



A Bullet In The Rubble

The opening statement was really just a bit of theater, Seymour Murphy's attorney explained in the moments leading up to trial. The Assistant District Attorney would stand up and give an impassioned speech about why guilt was sure and justice was needed to the fullest extent of the law. Then, he said, I'll get up and exercise my ability to negate everything a seasoned prosecutor says. Simple as that.

Seymour nodded along without any real need to understand. The logic of it wasn't hard to understand. What concerned him more was the fact that Legion, otherwise an upright and able-bodied soldier, pulled up lame the moment they were in the company of William Heaven and fell into an indolent posture.

His dog's sudden weariness induced a greater focus on his discovery that William, the man who sat directly next to him through the entire pretrial conference and his manager, had more than likely been operating behind his back like a thief in the night, maneuvering people in and out of his life. As a matter of consequence, Maya had now been excised. James Evans and Giovanni Aries stood on either side of him. The people William wanted against the people he *didn't* want.

All those little movements, neatly decided by the will of one man. Who comes and who goes. Losing people was a skill that Seymour was forced to master at an early age, and that was *before* his parents divorced officially or he lost anybody to the inevitability of death. That it happened didn't particularly bother him. It was the matter of choice that he felt he no longer had the right to exercise.

And so all the while Nick McColligan gave his impassioned opening statement about being a born and raised Denver product, playing wiffle ball in the streets with other neighborhood kids and romanticizing that easy home run, Seymour was lost in thought over what the right course of action was. Had he been listening, he might have taken exception to being referred to as a menace to society. He was concerning himself with how right and wrong were such fickle extremes that he could not distinguish where William's place in each zone *really* was.

While McColligan lauded the prosecution's case as the easiest lobbed grapefruit over the middle of the plate a jury would ever swing away at, Seymour couldn't help but think deeper about those opposing forces and what he had seen as a result of their duality. There were no absolutes. Seymour saw a lot of good men go out the wrong way while doing the right thing. For his part, it occasioned him to think about Private Callahan. The way he died, what he left behind. What it really meant in the big picture.

By the time it was Joe Horowitz' turn to take a crack at addressing the jury, Seymour might as well not have been there at all. He stared straight down at the limp black sack of fur at his feet and sighed. Looking back, he wasn't so sure PFC Bondarenko was wrong about his conjecture that Callahan's life

was needlessly forfeit for little gain. *Somebody* was responsible for the bullet that should've been lodged in some loose rubble. Seymour felt as culpable as any party involved — and that was including the country that sent him to his death.

After Maya had come clean, it was only Seymour who was left to deal with the mess that was made. He tried to rationalize it away with simple reminders that William's involvement with his woman was not entirely unlike the government's godlike oversight and command of his own life in a time of war. The places he never wanted to visit again and the memories locked away in the safest of recesses came flooding with ease through the new cracks that destabilized the levee.

Seven years prior, Seymour lived under the easy acceptance that he might have no choice but to die for country. He didn't see any honor in it, nor did it trouble him. His act of submission made his life more bearable, the sights he had to see more sufferable. At any point, he accepted that a convoy he was traveling might be disrupted by an enemy rocket or a road bomb. And when it happened, the furthest thing from his mind was the question of who had set him down this path.

For a man who was so accustomed to having his very life put up for grabs in the most inhospitable environments, it was strange, then, that it took this line of questioning to unsettle him from acceptance.

The rabbit hole tunneled so far down winding elbow bends and bifurcating channels that he could only be brought to by the business end of Judge Eldridge's gavel.

"Mr. Horowitz, that's *enough*," hissed the interim Senior Circuit jurist. **"The jury will disregard Mr. Horowitz' remarks. I will see counsel in my chambers. Now."**

Finally conscious of his surroundings, Seymour's head perked up upon the imperious authority of the wooded punch. **"What just happened?"** he asked, unsure of anything.

William gave a small chuckle. **"Phase one of your attorney's plan to alienate the jury from the judge,"** he said, collecting his things. **"Letting them know that the case was essentially pled out before Judge Minor's passing makes this seem like a witch hunt. Even if it's not."**

They were exiled to the conference room of the Denver courthouse, waiting for Joseph Horowitz to rejoin them after his summoning to Judge Eldridge's chambers. Seymour Murphy knelt down on the floor, addressing a series of whimpers that Legion had emitted just moments before.

These were not the normal behaviors of a dog who always had the counterpoise that Seymour needed. He seemed a little bit down when they left the hospital, but since their day began, it multiplied exponentially. His lethargy was an unbreakable shield.

No truer love would Seymour ever know than this, that in his own time of need, he would find himself on the ground looking to pick up a member of his unit. The same way he'd spent his military career. Fixing instead of killing, doing his best to tend to a mortal wound.

"Are you alright today?" William asked, examining the titled spines of some legal encyclopedias on the shift. **"You haven't said much."**

"I never say much," replied Seymour, running the back of his hand from the handle of Legion's nose to his ear, concluding the movement with an affectionate scratch.

"Fair enough. Let me rephrase. It doesn't seem like your normal calculating quiet. It's less overtly aggressive, more distant," said William, not turning around. **"I know it's the second biggest day of the biggest week of your life. I'm just watching out for you."**

"Yeah, I'm fine," answered Seymour. **"It's been a weird week. An acquaintance of mine is dying. Maya and I are no longer together. I will fight for the World Title in less than a week. There's a lot more to think about than usual."**

Upon his answer, William turned away from the shelf. There was a slight delay between his thoughts. Seymour could almost feel him sorting through the Heaven lexicon for the right path to lead the conversation down.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Heaven with a sincere and fatherly tone to his voice. **“About all of that. Truly, I am. Did she give you a reason?”**

Out of everything Seymour put forth, he found it interesting that the termination of his relationship was the thing Heaven focused on. It could’ve been a coincidence, but it was almost as if it was a question targeted for recon intel.

“No,” he said, opting to not clue William in on the fact the split was ultimately his choice. **“That’s okay, I didn’t need a reason. Not my decision to make.”**

“It may not be your decision, but it does affect you, doesn’t it?” William stepped forward in neat paternal strides alongside the long end of the mahogany table. **“It’s alright. It doesn’t make you less of a man if it does. Even tough guys can have their goats gotten.”**

Seymour didn’t feel great about the split, but it wasn’t a crippling blow, either. He was a man who preferred consistency to passion, and as such, it was really the changing of the situation that bothered him. But he would learn, as he always did, how to navigate a new world while mitigating the damage.

“I know,” answered Seymour coldly, **“I simply don’t have room to let it have an effect. I need to focus on other things now.”**

“You have a gift, son,” replied William, crouching down next to his client. **“If you mean that, that level of compartmentalization is *truly* your superpower. There aren’t many men out there with the wherewithal to throw that kind of stress to the wayside.”**

Where William may have seen it as a learned skill, the reality is it was as innate a mechanism in Seymour as drawing air was. His time in the service only enshrined it. People would come and people would go. Maybe even William, one day. Seymour needed to be his own constant variable by which others adjusted their own realities to.

Seymour looked up at William, stone faced, and simply gave him a tilt of acknowledgement. Legion gave a vibratory groan that rattled his ribs. **“I’ve never had it in me to worry about things like that too much. Seems pretty insignificant.”**

And to Seymour, it was. It was never the sweeping, life changing events that ended up crippling him. He didn’t shed a solitary tear over his mother’s passing. The real injury was in the details. He even tolerated the split with Emma well, until he was served with legal paperwork. When he considered the truth of what he said, even *he* was taken aback by how much he believed it.

“You know, I could’ve given this chance to James or Giovanni and felt good about it. In my career, I’ve never been so blessed with an embarrassment of riches like the one I’ve got now. Through this group of men, all things are possible.” Like the underwing of a dragon, William’s praise had a funny way of feeling more warm than it had any right to.

“Have you asked yourself that question, Seymour?” William’s wintergreen breath permeated the air in his client’s personal space. **“Why you? James is a multi-time World Champion. Giovanni Aries might just be the most important wrestler to *never* win the big one. And yet, I’m pushing my chips to the center of the table on a guy who’s never seen the summit. Do you understand why it has to be you?”**

“No,” lied Seymour, **“I haven’t.”**

“Because of those intangibles that the other boys don’t have,” smirked William. **“That ability to compartmentalize...Seymour, James can’t do that. He’s the best at what he does, but the fact he’s**

not getting this chance? His hand wringing has probably already given him callouses. He can't tuck his feelings away in boxes the way he likes to project. And Gio? He lacks your drive and understanding. He's an agent of upheaval. I need — we need that. But success to that man is a reducing civilization to rubble and leaving it unclaimed so that the cockroaches can take up rule. You, Seymour, are the perfect storm to accomplish this task. They are a great many things. But they aren't Waylon Creek."

The high praise from William felt genuine. It was also something that Seymour desperately needed. So needy was he for this kind of praise that he wondered if the seeds of distrust had been sown by gardeners of questionable intent. It was a blind spot of his to *need* that kind of expression of belief.

"I know what has to be done," reaffirmed Seymour. **"You can trust me to get us there."**

"You have more than carried your burden," agreed William. **"But for our venture to be successful, all the players have to do their part. We need to be able to rely on the man next to us. If you don't do my part, you can't do yours. But if you don't do yours, my scope is more limited than it could be. Do you understand what I'm saying?"**

"Yeah," said Seymour, resisting his Army embedded call to give a hearty yes-sir.

"I know that today isn't any fun for you, and I'm sorry about that. But when we're looking at the end product, you're going to understand," promised Heaven, patting Seymour on the back with two authoritative knocks.

The cold steel in his fingers served as a reminder that he needed to trust the man next to him. He felt the etched in letters of own given Christian name — born into Buckhorn poverty to Catholic indigents, returned home from a sloppy war to become a suit's ultimate weapon.

This pep talk occasioned him to think about the man that might never get the credit for making this all possible. Billy Heaven Jr. had more than done his part, and yet William didn't so much as mention him.

"Is Billy okay?" asked Seymour, making solid eye contact with Legion. The question didn't come from a place of concern. It was a gauge.

"I'm sorry?" William stopped in his tracks, then turned around.

"Your son seems beat up," continued the client. **"He may not have much left in the tank."**

"Ah, well, that may be the case," replied William with an expiring blow through his nares. **"He's been medically cleared, but maybe there's some truth in that he doesn't have much left. Time will tell. If the spinal surgeon hadn't cleared him after our German excursion, then he'd be at home. But he insists on continuing with this dream."** He shook his head, making his way over to the window. Seymour noted that he seemed to be staring more at his own reflection trapped in the glass than at the lively city of Denver cast outside of it.

"Do you ever feel guilty?" He asked. **"He isn't ready, but he continues to fight. Taking the bullets for us."** It was admirable. There was something in Billy that reminded Seymour of a young Private he once knew who had been slain in the line of duty.

William summoned a sigh from the pit of his stomach and gave a nod. **"The thing a lot of people in this business don't understand is how cruel and sacrificial it can be all in the same breath."**

"So you do," probed Seymour, through a lens meant to catch Heaven off guard.

"The only thing I'll ever feel guilty for," began Heaven without missing a beat, **"is the name and status that boy inherited through me. Everything else, I have very little control over. The choice to continue on is his. He has the doctor's blessing. I can do nothing else about it."**

His answer seemed drenched in authenticity — in spite of the fact it appeared he *did* carry some guilt despite his bold claim. The young man in question was his son. The way Seymour understood the bond, a father was supposed to care for his son in that way, and even though his experience had been very different from his own paternal figure, he felt a little more weight lifted from him. He wondered if Legion wasn't actually just outright sick.

The door flung open, and in walked Horowitz, briefcase situated in his right hand. **"Gentlemen,"** he started, **"we've got about an hour to talk things through. Let's get to it, shall we?"**

That was Seymour's cue. He rose from the ground, giving Legion a prompting pat on the head, and gestured with his head towards the table where Horowitz had taken a seat. Heaven had taken up the space to his left. Seymour approached, lumbering, and sat across from his manager, with Legion languidly shifting on tired paws next to him.

"I just took the tongue lashing of a lifetime," said Horowitz, opening the clasps of his briefcase. **"But I think it was worth it to the extent it may have poisoned the jury against their agenda here. Which is important, Seymour, because the case was more or less dropped before the tragedy."**

"It was a hell of a show," said William, smirking widely. **"I think you accomplished your goal. So where do we go from here?"**

"The prosecution's first witness is the driver of the ambulance, some young guy named Connors — who, I might add, has contacted SCW legal about a settlement of some kind," Horowitz stated, giving a smug smile as he folded his hands across the table. **"That's dollarsign victimhood for you. Why not profiteer a little bit on the side after serving as a material witness?"**

"He's suing SCW?" Heaven cackled, face flushing with red humor as he looked at Seymour, shrugging his shoulders. **"Why?"**

"Deep pockets, most likely, but Seymour's little—" Horowitz paused in his tracks, **"— extrication of him didn't help that any. Probably some emotional distress claim. He wasn't *physically* injured, after all, was he?"**

"No," answered Seymour. He barely remembered what had occurred during the aftermath of the fight. It all happened so fast.

"Well then there you go," said Horowitz, plainly. Seymour noted how William opened up his cellphone, a black rectangle through which he seemed to almost control his surroundings by scrolling with his pointer finger. He imagined William calling in a drone strike from a touchscreen. He also imagined based on their recent conversation he could just as easily be checking in on his son. There was no way to know.

"After that, it'll be Seymour's turn to explain the event, and that's where this gets a little challenging, because what you did does *not* resonate well in the court of public opinion," explained the attorney, removing a stack of papers. **"What *does* have some currency is your decorated history as a United States veteran, and that's something I'm going to be calling on for some judicial sympathy, as well."**

"No," Seymour spoke forthright and adamantly, **"you won't."**

Horowitz nodded. **"I understand your hesitation. I also need *you* to understand that in the event you're found guilty here—"**

"He won't be," remarked Heaven, finishing up with the swift work of two thumbs. **"Not gonna happen. Unacceptable outcome."**

“If you’re found guilty, we’re going to need something to trade on. I’ve done my due diligence here. This particular jurist tends to take it easy on veterans,” Seymour’s attorney continued on without regard for William’s interjection. **“We may need to rely on that card.”**

“I said no,” repeated the honorably discharged First Lt., **“it won’t be mentioned. I won’t stand to gain a single thing from those years, and I mean that.”**

Seymour’s face was feeling flushed. He didn’t want it mentioned in any court or otherwise what he had to do to avoid an Iowan purgatory. It emanated from his gut, then quickly spread like wildfire up his neck. Legion must have detected a detonation. His lazy floor vacation quickly transitioned into a rapid jingling collar.

“Seymour, I hear you, but you *have* to trust me here—”

“What you’re not understanding here,” began Seymour, some extra bass in his voice, **“is that my service to the United States isn’t anybody else’s business. Now, I’ll let you do pretty much whatever you want, but I’m serious when I tell you I’d rather go to jail than use it to safeguard my freedom.”**

“It’s too late for that, Seymour. The *world* already knows,” the attorney reminded him. **“Waylon’s Wounded is a charity William has set up using *your* likeness because of your decorated history as a veteran. It can’t get much more public than that.”**

“William did what he had to do to mitigate a PR nightmare,” he clipped back with fire, unsure of whether or not that was even true, **“but this is very different. This is my choice. I don’t want it mentioned.”** The recency of his PTSD flashback reopened too many healing scabs to allow it. He wanted to get back to a time where he couldn’t see Callahan’s face. Where he didn’t have to think about all that had been taken from him.

But Horowitz wasn’t having it. He leaned forward, outstretching with palms up, as if to ask where the big deal was. **“Seymour, please. If I could just—”**

“NO,” he thundered, both hands colliding with the edge of the table. Legion barked, then thrust himself urgently over the arm of the chair into his partner’s chest. A single drag of canine tongue across his cheek reoriented him into a normal cadence of breathing. **“I said...*no*.”**

His outburst must’ve stunned Horowitz. Once Seymour was cognizant of his reaction, he noted that the criminal defense attorney enlisted to safeguard his right to assumption of innocence was tensed up and pushed back in his chair. His eyes were widened like he’d been the unexpected recipient of a couple hundred volts. Under other circumstances, he may have felt some remorse. But he was pushed.

William Heaven, on the other hand, seemed barely phased by the reaction. He simply looked up from his phone, gave Seymour a nod of acknowledgement, and then looked over at Joseph Horowitz with a kind and over-the-top smile.

“I don’t believe we’ll be needing that today, Mr. Horowitz, thank you.”

Horowitz didn’t say anything. He parsed through papers, red-faced, and began searching them over with his eyes, looking for a different route on the map to find an alternate route to the acceptable destination.

William Heaven spent the last fifteen minutes of their conference room time excavating what exactly prompted Seymour’s less than pleasant reaction to Joseph Horowitz.

In the final analysis, what he came up with was the certain fact that his service time was *his*. He had no desire to profit on it monetarily, and the fact that William had managed to swing it into a charity

project was about all he could take. The fact that it was, to some degree, publicly shared knowledge made him feel sick.

"Everybody loves a hero," said Heaven, showing a depth of understanding Seymour hadn't experienced before, *"until they see what it cost them to be one."*

William went on to tell Seymour that he was personally proud of what he had done, that he understood completely, and that it wasn't going to factor into any decision made today anyway.

"For reasons that I think will become quite clear," he reiterated. Seymour didn't know what that meant. But he trusted William, for some reason, when he said it.

As a result, he didn't ask any questions. He quietly sat until it was time to filter back into the courtroom for the impending trial.

And when they walked through the door, sticking out like a bruised thumb in the middle bench of the courtroom, sat the sinewy frame of Alex Desoubrais, accompanied by a man he didn't recognize. As Seymour took note of his surroundings, he could see the jury was inexplicably absent. His attorney and ADA McColligan were sharing a word with the judge.

"Nice of you to join us," bowed Heaven, as he passed Desoubrais. Seymour caught the distaste in the Chief Operating Officer's eyes before he averted his gaze and turned his attention to the man next to him. Heaven, however, was in different spirits. His smile went from ear to ear like a freshly cut throat. He was bleeding smugness all over the courtroom floor.

"What the hell is *he* doing here, anyway?" In a rare but tepid obscenity from the lips of Seymour Murphy, he couldn't help but wonder. He looked back at Alex, who caught a split second of eye contact with him as he listened to what his counsel was telling him.

"What he needs to do, I believe," sighed Heaven with a self-satisfied nod, **"for preservation purposes."**

"Mr. Murphy," called Judge Eldridge. **"If you would please stand."** There was no excitement in her voice. That must've been a good sign. And so he did as he was prompted. Legion opted to sit upright next to him, settling against his leg. William, remaining at his side, put his hands behind his head in silent delight. As Horowitz took his seat, he whispered something in his ear that only provoked a wry grin.

Her Honor gave him a grave, stern look before putting her glasses on and picking up a folded over packet of papers. **"Denver County EMS offered its services to Supreme Championship Wrestling for the use of its ambulance and staff on the twenty-eighth of November, of the previous calendar year, wherein certain agreements were reached between both parties. Fees, volunteer agreements, insurance liabilities. Very turgid reading,"** she said, shaking her head with a deflated giggle. **"Upon some information sharing between SCW's Mr. Alex Desoubrais, here today in his capacity as COO of the company and represented by corporate counsel, there are new developments, chief among them is the undeniable fact that DCEMS entered into an agreement and understanding that the ambulance provided could well be called into action during the course of the event. For whatever reason that may have been, it appears that Denver County acted in bad faith in filing a criminal complaint, insofar as SCW and its contractors are covered by legal waiver under indemnity clauses agreed upon by both parties. Therefore, the fact that the ambulance was subsequently damaged does *not* fall at the feet of Seymour Murphy. It rests squarely before the legal representatives of Denver County."**

There was a small sense of relief to go with a greater sense of concern. Seymour couldn't help but feel as though William had some form of preexisting knowledge that it was coming down the pipes.

“Mr. Murphy,” continued Eldridge, dropping the packet with a slap against judicial oak, **“the court reviewed this contract last month and did *not* deem it to be a precluding factor for charges to be filed. In light of discovery here today, I am left without any choice in the matter. Now, I don’t know how you’ve earned it, but you’ve got one heck of a set of eyes watching out for you. If the presence of Mr. Desoubrais should tell you anything today, it should be that he and the company felt it prudent to present to the court today to clarify the fine print. As such, I have no choice but to dismiss this case *with prejudice*.”**

“Hallelujah,” quietly snickered Heaven, patting Horowitz on the back. **“Thank god for the American justice system.”**

“Before I conclude this matter, I would like to pose a challenge to *you*, Mr. Murphy,” she continued, lifting the gavel from its place. **“This doesn’t necessarily have to be so much a goodbye as it does a ‘see you next time’. The next time you find yourself in a similar position in the great state of Colorado, I would advise you to choose your actions a little more carefully. You may not be so lucky.”**

And just like that, she drove the final nail into the matter altogether with a firm strike of the gavel’s face against its platform.

“Case dismissed.”

And just like that, months of mounting tumult were dismissed, in no small part due to the largesse of Alex Desoubrais. While William was congratulating himself, Seymour was left to wonder what had really transpired today.

The handshake that came in from Joe Horowitz was more nervous than anything else. **“Congratulations,”** he said, looking down, then hurriedly turning back towards his briefcase. William Heaven shook his hand and gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” said Heaven, **“I’m sure you would’ve tried an excellent case.”**

Seymour still wasn’t sure what exactly had happened when he walked out the open double doors of the courtroom, Legion trotting only a few feet behind him. He couldn’t shake the idea that the surprise of the intervention was entirely lost on William. But something in the details of the whole ordeal didn’t sit right with him. It felt cheap.

“I told you not to worry,” reminded Heaven, all smiles, stretching his arms out in a hyperbolic yawn. **“The truth always comes out.”**

He should have felt relief. As Alex and his counsel left the courtroom, they walked directly past without so much as a word to share. Seymour’s eyes followed the pair as they walked down the hall in quiet discussion.

“Awfully kind of Alex to do some information sharing on our behalf today.” William’s tone quickly devolved a sharp sarcastic edge. Something resembling hatred.

“Yeah.” Seymour’s blunt response was a shadow of anger that was emerging from the shadow of confusion. **“It doesn’t make sense.”**

“It makes plenty of sense in theory,” answered William, studying Seymour’s face as unblinking eyes tracked Alex and his counsel until they disappeared behind the door to the conference room. **“You’re a rising star. It doesn’t do the company any good to have you standing trial before a major pay per view event, now, does it?”**

The short wick sparked by William was quickly stomped out by Seymour Murphy. **“That makes even less sense,”** he said, turning his attention towards William. **“We haven’t seen eye to eye for a moment. It’s been that way since I interrupted him in Japan.”**

“If I were with you then, I’d have told you that sometimes you’ve got to take special care not to upset the powerbrokers,” said William, with a nod. **“There’s nothing he can do about it now. It’s over. And *our* time is now. All he’s done is drawn us a shortcut map to the destination. Now come on,”** he added, patting Seymour on the shoulder. **“Let’s get some food. My treat. Court hearings make me ravenous.”**

Seymour took a moment to mull that over. When he thought about their history together for the last ten months, it truly didn’t make any sense for Alex to step up for him. There was an angle, and compliance would need to take a backseat in earnest to satisfy his curiosity.

“In a minute,” said Seymour, gesturing to Legion. **“I need to have a conversation with Alex. I have some questions.”** Without further prompt, Legion led the way, his nails gently clicking down the hall.

“I don’t know how that’s going to serve you, son. I’d rather you focus. Trust me, kid. I’ve been in this business a long time,” William urged. **“That’s not going to help matters any in terms of relations. What’s done is done. Come on. Let’s get outta here.”**

In William, Seymour had found a ready replacement for the military authority he used to take orders from. It was ingrained in him to rely on an overriding directive from a place above him to fulfill his purpose. But for some reason, Seymour couldn’t abide. He needed to know why.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” said Seymour, turning away from William.

“Alright, *alright*,” William shuffled in front of Seymour with two hands up, the way a frightened pedestrian might try to stop a truck. **“Let me come and officiate it, at least, and make sure he doesn’t try anything funny.”**

“Wait downstairs,” uncharacteristically ordered the number one contender, briskly sidestepping William without a second thought to head down the hall after Legion.

“Can I just—” William sighed, knowing well it was too late to stop it.

When Seymour opened the door, he let Legion waltz in first. The black lab that served as his herald was enough to put an abrupt stop to the conversation. And then, Seymour lumbered in, eyes going straight to Alex, who looked up from a dense stack of paperwork through some reading glasses.

“I need a word,” said Seymour, cutting straight to the point. **“Alone, please.”**

“Allen,” nodded Alex, a gesture that Seymour’s terms were acceptable. Seymour watched as the man detached from the seat, giving him one last look before settling on the safety of the matter at hand. For his part, the executive officer was lacking in any form of distress or concern. He was at *worst* cushioned by the neutrality of the courthouse.

Before the attorney left the room, Seymour was already pulling out the seat across from Alex, Legion, dutiful as ever, slumped down next to him, closely monitoring Seymour’s movements. Maintaining his poise, the professional wrestling icon removed his glasses, folded them by the arms, and rested them off to the side.

Once the door was closed and they were left to their business, Alex rested a pair of folded hands on the table. **“What can I do for you?”**

“It’s always a pleasure to see you, sir,” started Seymour, straight-faced, tone soaked in mockery.

“So you just wanted to say hello,” replied Alex. Seymour resented the fact that he couldn’t be intimidated. He was no longer a professional fighter by trade, but there was plenty of fight in the tank. His contests now just happened in another arena altogether. Seymour should’ve been able to relate. Instead, it filled him with hate.

“You can start by telling me what that display in there was all about,” he sternly responded to his direct superior. **“I may not know much, but it seems to me that you probably could’ve shut this whole thing down months ago.”**

Affirmatively, Desoubrais responded with a nod. **“You are exactly correct, and we would have. We were obviously aware of the charges when they were brought. Your representation was contacted by the corporate office. We were told the matter on your end was concluded.”**

An obvious oversight, thought Seymour. The matter had been dealt with almost in the immediate aftermath. **“It was dealt with, the day after I did it. I was booked, charged, and then at the arraignment, the judge agreed that it would be best to drop it pending my paying for all damages. And then he inexplicably died a month later.”** Seymour shook his head, recounting the chaos that led to the reopening of the scab. **“Must’ve been lost in translation.”**

“The last correspondence we had with your representative, William Heaven,” sighed Alex, appearing hesitant to divulge, **“was in late February. He was very clear when they reached him that the matter was handled. It was only through the ambulance driver’s attempt to file a civil suit against us that we were even made aware that this was still a pending matter.”**

There was no cause Seymour could find to make sense of that. He immediately dismissed the notion altogether without taking any time to consider it. **“So I’m supposed to just believe that you had my best interest while William was prepared to throw me under the bus? Forgive me if I don’t buy it,”** he stated through a clenched jaw, irritated at the idea that William would risk his reputation. The problem was he couldn’t entirely discredit it, considering recent history. He tried his best to push it off to the side and stand in support of his commanding officer.

“I’m just giving you the facts as I understand them out of respect,” countered Alex. **“I didn’t say William threw you under the bus. You did. There is obvious room for misunderstanding.”**

“Respect?” Seymour rejoined with obvious avoidance. **“You’ve done nothing but show me the exact opposite. You’ve hated me since the moment I set foot in this company.”**

“In my current capacity, I seldom have room to let petty feelings like hatred influence decisions and policy,” said Alex, cocking a brow. **“I had no reason to hate you when you came here. I didn’t know you.”**

“The first conversation you and I had, you called my mask ‘simple’,” the man known as Waylon Creek reminded him. **“Since then, it’s been nothing but problems.”**

“The first conversation you and I had concluded with the threat of violence from you.” Desoubrais leaned forward. His demeanor, as calm as ever. **“Some of that threat has come to fruition.”**

“You have cause to believe me when I speak now,” replied Seymour, never taking his eyes off Alex, **“so at least we’ve reached that understanding. It hasn’t done anything to dissuade you from plaguing us with your agenda.”**

“And what agenda is that?” Alex coolly questioned. **“The agenda to not have our talent driven into walls and powerbombed through barricades? My job is to keep things running smoothly and provide the very best competition we reasonably can. I can’t do that with injured talent.”**

“I’m talking about the agenda to limit my opportunities in this company. I’ve *never* been beaten one on one,” said Seymour, clutching his tags under the cover of his pocket. **“Not *once* in almost a year. And yet, I have to take this...*this*...”** he dropped his free hand with some authority onto the table, nauseated by the fact he needed to spew forth, **“*this child’s* Trios Contract that I didn’t rightly earn, because if I didn’t, I wouldn’t *ever* have gotten this chance. Why do you think that is?”**

Alex shook his head. **“Despite your misguided belief, you haven’t been denied anything. You’ve only grown in stature. You’ve main evented several Breakdowns. You’ve been in high profile matches in major international events. That’s the *dream*. But while we’re on the subject of Billy, what becomes of him now that he’s less than one-hundred percent?”**

The question of what was to become of Billy was not his business, nor was it something he was emotionally invested in. **“This is a cruel business. If you don’t have what it takes, there’s a good chance you could end up hurt. You know better than I do,”** Seymour remarked, unblinking.

“It is,” began Alex with a nod, **“and I also know a debilitating injury when I see one. Now I wonder, how do you think Billy has come to be medically cleared? And what is to be gained by his continued competition?”**

It wasn’t for the hands to wonder or reason it out. Seymour felt a little for the kid — but this wasn’t his primary focus. Far from it.

“Maybe he just has a whole lot of heart,” said Seymour, brushing off the lapel of his suit. He felt restricted in its formal thread.

“Yeah, maybe,” nodded Alex, **“and *maybe* somebody stands to gain something from his incapacity.”**

The sharp look from Seymour would’ve cut through a stone, but it didn’t budge Alex. **“I don’t like your implication.”**

“And I don’t take any pleasure in conducting internal investigations over medical clearance,” Desoubrais bit back, **“but should I find that any of his records have been fudged, altered, or are otherwise illegitimate—”**

“You’ll, what, strip me of another Title? This has *nothing* to do with me.” Solid eye contact now from Legion. Seymour could feel his hazel orbits trying to pierce his building rage. It didn’t work. **“As always, this has to do with your continued fear of what might happen should I take this company’s top prize.”**

“That’s not true. I’ve been very clear about how I feel about your talents, in a lot of cases in front of capacity crowds,” returned the executive, refusing to escalate in tone. His resolve to remain professional continued to frustrate and infuriate. **“Whether or not I appreciate your associates is another matter entirely. I would suspect that the other matter would be something you’re unaware of entirely.”** He then paused, making dead eye contact with Seymour.

“Words, words, words. It has little to do with what you say,” he said, protecting himself against Alex’s logic. **“Billy is a smokescreen issue. The truth is, you’d have to go back decades to find an example of that level of dominance being deliberately passed over in this company. And then you have the guts to speak ill of William to me? Make it seem like he’d endanger his own son for his own gain? As far as I can tell, William is the only reason I’m getting a shot.”**

“In the immediate sense? Yes,” admitted the COO, **“but I can assure you, you had been noticed. A big part of what I do is measure performance and results. It was only a matter of time.”**

Seymour could feel himself becoming progressively more heated as the conversation went on, and the less Alex reacted, the more flushed he felt. It was at that moment that he realized what incensed him about the Canadian Heartbreak Kid, and it had to do with how William labeled their conflict. There were now more questions than ever as to whether or not his terms were trustworthy.

“And yet you fail to realize that almost everything begins and ends with *you*. It’s always an excuse and a promise. Tomorrow simply wasn’t good enough anymore. That’s why we’re at war, Alex.

Legion's heightened awareness at the mention of the word 'war' resulted in two paws like grappling hooks over the ledge of his thigh. It was exactly what Seymour had been trained to think by William Heaven — that they were involved in a constant state of battle, and that the fallout of their attacks was always meant to be laid at the doorstep of Alex Desoubrais.

Alex, for his pattern of passing over Waylon Creek to give opportunities to lesser athletes.

Alex, for his refusal to heed the words of a man who had decades of experience in the business.

Alex, who placed them in an unforgiving steel cage with four bitter rivals to attempt to stop their momentum.

If it was battle formations Alex was asking for, then it was battle formations he got. And yet the taken aback expression on his face suggested he wasn't going to return them. **"If you haven't noticed, I'm not at war, nor will I be drawn into one. My only interest lies in protecting the vital interest of this company. Nothing more, nothing less,"** he answered plainly.

"Then why make yourself such an enemy?" A couple of extra decibels carried Seymour's voice through the air. *Enemy*. That was the operative terminology he had been missing. Enemy. And it was apt. Alex had the distinction of being labeled an enemy by the man who directed traffic for the Fall of Man, and now that was the only way Seymour was capable of seeing him. An adversary who carried the objective of suppressing his influence. A target.

"It's very simple, really. I'm not." Alex shrugged. Being a statement Seymour was indoctrinated against, there was little that could be done to change his. **"An enemy does what they can to hurt you. I've done my best to be fair to you while also setting limits. If you look at the facts at hand, I think you'll see you've always been playing on a level playing field. That's part of why I'm here today."**

In spite of the stress he was under, Legion detached from Seymour's lap — something that went against Legion's programming. The loose jingle of his tags flopping against the metal clasp of his collar nimbly chimed as he walked around the table.

"I don't know why you're here," said a seized up Seymour, feeling the threat of anxiety coming in like a sudden drone strike, **"but I'm more convinced now than ever that you *are* my enemy. It's the only truth there is."**

There was very little Alex would be able to do to change that. Seymour rose up from his seat, tilting his head to the side as he watched Legion round the corner, stop abruptly, and then sniff for danger. He put his snout to the floor, sweeping in whistling inhalations. Attempting to smell sulfur where the Devil had been. When he was sure that the coast was clear, he moved, chest to the floor, towards Alex.

Seymour knew that Legion was loyal to him with reckless abandon. The way he moved towards Alex was a slow, predatorial stalk, the way a wolf might move closing on a kill. Alex took note of it, watching as the service dog slinked closer and closer, looked up at Seymour without any nerves, and then back to the dog.

"Here, boy," urged Seymour, adding a triplet of taps to his leg to prompt him to return. But it was as if the dog didn't hear him at all. A groan emanated from Legion's chest. By the time he was a foot away, Seymour was panicked.

He worried sometimes that Legion *might* actually bite another human being after receiving Seymour's telepathic reservations. He rose from his seat to put a stop to it before his partner did something he couldn't take back. **"Legion,"** he ordered, **"now."**

And then, he lunged himself forward, both front paws leaving the ground towards the edge of the table, and torpedoed the center of his rhinarium towards Alex's hand.

“Legion!” yelled Seymour, heart alight with panic. He felt sick. He was sure that Legion had buried his incisors into Desoubrais’s hand for the purpose of turning it to meat ribbons. The way he lunged forward, he could only assume it was a done deal. He closed his eyes tight, in fear of the damage that awaited him in the tangible realm.

But when he didn’t hear a yell, he opened his eyes. Legion only sniffed at his hand. Then, he gave the webbing over Alex’s thumb the smallest of licks before self-ejecting from the table and returning to Seymour’s side.

Alex stood up from his seat. He gave the Labrador the hint of an old, wise smile — perhaps a return of respect. Then, he stepped forward.

“I know this business like the back of my hand, and believe it or not, I was at one point the thirty-year old young buck with the world at my fingertips and people in my ear, too,” he said, calmly. As Seymour looked down at his dog, he felt a rush of confusion sweep over him. **“I may not know everything, and I won’t presume to know what’s best for you. But just know that if there’s anything you can be sure of, it’s that I’m not your enemy.”**

Dumbfounded and wind taken out of his sails, Seymour resigned himself to a measure of defeat. There were a lot of questions he had about the Chief Operating Officer, and Alex himself answered exactly none of them. They had been answered, however, in one swift moment by a dutiful and perceptive canine tongue.

Legion settled his head under a prone hand and looked up. **“You know my history. My background,”** he spoke to Alex, but he was really speaking to both parties who remained in the room.

“I do,” admitted the Canadian Heartbreak Kid with a solemn nod. His choice to stop there and not offer any input seemed genuinely respectful to Seymour.

“Then you must understand that my enemy isn’t my enemy because of any real choice I had.” The truth of Seymour’s words as he locked eyes with Legion, dewy eyes flickering under fluorescent lights, reattached him to his purpose. **“If what you say is true, it still doesn’t matter. I will do what I have to do to get it done.”**

“There’s always a choice,” Alex firmly opined. It was the second time within a week he heard that phrase, the first time coming from the cyanotic, dying lips of Roland Hill. The words perked Seymour’s head up. **“But do what you think you have to. I can’t stop you.”**

Seymour looked at Alex with a sincere look. **“No. You can’t.”** Where there should have been a handshake, Seymour gave him a subtle nod. And that was it. Legion led the way to the door, and Seymour followed, head less clear than when he entered.

“One more thing,” called out Alex as he stood at the threshold of the doorway. Seymour didn’t turn around, only stopped to receive. **“I am the Chief Operating Officer, and I will warn you to proceed with caution. What you did last November endangered both the company, the health of yourself, two other athletes, and your own future. It will *not* be tolerated moving forward. Do you understand?”**

It went against the nature of his understanding with William to accept those terms. But just the same, given the circumstances, he felt the only reasonable response was a simple nod before closing the door. Whether he meant it or not.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Seymour took a moment to stop and take it all in. He was safe from the hand of justice for now. But the bar had been raised. He knelt down, fixed Legion’s bandana, and rubbed his head.

“I understand what you see, but Legion, it doesn’t matter, alright? We move forward with the plan. We stick it out. That’s all there is to it.”

Legion tilted his head, then gave Seymour a lick to the left side of his cheek. A sign he understood. Even if he didn’t like it. Even if Seymour was less than convinced himself.

It was his lot, it seemed, to see others sacrifice so that he could live. Billy Heaven Jr. wasn’t so much William’s son as he was another example of the sacrifices that needed to be made. Seymour now saw how Billy had been maneuvered into a situation just like the one Bondarenko posed Callahan had been placed in, and all so that the ultimate goal might be actualized.

Seymour let out the tiniest hint of a chuckle as he thought about the irony. **“I think that arrogant ass may have actually had a point.”**

He reached into his pocket once more and felt the tags, sighing deeply, remembering the path, and desperately wanting it to be the right one.

Everything else, as far as trust went, would have to be tomorrow’s problem.

“I suppose we should be thanking you,” *says the voice of William Heaven over a black screen.*
“Without you, none of this would be possible.”

When the picture fades into focus, we see the frame of the nearly sixty year old William Heaven sitting back in a leather chair, holding a wine glass, the halfway line met with Rosé. In the background, the fireplace is lit. There is a chair facing away from the camera. The hulking shoulder we see over the end can belong to only one man.

“I suppose it would be reductive to offer you a thank you. After all, the beating of a lifetime seems like a fairly disingenuous token of appreciation to extend. But just the same, I only feel like it’s appropriate. At the end of the day, it’s only through Xander Valentine that we stand at the precipice of this new era I’ve promised.”

William takes a shortened sip from his glass, then places it on the oak stand next to him.

“A couple of weeks ago, Xander made the remark that this has come to fruition thanks to the triad of himself, Amelia Blythe, and my son Billy Heaven and their triumph through the Trios tournament. And in the immediate sense, that may seem true, but I’m also not referencing the immediacy of the moment. The truth is that the Trios contract won by my son was just the hammer. It’s actually your entire essence, Xander, that will be the final nail in your coffin.”

Through a smile, William leans forward, looking dead into the center of the lens.

“Imagine the wrestling world, for a moment, *without* Xander Valentine. It’s not so easy to think about. That’s what happens when the world is exposed to a literal tour de force like the Executioner. They become synonymous with their field, their very spirit becoming one with it. The moment he came to Supreme Championship Wrestling, there was no going back. He went on a run in the biggest wrestling company in the world that wouldn’t come close to being replicated for two decades. He operated within this very company like a boot, and all who opposed him were insects. And try as they might, the best that wrestling had to offer could not escape the impending squish. There was simply no going back.”

He nods, picking up his glass, taking a drink as he extends his arm out and crosses his right leg over his opposite knee.

“For a time, you were allowed to exist as the apex predator that every wrestler feared. There was very little that could be done when you needed to impose your will. But as is often the case, that shift in the natural order of things provoked a profound change. And so it came to pass that your dominance gave way to new challengers and athletes, all knowing that they had to be at the very top of their game if they were even going to stand in the ring with you. They trained harder and zeroed in on what very few weaknesses you have. And then, finally, it happened that some were able to better you and *end* your very impressive run of absolute authority. It’s because of *you*, Xander, that Supreme Championship Wrestling is the international proving ground it is today. The biggest company in the world, with the single most important game changer of all time moving about its hallowed grounds. Always raising the level.”

The fire crackles in the background. We see the figure shift in the seat. A torso leans forward through the shroud of darkness. William looks behind his shoulder and smirks as he turns back.

“This company has been a veritable wellspring for the best talent in the world ever since. Not everybody sees the big picture like I do, but it’s actually your dominion that gave rise to the Syrens, the Selena Frosts, and yes, the James Evans’s that needed to push the limit to break through your barrier. And twenty years after you changed the game, you’re still here. And as much as I’d love to say you’ve lost a step in the ring, you haven’t. At nearly forty years of age, six foot ten and three-hundred plus pounds, you’ve somehow managed to maintain that aura. Twenty years strong, and you remain the head of the very house that Xander built. You are *truly* inimitable.”

Through a sigh, William’s face becomes a little more grave. Then, he leans forward in his seat.

“But just like all those years ago when your very arrival represented a tectonic shift in the landscape, history has repeated itself, only now it offers something very different than those who came for your throne the first time around. It brings to your doorstep a monster who has, just like you once did, cut a swathe through his competition like carving a cake, until finally, the collision we all knew was coming all along has been realized.”

William shakes his head, sighing.

“And so it’s here, a match with a man being lauded as the most dominant force to arrive in SCW since Xander Valentine. A man who has yet to be defeated in one-on-one action, and that’s *after* the influx of talent that followed your advent. Waylon Creek’s body of work speaks for itself. You already know about the coming of the LORD. I’m not here to spread the gospel,” *he laughs*, “and I’m not here as a missionary to spread the word. The simple fact of it is that people see this fight as Xander Valentine squaring off against a second coming of his very own dominant form. Even Xander said it himself. He boldly referred to Waylon as 2025’s Xander Valentine. But the eyes are the worst liars of them all, because what they *should* be seeing is Waylon Creek going toe to toe with the incomplete rough draft that saw him come to realization. Because while you were certainly the most dominant force of *your* time, something was wrong with the blueprint. And as an architect of greatness, I believe I know what that is, Xander. Any guesses from our resident legend?”

He taps his head a few times in sarcastic thought.

“It certainly isn’t age. After all this time, you move as well as you did at the peak of your powers. Four decades haven’t slowed you down. Fatigue? Please. There are no signs of weariness or terminal decline. No, it’s what you’ve discovered in that time that renders you vulnerable, because you had no choice in the matter of what you were to become, Xander. Not just a force, but a machine made for combat sports. Your physical tools were given to you, but it was also your well-documented case study of a background that shaped you for a life of fighting. You used both of

them well to aid you. But the trouble with being *born* a monster, Xander, is that the evolutionary pathway was actually set for you to become *human*. You had no choice to mortgage some of your dominance the very moment you gave into the spirit of humanity. That's where the flaws in the design are. Such a shame. Your preeminence may never have had to stop, if only you had a William Heaven to nurture what was best in you."

And suddenly, his face turns into a deadly seriousness. In the background, the figure stands up — his black tee fit forming to his body, hugging his shoulders, arms, and back — then, stands perfectly still.

"Waylon Creek, on the other hand, was born a man. He was born flesh and bone and would bruise just like anybody else. Coming in at a shade over six feet by the time he was seventeen years old, he took his own background and all that came with it and *worked* himself into the physical freak you know him to be today, through rigorous discipline and a compulsive desire to push his body until there was nothing left for him but raw, unholy power. And then, he submitted himself to the pursuit of cementing that monster in every which way a man could possibly perform. There are no restraints. There are no rules. There is only the choice that Waylon made all those years ago and continues to make every single week. You've seen it now for the better part of a year from afar. And now? You'll see it up close and personal in more than just a tag team match."

William only smiles, having another sip of his wine.

"When was the last time you were sawed in half by another man, Xander? Or the last time you got yourself pretzeled in a pump handle and had your three hundred pound carcass thrown around like you were weightless? That tag team match wasn't a warning. It was a prophecy on the brink of glorious fulfillment. I watched from the ringside as you were handled in ways that you've scarcely, if ever, been dealt with. And then when you, with all your strength and skill and a little bit of luck, *finally* managed to catch Waylon in the Fade to Black, were *still* incapable of doing anything. He choked his way out of it from a compromised position, Xander. Tell me. How did that make you feel?"

The crackle of the fire seems to suddenly intensify. The muscular figure in the back stretches his arms out, then drops them to his side. He shakes off his left hand like clearing ash from his arm.

"When you arrive at your answer, then you'll understand perfectly well why it had to be you that Waylon Creek topples to take top honors. There's simply nobody else that will do. Because while both Waylon and I have a great affinity for exactly what you are, we both feel it's in the best interest of the company that the old industry standard be done away with so that the *new* can thrive."

And with that, the owner of the broad body turns around. Waylon Creek stands, facing out of the shadows, and looks over at William. Two gleaming dog tags hang around his neck, flickering like the steel of a sword against the bright of flames. William turns to him and nods, then raises his glass.

"2005 was the year that changed the wrestling world. You started shaping this paradise then, and have since bent it to your will with deft hands. You did everything you could to preside over it with authority and power. But here? Now? In 2025? Different ballgame. The paradise of your own making betrays you..."

Waylon Creek steps forward, tags clanging together.

"...because it now belongs to him."

William smirks before dumping the last of the wine onto the floor. He gives a deep laugh as he steps off the camera, with Waylon's combat boots plodding against the floor the last thing we hear as we fade out.

