’s guitar and hair signaled his presence on the stage. This wasn’t right at all. The other members of the band weren’t his.

“Something’s about to happen. It’s going to be bad,” Rom warned as he hiked up his leg.

“Shh, Rom,” Vic said, remembering the need to concentrate.

LJ nodded.

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They waited while the display in the crystal ball continued. The concert floor was holding several hundred people. There was a circling mosh pit close to center stage.

Mass hysteria broke out as the playing music ceased just after a man pulled out a gun, ran onstage, and shot it several times right at Dom.

Dom was lying, with his back down on the stage, and his guitar still strapped to his shoulder. He was bleeding from his chest and head while the other musicians dropped their instruments and ran over to check him.

“Told ya,” Rom boastfully scoffed.

“Shh!” Vic equalized the situation again, this time a bit louder than before. Vic covered her gaping mouth.

Long faces watched as the crystal dome reversed the initial electrifying, purple-haze display of the future.

“*That’s* what is going to happen if you don’t go to Florida and do something.”

Donna said what everyone knew, except for LJ. When this happened to LJ, he knew what the pieces were to the puzzle, and he knew they fit, but it often took him longer to put them together than others. Probably still churning on things that happened yesterday.

“That is all.” Donna smirked while swiping the crystal dome off the table and returning it to its hidden resting place in the other room.

As Donna returned, everyone had already moved to the area next to the fireplace. They sat mostly quiet in high-backed, ornamental chairs with a love seat in between.

“The bedroom is the second door on the left, down the hallway.” Donna was comforting to the good company of LJ and Rom.

It had been a while since LJ and Vic had made love. Vic had an image burning in between her thighs. She was