

Asher Hayes looked down at the contract while sitting in the office of his newly appointed agent, Carter.

"Are you alright, Mr. Hayes?" His agent was young and seemed to be in over his head, like he was fresh out of the womb.

Asher sighed. "I'm not sure. I mean," he shrugged, "I'm alright but I can't help but wonder if I'm doing the right thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," the highly decorated pro wrestler began, "I've been doing this for a long ass time. I've destroyed my body in, and out, of the ring. I'm taking shows on the independent scene along with one major wrestling company," Asher flicked the contract with the back of his hand, "and if I sign this, it'll be two."

Wanting a drink, Asher pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm being a straight up bitch. And I hate that it may be your first impression of yours truly. I'm not usually this emotional. And before you ask, it's not my period."

Carter shook his head. "I didn't think that was the case." The young lad was from London, coming over to America for reasons Asher probably wouldn't be able to understand. He respected the kid because he wanted to get things done and have them done right the first time.

Asher couldn't help but be reminded of his younger self when he was around his agent. His younger self before shit hit the fan and booze consumed him, along with needles to the vein.

"Well I can appreciate that mate," Asher said, giving his best British accent, and failing more than likely. Carter scrunched his face. "Sorry."

"If I may be so bold," Carter exhaled, "when I was tasked with fulfilling the shoes of your previous representation, I did my homework. I know about the drug use and the run-ins with the law. I've studied your career in and out of the ring."

"Many spanks," said Asher.

"Come again?"

Asher shook his head. "I can't right now. I did it earlier. Your boy is in his forties."

"I'm aware," Carter nodded. "As I was saying, I've studied your career and you're right. You have destroyed yourself so I do have to ask…why are you pursuing this venture with the XWF?"

Asher shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment?”

“Maybe so. That would explain your face?”

“What’s wrong with my face?”

“You look like you just left your regular Tuesday evening with your local fight club.”

Asher chuckled, knowing exactly why he looked like a can of smashed assholes.

But he lied. “I wrestle for a living. The bumps and bruises are bound to happen.”

“It looks like something completely different. Plus,” Carter crosses his arms over his chest, “I saw your last match. The bumps and bruises don’t match what took place in that contest.”

“Uh huh.”

“You really are burning the candle at both ends, aren’t you?”

Asher smirked. “Old habits die hard I guess…”

1.1

One minute I’m putting my opponent through a table, earning myself a victory and the next, I’m stealing diamonds.

I’m a professional wrestler. It’s a glorious gig if I do say so myself. Sure, there is the risk of injury, and all the Deities know I’ve had my fair share. This damn back of mine. I get to travel the globe, which has always provided me with something new in terms of my five senses.

But I don’t *just* participate in the ring wars as I like to call them. I’m from Chicago. The Windy City and in each breeze variation that flows through our streets, crime and corruption are like carry-on, tagging along to change, alter, or shape the city into another version of itself. And my city has a long and brutal history when it comes to crime, organized or not.

I mean, does the name Al Capone ring any bells?

That was the world I grew up in. Call me Ray Liotta because for as long as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. My father worked in law enforcement, busting his ass to put my idols behind my bars, so naturally. that put us at odds more times than I can remember. Speaking of having a bell rung, right? I’ll blame old age, but I’ve taken my shots to the head and face, in one life or the other.

Both worlds I dangle my nuts in, they’re violent. Pro wrestling has been said to be fake and all that jazz. Step into the ring and find out for yourself. That’s all you can say. In the realm of crime, I’ve fired bullets and I’ve been shot at. Never killed anyone thankfully. I’ve almost been killed. I’ve lost count of how many times. Tonight could add another number to the growing tally.

Picking the lock with a credit card and a paper clip, I tell myself that once I’m in the room opposite of mine, I need to be quick. My target is out on the town, probably having the time of his life. No clue for how long, so I have to MacGuyver the shit out of this, just as my boss taught me.

His name was McNeil. He died taking a bullet for me, but he taught me everything I know about this line of work. His son, Vincent runs things now. I don’t like him, or trust him, but I haven’t been able to shake the feeling that I owe his old man.

Vincent’s fence, Marko, clues him on potential jobs. Once Vincent says go, I’m sent to do his bidding. Being a pro wrestler, Marko finds things for me to do in whatever cities we’re in for shows.

One wiggle and jiggle later, I’m able to open the door separating our rooms. I stand in silence for a few moments, waiting to see if any action arises. Feeling the coast is clear, I step inside.

My target is another criminal, Nate Beard. You've seen his crimes in the papers, but not his name. He's a thief, too. He's sort of a professional rival. Nate just doesn't know it.

Marko said when Nate is performing a robbery, he's locked in. When he's laying low, his eye comes off the ball.

That's the part I'm counting on.

I leave said door open at a crack and I move through the room, checking every nook and cranny, leaving no stone unturned. Just placed back how everything was, just as Nate left it.

I check the closet. I check under the bed. Through the drawers. Under the pillows. Behind the bed, the fridge, anywhere I can think of, telling myself it's where I'd hide some diamonds.

And yet, I find nothing.

With my hands on my hips, inflating my stomach like my father always did when he'd be piecing together evidence in his home office, I look around completely stumped.

"This is some bullshit," I whisper. My words are loud enough apparently that I don't hear the door separating me from the hotel hallway opening. No snapping of the lock. Nothing. It isn't until the lights flip on that I know I'm busted.

"What the fuck?" I know it's Nate instantly by the gravel in his voice.

"Well," I throw my hands in the air, "this is rather awkward, wouldn't you say?"

And then, the fight begins. Fists fly in zig zags. Very few connect from either of us. I land a shot to the chest, with Nate staggering back. He uses the wall behind him to regain his balance. In that instance, he sends me flying into the door separating our rooms, closing it behind me, with a swift straight kick to the chest.

"Fuck," I groan.

Nate charges at me, lunging at me, and I use a wrestling move I've used quite frequently. A running knee to the side of the head. Nate lands on the floor but I notice he's not exactly lying on it. There's a bit of a divide between his chest and the floor. On my hands and knees, I lean my head down a bit more and I see what that divide is.

It's of the diamond kind.

I flip him over and grab the stash but Nate grabs my hand and thinking quickly, my skull meets his, not once but twice. He's out and I grab the diamonds once again. Sliding them into my coat pocket, I step out of his room and into the hallway, where I take off, running as fast as I can as the realization that I'm wearing a mask washes over me.

Taking the back stairwell, I run while fire takes my lungs, igniting my legs in flames, but I don't stop. I can't stop.

I have to keep going even as I reach the world outside. I run, disappearing into the crowded streets, not removing my mask until I have a sense of safety.

It's a small one, but I take it.

1.2

I return to the hotel, finding it surrounded by police. I'm without a mask and everything else I deem as robbery gear, but I still have another pickle that I didn't think through.

I know I was seen going into my room but not coming out.

Shit.

Pulling out my burner phone, I send a text to Vincent. I know he's not going to be happy but when desperate times call for desperate measures, you have to roll with the punches.

"Problem," I say.

It doesn't take long to receive a response.

"Call me."

Shit.

I see police talking to the receptionist and concierge. The manager is there, as well. They all look shaken up. Even with the 5-0 nearby, I make the call.

It rings once and that's it.

"Yeah?" Vincent's voice makes me cringe. He's already annoyed.

"Do we have anyone looking for work while I'm here?"

"What kind of work?"

I slip into the elevator, seemingly undetected. For now.

"In the electrical field. Video footage, mainly."

"Elaborate."

I roll my eyes before making sure the coast is clear and getting into the nitty gritty of tonight's proceedings.

Another sigh.

"Go to your room and wait. I'll be back in touch with you. Give me ten minutes," said Vincent. "If that."

I say nothing else, going into my room as instructed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I stare at the door separating my room from Nate's. It's fully closed but I can't help wondering if my rival was able to tell the cops anything.

You need to get out. Pack your shit and go.

I shake my head, in an attempt to clear it of any thoughts.

Vincent told you to stay put. He'll take care of it. Help is on the way.

I take a few deep breaths, as I'd read doing such an exercise can reboot your nervous system and ease any growing anxiety. Deep breath in and slowly exhale. Repeat three times.

I feel a calm crawling over me.

But then, there's a knock at my door.

Do not panic. Do not panic.

Another knock.

Fuck me.

I stand from my bed, slowly. Questioning my mental state, I step towards the door as a third knock occurs. My burner phone begins to go off. I check the peephole. A cop stands on the other side.

More deep breaths. Inhale, exhale. Repeat just as the phone rings, along with the knocking.

I exhale once more before opening the door.

"Yes?" I ask, hopefully giving my best confused performance. "May I help you?"

"Good evening, sir. I'm Detective Hensley. I'd like to ask you a couple questions if you don't mind."

The detective chews way too hard on his gum.

My phone buzzes again.

"What can I do for you, Detective?" I ask, squeezing the burner as tightly as I can.

"How long have you been here tonight?"

Play it cool, homie.

"I've been in and out," I say. "I'm only here until tomorrow morning."

"Why's that?" Hensley asks.

"I'm a pro wrestler," I state, matter-of-factly.

"That's a real profession?"

I shrug, "It pays the bills. But why are you asking me this?"

"You didn't hear anything over here next door?"

I shake my head. "No. Is there something going on that I should know about?"

"Your neighbor was attacked in his room."

"Oh, shit!" I cry, hoping I'm giving the type of Oscar worthy performance that'd give Daniel Day-Lewis a run for his money. "That's insane. Jesus," I exhale, telling myself not to lay it on too thick. "I hate that but I honestly didn't hear anything. If I did, I would've jumped in and helped. My neighbor, that is."

"That's nice of you."

"I do what I can."

"Can anyone corroborate what you do? That you wouldn't be here, or that you'd be in and out?"

My phone buzzes again.

"Yeah, of course."

His phone goes off, as well. "I'll be right back," Hensley says. "I need to take this."

"I'll be right here," I say, before closing the door behind me. My phone buzzes and I answer it. "Hello?"

"What the fuck are you doing?" It's Vincent. He's pissed. "You ask for my help and then you don't answer?"

"I had a fucking detective at my door," I whisper. "Excuse me for trying to keep it cool. But let's cut to the chase. Did things get taken care of?"

"Yeah you're straight."

"Well, that's good news."

There's a long pause. I have a million different things racing through my mind, all wondering how he's going to react.

"Whatever you want to ask, go ahead and do so," I finally say. "I can tell there's something on your mind."

"You got what I sent you to get?"

"Yeah."

"I need to know how you managed to fuck up this bad. This isn't like you, Asher."

"I fucked up once in how many years?" I ask. "Exactly. And I got what you were after."

"Yeah but I've had to do a lot of extra work to cover your tracks. That's not the type of shit I want to do on a consistent basis if you catch my drift."

“This sounds like a threat and I’m telling you this isn’t a consistent thing. You know me. And you also know I don’t take kindly to being threatened.”

Vincent scoffs. “I’m taking your cut then. You want to make it up to me? I’ve already got a job lined up. You want it?”

“Well since you’re taking my cut,” I sigh, “I don’t have much of a choice.”

“See you when you get back,” and the line goes dead. I drop the phone to the bed and exhale sharply.

You can’t keep doing this. You’re going to have to get out sooner rather than later.

There’s a knock at my door. The detective announces himself.

But you need to clean up your mess first. No more mistakes, Asher. No more.

“And that’s the truth,” Asher said, though the story he provided Carter was a total fabrication, “and I’m sticking to it.”

“If you say so,” his agent said. “So, are you going to sign the contract and make it official, decline, or are you going to remain in limbo while having second thoughts?”

Asher looked at the contract once again. It was for a first round match within what the XWF called the March Madness tournament, where the winner would be crowned the King of XWF.

“So this Kieran King guy,” Asher began, “he’s won this tournament two years in a row?”

Carter nodded. “Yes. And to my knowledge no one has ever done that in the company’s history. And he’s the current Universal Champion.”

Asher snickered. “I’ve been Champion of the World, but the whole fucking universe? That sounds sick.”

“Well let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said. “This would only get you in the door. Based on your history, I believe it’s safe to assume you want to get to that point.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“So, this contract would put you against Latoya Hixx and someone named El Anderson.”

“I’ve not heard of them,” shrugged Asher.

“Maybe you haven’t,” said Carter, “but they’re well versed in the industry, so to speak.”

Asher nodded, then leaned forward, snatching the pen up and signing his name on the dotted line. He then looked up at his agent and said, "Sounds like I’ve got some homework to do. No turning back now.”

“You can only move forward.”

So, this is the XWF?

Well to all my fans, do not adjust your screens, but feel free to turn the volume up to eleven. Your eyes do not deceive you.

Asher Hayes has arrived.

And those who don’t know me, all I need is fifteen minutes to make sure you never forget me.

Bell to bell, I’m one of the best to ever do this. I know that I am, and while it may seem like I don’t need to prove anything, I feel I need to. I’ve gotta bring truth to my statements.

I gotta ensure these words don't write some fantasy story. These words must become the new reality check to change the landscape of the XWF. These words must become anthems, that'll stand the test of time, long after myself and the XWF are gone.

I've watched the product for quite some time. Well over the last year and even when I look elsewhere, I always find myself back in my seat watching Warfare or Anarchy. And I've been hearing about this tournament. About these kings.

And what better way to make an impact than by marching straight into the madness the XWF provides?

What better to reshape this company than by coming and staking my claim to Kieran's crown, and then going all the fucking way? I don't doubt myself. I've lived too long and I've overcome my own self destruction more times than I care to count in order to not chase the greatest challenges provided by the greatness wrestling promotions in this industry.

I refuse to fear anything this business has to offer. And with the XWF, it thinks outside the box.

Think about it.

My first match takes place on fucking ice. That's not something you hear about in most companies. How could I not love that? How could I not be drawn to that? I came into this business to become the best in the industry, not just in a company.

I've topped every promotion I've been in.

I need to be challenged. I need the adrenaline from a new crowd. The blood lust of another hungry locker room. If I don't get that here, I'm going to sure I wake you all the fuck up.

I'm not going to tell you all that you suck like your current King. I want the best out of you all, and that's why if El Anderson and Latoya Hixx don't bring it on the ice, I'm going to force it out of you. It's that simple.

Latoya, I've seen you. You're a fucking tank. You've got brute strength the likes not many have seen, and nobody can doubt your determination. It's like it flows through your veins and seeps out of your pores.

But then there's the downside to that. You can get overconfident. You get over eager, thinking you have it all figured out and then what happens? It backfires in your face and you're left with two things you didn't want.

You're left with a loss, and from that loss you're left with doubt. Take it from someone who's been there. You can be on top, riding wave after wave, and then when you lose, you're toppled. You think you've lost it all and it takes you even longer to recover.

We've not encountered one another in the ring but I've been around a lot longer than you. With that said, I've seen them all, and I have to tell you that I've got you all figured out. You're going to get in some good licks and you're going to think you've got me right where you want me, and then, you'll make a mistake. And when you do, it's going to be all over.

You've yet to figure out a way to recover. You just give up and get pummeled into the mat. Unless you figure something out and figure it out quickly, you're going to be left with more than your tongue stuck to the ice.

And I think I'd rather just fight you, Latoya.

There is just something about this El Landerson I'm not quite comfortable with. It has nothing to do with him wearing a mask but it's the fact that his birthday is April 1st, 2025.

Now I'm no mathematician but something about that just doesn't add up. If I'm expected to walk out on the ice and not only kick your ass but punt an infant, then you win XWF. You've taken this sport to a whole new level. A level I may never reach.

And if this high flying masked baby comes out and overcomes its own overconfidence to take out not only Latoya but myself as well, then that overgrown sperm noodle needs to be tested for steroids.

I guess this place really does just sign anyone. From what I remember the XWF was known as the place where the big boys played with each other. Now that times have changed, it's open to anyone and everyone. The sky's limit. The chaos is strong within the ropes, and I thrive off that.

But the time for talking is over. Time to put words to action, and boots to asses.

My name is Asher Hayes and prepare yourselves to hear my name the loudest once this thing is said and done.

Now how's that for an ice breaker?