

*Of Blood and Water,*  
*A Short Story Excerpt*

\*This is an excerpt from a slightly long short story I wrote about two boys who become lifelong friends. The story itself was inspired by some of my closest brothers at ADPhi.

An old friend once said, “Big things are made of little moments,” but I think that Andrew Benson and Robert Gallagher would think otherwise, if they ever thought hard on the matter. Rob was more inclined to thinking up such platitudes anyway, and he would likely have said that big things *were* little moments, the tiny seconds of “Hello” and “Goodbye”, of bursting into laughter with a stranger, of heads turning and eyes locking. Those moments were the ones that shone even when the great toll of time sucked them into a wash of stark, endless moments. They came whenever they wanted to, just before bed or at that random period stuck waiting in a never-moving line. Rob might have even argued further that life was simply and only a collection of such moments, and the things in between were filler, insignificant lines connecting significant realities.

But there was surely a time when even Rob was too little to think of such things, when the highlight of his day came from Tom finally giving Jerry a good whack—“the mouse *always* wins!” he often cried—or the *Happy Bartley* van rolling down the street with its sweet jingle and promise of vanilla ice-cream. On one of such days making up this time, he was out on the lawn with his parents and older sister, watching strangers rummage through the items set up for a yard sale. Heat waves seemed to shimmer the air, and although Rob was drenched, he was grinning, the smile so small you could barely see the curl of his lips. It was more of an internal grin, born from his happiness at getting to keep some of his rather expensive *Titans of the Multiverse* comic books, despite having read all of them dozens of times.

He was zoning out and beaming on the inside when his unseeing eyes caught the shiny black sedan trundling its way up the slope of Parker Street, shortly followed by two white vans.

“Moving vans,” he heard his mom say. The vehicles pulled up opposite the street. From the sedan, four people and a gleeful Doberman spilled out. There was only one kid in this sudden ensemble, probably of Rob’s age and height. He

looked lankier and wore a sea of acne over his face, but what struck seven-year-old Rob at the time was his expression as he squinted and surveyed the street, his gaze latching onto the swarm of people in the Gallagher yard. He seemed timid, an expression of the variety that suggested both excitement and intimidation. Rob only watched the boy's face for a few seconds before a glimmer of metal caught his eye, and he shifted his attention to a stout, frowning woman who was experimentally slicing air with a red-and-white-hilted knife.

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He did not care or expect to see the new kid again, but he did so quite often in the months that followed. The first time occurred when his dad, John Gallagher, took the family over to see the Bensons the night of the latter's move-in. It had been a fairly breezy night, which Rob had found surprising following what had been another hot day, and he remembered admiring the ring of holly that adorned the Benson doorknob before Jon and Stella knocked as one. Moments later, the door opened. A tall, crimson-haired woman Rob recognized from the sedan walked out, her expression one of particularly bright-eyed pleasure, as though she'd had to open the door and smile a thousand times that day already. Rob only saw Andy for a few seconds—the latter poked his head from the end of the living room, as if trying to investigate who had disturbed his peace of mind. The same expression from earlier that afternoon took over his face, except that there seemed to be less excitement.

*He looks kinda scared, Andy thought.*

And that thought made him smile, a gentle smile that said, *Hey there kiddo, don't be scared, we're all nice here, I promise.*

Moments later, Eric Benson showed up at the door. Jon and Eric exchanged words that seemed introductory and somehow necessary at first, but Rob was sharp enough to pick up when the tones changed, going from perfunctory acceptance of a not-unlikable routine to genuine, pleasant surprise.

"The *Quad Lakers*?" Jon said, his eyes widening. "Damn, you're kidding, right?"

"No way in hell," Eric replied, beaming. "Not about them." He extended his hand for a second time. "It's *really* nice to meet you." Rob looked up to catch the handshake, and when he turned to Andy's direction, the new kid was gone.

Andy showed up with his family three nights later to have dinner with the Bensons. Over rice, stuffed turkey and chocolate pudding, the adults chattered about insignificant things like news and salaries while Rob's and Andy's

siblings—one twelve, the other fourteen—put in their opinions every once in a while, but stayed otherwise focused on multitasking texting and eating. Andy stabbed everywhere on his plate, never seeming to eat more than dime-sized bites. Rob ate more, only looking up whenever he thought Andy was timidly glancing his way.

After dinner, Rob rather loudly asked if Andy would wanna see his comic books. The ensuing silence that took over the room struck some fear in Rob, and he wondered if he had somehow made a mistake by not asking his mom for permission. But he saw no consternation in any of the adult faces, and Andy was actually smiling, as if he'd been waiting to hear such a question.

“Which ones?” Andy asked.

“*Titan—*”

“*Titans of the Multiverse?!*” The words flew out of Andy’s lips. “No way!”

Rob asked his mom if that was okay, and she had barely nodded her assent than both boys flashed out of their chairs and up a flight of stairs. It turned out Andy had already read all the issues of the comic book Rob possessed and then some.

“There are new ones out though,” he said disconsolately, staring at the navy-blue armor Ultramax wore on the front page of Rob’s most recent issue. “Haven’t seen them anywhere yet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rob replied. “You *have* to tell me about seventy-four. Does Ultramax finally—”

“You should read it,” said Andy, beaming. They were seating at the foot of Andy’s bed, surrounded by a multicolored semicircle of *TotM* comic books. “It’s so cool.”

“I will,” Rob replied, “but just tell me anyway.”

Andy’s clear reluctance to lingered for a moment more, before he burst into animated speech, waving his hands, making the sounds of everyone and everything—the Alpha-jets, the enemy drones, the newly revealed world bursting with candy in every district. Time never mattered to them, and the things that surrounded them—the bed, the chilly, air-conditioned air, some of Andy’s broken toys—bore no faces. It was the gift of a moment, one both boys had won the very instant Andy had interrupted Rob’s speech to cry in delight, “*Titans of the Multiverse?*”