



They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression – how *tragic*. I suppose that begs the question then, of what the Warfare fans think of me, given that my leap from the Madness brand was a bit *underwhelming*. I could try and explain, could make an excuse but the truth is despite all my years in this business, my track record in battle royals has been abysmal. No time for rumination tonight. We have blood to shed. Lives to ruin. You know, the usual. So let's not waste any more time, hmm?

Hello, XWF. Your US Champion has arrived on WARFARE and I would like to make a clear statement from the get-go, one that's far less clichéd than the sort that has been overused by the wannabe edge lords of the business since time immemorial.

**WHEN YOU LOOK INTO THE ABYSS,
THE ABYSS LOOKS BACK.**

Is that unoriginal?

Perhaps.

But then, someone I once knew used to start all of those introductions the same way, with that oft-quoted line from The Libertine:

**ALLOW ME TO BE FRANK AT THE COMMENCEMENT:
YOU WILL NOT LIKE ME.**

That would always be followed by a recitation of names and places and championships held, as if the knowledge of one's own alphabet soup is laudable? Hardly. Makes my skin crawl, just talking about it now. Absolutely cringeworthy. No take-backsies. Those who know me know that I am always accountable, even when it leads to nights like this where I feel caged again, trapped in solitary confinement in my head, reliving that personal lowlight reel of all my latest mistakes. That's not meant to be a confession any more than I am trying to paint the image of the downtrodden and woe-begotten here. Nope.

I AM THE ABYSS.

**I AM THE WORST THING TO HAPPEN TO YOU.
TO THIS BUSINESS.**

Look at me, the one-man dynasty of pain. I should be on a couch, talking about my feelings, working on a little conflict resolution. Trying to get along with myself like we're old buddies is hard work, even on my best days. I guess there's a bit of self-loathing in everyone who sets foot in that ring though, isn't there? There's gotta be some sort of sick drive to propel you into this meat grinder in the first place. Maybe a little lust for cheers and accolades. Maybe a hard-on for broken bones and blood spatter. Whatever it is, it's not something normal.

WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN.

Try to maintain balance and keep myself steady until then. It's getting harder. Not sure how much longer I can keep up this charade when I long for just a second of peace. This shit hurts, as you well know. I want a different thing now. A delivery into a different place – a substitution of a new reality for this one that sucks. Maybe I could crawl into another world and beg for entry. Maybe I could lie myself into a better place.

Take a look in the mirror at this sad sucker in the straitjacket of misapprehension and realise that infinite isolation is the place I'd rather be in this moment. It's safer that way. For all of you.

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Yurievich Residence (Rock Hill, NY) ||| February 21, 2024
(off camera)

Elle stood in the bedroom doorway, surprised to find her husband lying in bed in roughly the same place he'd been before she'd gone out to run errands. His eyes were still fastened on the TV even though the volume was muted. The sight of him huddled under the covers like a frightened child broke her heart. Saying nothing, she crept over to the bed and sat down beside him. He didn't move. Didn't even seem to be aware of her presence. Turning towards him, she slid down so that she was lying next to him before rolling over on her side, reaching out.

"Hey, you," her hand came up and rested on his cheek.

"Hey," his eyes fixed on hers, unreadable in the dark. "Missed you." He didn't ask her where she'd been, because he wasn't quite sure if she'd told him before she'd left or not. He also wasn't quite sure just how long she'd been gone. Time had grown slippery over the last couple days for him.

"I missed you too, baby," the words came out in an oddly choked whisper as her thumbs caressed his cheeks gently. "Sev, I'm going to tell you something and I need you to listen to me, okay? I need you to hear me, loud and clear— do you understand?"

Expecting the worst, he tried not to telegraph it, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he tried not to tense up. "Of course. I'm listening."

Her hands stayed where they were and she kept that firm tone to her voice. "In all my life, I have never loved anyone as I love you, I've never even come close to feeling the way I do about you with anyone else." Even in the dark, her eyes stayed locked on his. "There is NOTHING that you could ever do or say that is going to change that— you know that, right?" She removed her hands from his face, only to move her arms around his waist and snuggle up closer to him. Her mouth was by his ear and she spoke in a whisper. "You can trust me, Sev."

"Yes. I know this." He pulled in a deep breath through his nose and held it, "and I am sorry if I have made you worry unnecessarily. I am..." he trailed off, unable to find the right words. Or maybe it was that he was unwilling to lie to her yet again. Despite his efforts, he could still feel that difference in the energy, and could hear the quaver of fear in her voice.

He wanted to tell her not to worry, to assure her that everything was fine and he was just exhausted and overworked— everything since September, since Smash's passing had been steadily eroding his foundation and his sanity. Holding all these championships had felt like a blessing at first, had felt like he had finally made it to the pinnacle that had eluded him for so long and now he could see the rot, could see the rest of the pigs wallowing in their muck from this lofty vantage point. "I am just—"

"Shhh," she admonished gently, still stroking his face, "I know you're going through hell right now and I will do anything to keep those demons from swallowing you whole."

He let out a soft exhale that was almost a sigh, closing his eyes. "Elle," whatever reply he was trying to push out died on his lips. "I know," he said finally, breaking the silence. "That's not up for debate. I trust you implicitly to have my best interests— *our* best interests at heart."

"I just didn't want you to question it while you're..." she trailed off this time, nuzzling her nose against his neck.

"Having an existential crisis?" He joked but they both knew he was using that acidic sarcasm to mask what he was truly feeling.

"Is that what it is?" She tossed it right back, lifting her head to look at him with one delicate brow arched. "Well, huzzah. I suppose this is the part where I tell you that the world has always been shit and will continue to be shit and there's nothing you can do to change that?"

"Poetry, my love. This is why you are the writer, and I am the fighter." Even as he said it, he sighed and shook his head, knowing she was right. "Hasn't been the same—"

"—Since September." She said it at the same time, nodding. "I know. And I want you to know that I'm not angry with you, Sev. I'm just..." sighing, she lowered her head again, resting against his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around his, clinging to him. "I just don't want you to ever feel like you have to ever question me or our marriage."

He chuckled, but the sound was so bleak it hurt to hear it. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"I don't know," she sounded almost distraught, "you won't talk to me. It's like you're a million miles away and I just... I felt like I was losing you 'cause I can't reach you." Her voice cracked, the emotions welling up to the surface for him to hear. "I just want you to know you're stuck with me, Sev. Until death do us part."

"You can reach me," he replied, his voice still sounding hoarse, "just don't have much to say right now. There..." he closed his eyes again, biting his lip for a second as though he was trying to find the right words. "There's so much shit in my head— memories and nightmares, mostly— it's a minefield, Elle. I don't wanna move too far and blow everything up. Do you understand?"

"And I don't want to force you. When and if you're ready to talk, I'm here." She sighed and rested her forehead against his cheek, breathing him in. "I love you so much it hurts sometimes," her voice cracked again on the confession.

"Don't," he closed his eyes, wincing, "don't tell me it hurts to love me, Elle. That's not how it's supposed to be. I don't ever want to hurt you." The unspoken AGAIN was there in the rasp before he cleared his throat.

"Honey, no. It's a fantastic hurt," her lips curved in a sad smile— he could hear it in her tone. "It's the best kind of hurt and I wouldn't trade it for a damn thing. You make my heart feel so full. You... you give me a reason to smile."

"I'm scared," he said the words so softly that she had to strain to hear them. "I'm terrified, Elle... and I do not know how to fix that. Have you ever had a fear so bad that everything's shivering inside? That's—"

"It's okay to be scared. You're human, Sev. You can be scared or angry or sad and it doesn't make you any different in my eyes. You have every reason to feel that way— all these pressures you've been under. And I just wish you would slow down. Stop taking all these bookings." Her hand came up to the back of his head and her fingertips started massaging the base of his skull. She hoped it was soothing him. "But there may not be a quick fix right now and you're going to have to accept that."

"I need to be busy," he paused, licking his lips as he tried like hell to put what was in his head into words. "I need to stay ahead of the monster..." he lapsed into silence again, feeling dangerously close to some sort of catastrophic meltdown. "The Smash Championship—"

"Isn't *important*," she was back to holding his face, her eyes boring into his. "Neither are those other three that will never be defended again. They're not definitions. They were just..."

"IIW is coming back. They asked me to return."

"What?" She stared at him, "when?"

He said nothing, closing his eyes.

"Sev?" She kissed his cheeks, and his neck, stopping when he broke the silence in a hollow voice.

"A few days ago. Just one more for the pile."

"You can't possibly be considering going back after—"

"I don't know what I'm going to do. XWF offered me the contract first. My initial six months in WGWF ends mid-March— I have no idea what they will offer me, if there will be any incentives to continue on. I think it is time to read the writing on the wall, to acknowledge that the last year was a fluke rather than something we know will continue on—"

"NO." Her voice was loud enough to startle him, but she stared, unblinking. "Don't you dare, Sev. Don't you fucking *DARE* try and dismiss what you've done. The only damn person who's pinned you in the last year is Mac Bane. Think about that for a second. Let that sink in."

He tensed and then wrapped his arms around her, pulling her so close it bordered on hurting her. "Twice, no less. I am no better than Peter Vaughn now," he replied, "the only difference is that I do not let sour grapes dictate my actions. He knows, though. He knows that I keep receipts. Will only be a matter of time until I get my hands on him. And then? I will end his miserable career for good."

LJ held onto him tightly, as if she believed that putting every emotion into that embrace was going to undo the damage the toxic wrestling industry had done. She kept her mouth shut, though, deciding to let the conversation drop for the night. He was already far beyond stressed and she didn't want to make it any worse by picking at the wound. At least he'd opened up to her and that was more than she could have expected. She had no plans on moving from that spot, not until he did first. If they ended up staying like that all evening, so be it. Safe in the circle of each others' arms, it was easy to pretend no MONSTERS were waiting in the dark to tear apart their perfect little world.

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Let's get something straight: I don't have my face buried in a paper bag, huffing the fumes of greatness that's defined me since I came on the scene here. No, I spent my time wallowing in the gutter before I found the strength to rise above the shit and I'm pinching myself every ten seconds to make sure this isn't a dream. I'm not delusional. I don't think I'm the greatest thing since individually wrapped American cheese slices. I know that I'm not a mover and shaker around these parts— at least not yet. My arrival, my Warfare debut, was overshadowed by the signing of Vhodka and Victor Black. I hate to be a pessimist, but that was not untrue, what was said on social media. Their return to another company... was ultimately what led me here. The PWE season was cut short. That last event took forever to air.

I won't expect crowds to part like the Red Sea because I am a five-time champion, draped in golden baubles. I am not, as the kids say these days: fucking delulu. I do not believe I am awesome. Most days I'm lucky if they remember to ask me if I want fries with my meal. Sometimes, and these are the rare occasions when I think to myself that I've really made it—sometimes they supersize my combo FOR FREE.

Anger sustains me, rage fuels me and I know you're going to assume that's some trite bullshit I'm spin-doctoring because I don't want to admit how I was about to slink out the back door in shame after such a piss-poor performance in that Last Blood Rumble.

I could tell you that it's not true, but you won't believe me. People are wont to think whatever suits their own agenda. So instead I'm sitting here frantically stitching together these broken thoughts into some cobbled-together monster like Victor Frankenstein. And I know that every last one will be dropping into a pile that ends up being weighed against me as some form of judgement I don't quite understand.

Fine, I expect that and I know that I'm just an ordinary guy. I'm not Superman. Sometimes I forget that little truth, mostly when I'm flinging myself off something and defying gravity with the flashbulbs popping. I really wish I was immortal.

No matter how far you go, you can't run from the truth and you can't run from yourself. Best you can do is turn and face that demon, and let it tear your face right off. Go down fighting for what you want— *what you need*— or what you think you might have wanted once upon a time. Crash and burn and rise up from the ashes.

I do it every time my music hits and I walk down that ramp. I do it all for you. Life has become a series of wasted breaths waiting for the big moment. I feel like a bomb with a short fuse— ready to go off for your viewing pleasure. The world is hard. It's a goddamn vampire, and the best you can do is try to survive until morning. That's a mantra worth repeating while you kick them in the teeth and send them toppling back to the bottom of the mountain. Tell yourself that's where they should be in the first place because you own this moment. I own it because there's never been such a thing as a THIRD chance.

I've got my sights on beating Tommy Gunn, this wannabe bouncer. There is no personal vendetta here. Just business. I need this to happen— this makes poor Tommy an obstacle. It makes him yet another in a long line of victims. It makes ME a monster, GODZILLA stomping through Tokyo, tearing everyone to pieces. No survivors. The abyss is impartial. Indiscriminate. I have always been willing to be the harbinger, to spread my message of carnage to the masses. I am the last bastion of truth in this wilderness of pain. My message is simple. Pure.

**I AM THE ABYSS.
I WILL SWALLOW YOU WHOLE.**

These hands know what to do and the violence I plan to unleash here in XWF will bring about a rebirth. Baptismal waters, washing us clean, banishing the taint of mediocrity and

complacency from our midst. Ushering in a new era, a new CHAPTER to the LEGACY OF DESTRUCTION I have been toiling over this past year. My masterwork is nearly complete.

My mission is more defined now. I know what needs to be done and I won't leave behind loose ends like so many others do. Cowards. I won't leave behind a trail of broken hearts. I don't leave tracks in the snow that you can follow. I'm not a hunter. To call yourself that implies that you are willing to look for something, and possibly fail. A hunt is a quest with uncertainty and I need this to be concrete, in black and white terms. I need to go out there and cement that idea.

**I AM TO BE FEARED.
REVERED.**

There's no room for uncertainty here. This is a killing, my friends, and I am unafraid. Fists clenched, I am angry. Success beckons and now I realise that rivers of blood shed by my hands have drowned the last of my fears completely. So this is what it feels like to be truly free? I think I like this. A lot.

**WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE.
WELCOME, TOMMY.
YOUR NAME IS IN THE BOOK.
YOUR DEMISE FORETOLD.**

WELCOME TO THE DANCE OF THE DAMNED.