

*As far as Dexter was concerned, Taking Hold of the Flame was...passable.*

*He wasn't torn up about not winning the battle royal, far from it. He'd made it clear he never wanted to be in it from the beginning, but the thought of ripping SCW's top prize away from whoever held it and adding it to the list of 'distractions' he was 'holding hostage' for everyone else's sake at least gave him a reason to actually put forth some effort. Some might say he should be proud of his performance in the match and at least take solace in being eliminated by the former world champion, but there were only two things that really made the night worthwhile as far as Dexter was concerned:*

*Keeping the adrenaline title away from everyone else while exposing Veil as the hypocritical wannabe horror movie monster he was pretending to be, just as he promised.*

*And watching probably the only person on the roster he knew might actually be willing to hear him out rip the world championship away from not only Xander Valentine, but also his own puppeteered partners in the Fall of Man.*

*It had been hard to wipe the smirk from his face before his own match when Dexter had watched Giovanni Aries rise to the top, knowing the man had no plans on wanting there to even BE a world title match to main event SCW's biggest social media trap on the horizon. Truth be told, it aligned with his own plans perfectly, because Dexter retaining his own title tonight meant he had the grounds to refuse to defend it at Rise to Greatness. He had no clear-cut challenger after tonight, and he wasn't going to play along with CHBK's games to try and conjure one out of thin air for no other reason than to force him to set foot on a stage that only existed anymore as a glorified social media sensation instead of a night to celebrate the hard work you've put in as a professional wrestler.*

*Dexter Grant didn't need Rise to Greatness...Rise to Greatness needed Dexter Grant.*

*True, it was the biggest stage he could possibly ever ask for to try and spread the truth and save countless lives, but weighing the pros and cons at this point made it painfully clear the results weren't favorable. He knew people weren't going to listen, that they were so thoroughly enslaved by their screens that his hopes of getting through to anybody were becoming even slimmer by the day, and if they were so wrapped up in the celebratory atmosphere of Rise to Greatness that 99% of their focus would be on 'gramming' or 'vlogging' about their experiences instead of caring one iota about the wrestling happening right in front of them or even their own well-being, then his words were almost guaranteed to fall on deaf ears.*

*Still, he had to fight, because he knew the moment he stopped was the moment the human race was truly doomed to wipe itself out of existence.*

“Sorry things didn’t work out with the battle royal, Dexter.”

*Dexter glanced over to see his faithful flunky Wendell giving him an apologetic look. He almost wanted to scoff at the notion that he was upset about not winning a glorified orgy of clickbait and social media sensationalism, but he restrained himself.*

“I’m not that torn up about it,” *he shrugged as he adjusted his bag over his shoulder.* “I took down Veil and proved that he’s not the scary, terrifying monster who changes you and makes you question your own sanity like everyone else has been portraying him as. If there were any truth to that, then would I have been able to even walk out for that battle royal and act like nothing happened?”

“I suppose not,” *Wendell shrugged, seeing the logic.*

“Exactly,” *Dexter nodded.* “If you ask me, people like ‘The One’ and Deanna Frost? They either did it to themselves because they’re just that weak-willed, or it’s all some big publicity stunt to garner sympathy for whenever they do finally ‘grace’ SCW audiences with their return to the sound of tweets and posts welcoming them back like they’re the second coming of Jesus Christ. I wouldn’t be surprised in Deanna’s case as a means of bloating her own title reign to some number she hopes will never be beaten without actually having to do any of the work...sounds about right with the entitlement the Frost family feels are owed to them because it provokes responses from the sheep who read too deeply into every word they say.”

Wendell took a moment to look around, almost afraid of who might hear what Dexter had to say. Dexter was aware of why he was so concerned...the last time Selena had heard someone badmouthing her significant other, she’d immediately played deranged psychopath and tried to shut their mouth for good, and he was afraid the same would happen if she heard any of the likely truth Dexter was sharing in his moment of reflection. Dexter wasn’t concerned, however, and not just because Selena was nothing more than an irrelevant cog trapped in the machine like all the rest of them. The battle royal was still ongoing, and Dexter had no reason to doubt that she was still in the match and would likely last until the end to convince the fans she may actually make good on her promise to win for the final spot. She would never hear what he had to say, not that he was concerned if word ever did reach her ears.

“Right...” *Wendell finally mumbled.* “We at least kept the adrenaline championship.”

“It’s safer being in my hands and out of anyone else’s thoughts than at the central plot to some bad wannabe horror movie anyway,” *Dexter huffed.* “Last thing those people need is endless tweets about how fun it is seeing a man who supposedly nearly hurt some of them pretty badly

last year now being hailed as the next great dark anti-hero or whatever just because he saved a golden distraction from the ‘big, bad’ Digital Detoxer.”

“Still, it would’ve been nice to see you win the battle royal,” *Wendell admitted*. “Go on to Rise to Greatness and use the main event to-”

“There wouldn’t have been a main event.”

*Wendell stopped dead in his tracks at the admission, but Dexter kept moving through the backstage hallways, seeing no reason to linger even with the battle royal still ongoing. It took a moment for Wendell to seemingly process what Dexter had said before he realized the distance between them was growing as he frantically rushed to catch up.*

“What...what do you mean there wouldn’t be a main event?” *Wendell asked*.

“Exactly what I said, word-for-word,” *Dexter replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world*. “I’ve been watching Giovanni Aries, I’ve seen the signs that prove I may have been wrong about him all along. The dissension in the ranks, the cracks, the clear indication the true chaos he seeks to unleash to ‘destroy the Lizard Kingdom’ is being restrained by that wannabe corporate jackass for the sake of his own plans...that’s not a man designed to be some mere gimmick meant to play off as a more ‘controlled’ bootleg of everything that I stand for, everything that I am and fight to save. In my eyes, Gio is a man who only needs saving as far as being in a similar position I was in working for Martin Zachary. He made it clear that had things gone to the plan he’d laid out, there would be no main event for Rise to Greatness, no crowning moment for the Lizard Kingdom. If I were the one meant to meet him in that moment, I would have given him that, just to watch SCW scramble to salvage itself on social media at realizing they would either be held accountable for falsely advertising a match they weren’t getting, or that they would have to put something that wasn’t the world title at the end of their biggest show of the year.”

“Meaning SCW would lose either way,” *Wendell realized*.

“Exactly,” *Dexter nodded*. “Now you’re seeing the bigger picture. It didn’t work out that way, but I’m looking forward to seeing Gio still hold that main event hostage and deny whoever wins this useless battle royal the opportunity they think they ‘earned,’ just as I plan to do with the degrading hunk of gold sitting in my bag.”

“Wait,” *Wendell asked curiously*. “You don’t plan on-”

“Nope,” *Dexter bluntly replied*. “I’m the champion. I’ve been playing nice up until now, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s no clear challenger for me, no reason for me to keep playing along and defend the distraction in exchange for my message continuing to fall on deaf ears. Let the social media puppet masters justify conjuring my next challenger out of thin air and seeing how well it goes over with the people, because they’re not getting that shot at Rise to Greatness. I’m not feeding the machine just so they can keep try to spin this as finally getting me tangled in their wires. They can’t promote something that’s not happening...but I’d love to see them try.”

“But...won’t they just strip you of the title?” *Wendell asked*. “Declare a new champion?”

“They can try, Wendell,” *Dexter smirked a bit*. “They can try, but I know there will be some backlash as doubt prevails, those fans wondering if whoever replaces me is ‘really’ a champion because they didn’t beat me for me, as no one has accomplished yet. That asterisk will taint every single title reign that succeeds me, devaluing this title even more than anything I’ve done to render the thing a beaten, busted, degraded hunk of gold and leather rotting away in my bag.”

“You’ve really thought this through, huh?” *Wendell found himself asking*. “Not that I’m surprised, but...it always seems like there’s so much in wrestling you can’t actually control.”

“I’d never have taken up this war if I didn’t have a plan, Wendell,” *Dexter admitted*. “I knew it wouldn’t be easy, and trying to Disconnect the masses has proven more difficult than I’ve thought, but I’ve laid the seeds of doubt in people’s minds and know I just need to keep working to make them bloom. Glory already understands even if she refuses to admit to it, you think you can help Destiny see the truth of a life free of this social sickness...it’s small, but it’s as good a start as any.”

*Wendell may have nodded at that, and done a poor job of hiding his blush at the mention of the backstage interviewer, but Dexter would never admit that he’d honestly hoped to have made more progress than that by this point in time. He was only a few months off from being in SCW for a full calendar year now, and it was infuriating feeling like he’d made so little progress in even that amount of time. One, maybe two people seeing things from his point of view, eliminating one title from the rotation to the best of his ability...he’d barely made a dent. True, he was just one man waging a war against a power capable of infecting and destroying all of humanity, perpetuated by corporate monsters who held all the wealth and power necessary to make this task seem insurmountable, but even with Wendell by his side it was becoming painfully clear he was going to need more if he was going to Disconnect even just SCW to start spreading the vaccine that would kill this digital contagion once and for all.*

“Say, Wendell,” *Dexter suddenly said as the two of them reached the back exit to the arena, the parking lot and the comfort of their RV waiting just on the other side*. “Since the show’s not over

quite yet, why don't you go find Destiny and talk with her about what you wanted to do, see if she'd be interested in maybe visiting Derek Adonis's dumb little island resort with you."

"Really?" *Wendell asked, and Dexter struggled to hide his smile at the hope in his flunky's voice.*

"Really," *Dexter nodded.* "Just take a deep breath and remember to keep an open mind, don't read too much into everything unless you see the red flags we talked about. If she does want to go with you, build up slowly into talking to her about the benefits of cutting herself off from social media, don't force it. And promise me one thing...if this happens, then make damn sure you force Derek and his harem of harlots to sign something that would legally ruin them if they seek to use any images of you for their promotional material. Remember: to that, you do not consent."

"I'd do it anyway," *Wendell agreed.* "Not just for our cause, but because I'm sure that's the last thing Destiny would want anyway right now. For the sake of confirmation, though: I promise."

"Then go get her, tiger," *Dexter nodded and patted Wendell on the shoulder, watching as the young man eagerly rushed off back the way they'd just come from, looking for the interviewer. He knew Wendell would at least be protected from any cameras catching the incident, seeing as all of them were still focused on that damned battle royal right now and would linger until its conclusion. After all, the social media riots over missing eliminations or not being able to see the match in favor of something irrelevant to it would be the kind of damaging risk SCW would never gamble on. Once Wendell was out of sight, Dexter turned and stepped through the door, breathing in the humid air of New Orleans at night.*

"He seems like a good kid."

"He is...which is why I'd kindly like you to stay the fuck away from him, Martin."

*Dexter slowly turned his head, recognizing the voice that had suddenly addressed him as soon as he stepped outside. It really didn't surprise him that Martin Zachary had decided to attend an SCW show, considering he was making more and more of an effort to "legitimize" Dexter's crusade by making a social media circus out of it for his own benefit. Martin leaned against the back wall of the Superdome, a confident grin plastered to his lips and his suit as pristine as ever.*

"I thought you'd be enjoying the rest of the battle royal like all the other sheep you love trying to herd into your little social media pen," *Dexter spat.*

“Eh, wrestling’s not really my thing,” *Martin shrugged*. “But it does great business thanks to social media giving it a platform to promote itself and keep everyone in the loop...something everyone but you seems to understand.”

“What I understand,” *Dexter snarled*, “is that wrestling was doing just fine on that front without all that cancerous garbage infecting it and making online engagement the only thing people truly cared about. After all, who cares about wrestlers when you can make it all about you and how you got to meet one for like two minutes at a meet-and-greet? Far as I’m concerned, it ultimately results in greed and disengagement from the human spirit in exchange for jacking up prices to have more dollar bills to count at the end of the night.”

“It almost sounds to me like you’re preaching a problem with capitalism itself now,” *Martin laughed*. “You know? That whole system America was founded on, what keeps it alive and its heart pumping even amidst the chaos of whatever politically-charged news story sways people whichever direction that day?”

*Dexter just rolled his eyes and started walking towards his RV, wiping the grin off Martin’s face as he was clearly expecting to engage Dexter on that little point he threw out.*

“What? You’re just going to let me have that one?” *Martin asked*.

“Debating politics and ideological systems is a fool’s game,” *Dexter replied*, “and one I know you and your ilk love abusing because it drives engagement and riles up the masses. Whatever you actually believe doesn’t matter so long as you can line your pockets off of taking advantage of idiots using what you push out to give you that sense of power you wouldn’t have without people like me doing all the coding work for you in the first place.”

“You could’ve been here with me, you know,” *Martin stated*. “Stood by my side, made the kind of money I made, know what the view from the very top truly looks like. I was honestly ready to give you that kind of promotion after all the work you did to make social media algorithms as adaptive as they are today. You could’ve been the face of it all...”

“I would’ve been the face of a lie whose only purpose is to brainwash people so the likes of you can use and abuse them to your heart’s content, all for the sake of a profit you don’t need,” *Dexter responded*. “I’m not like you, Martin...I have a sense of ethics. I’m honest with people. Maybe they don’t see it because of how ensnared they are in the social media machine, but not one word I’ve said to them this entire time has been a lie...maybe you should try it sometime.”

“You say that, and yet you’ve led that Wendell kid astray for how long now?” *Martin shot back*.

“I saved him from the pain your little system was causing,” Dexter revealed as he reached his RV and opened the door, glancing back at his former boss one last time. “Maybe you should actually take a good, hard look at what you help perpetuate online and the actual harm it can do...which reminds me. Before the last pay-per-view, someone who bought into the sensationalist spin you’re trying to put on my little crusade tried to attack me to defend the name of Innovatech. Care to explain that one to me?”

“You’re going to blame me for that?” *Martin raised an eyebrow, his sudden grin a challenging one.*

“Legally, I think I can,” *was Dexter’s response.* “On that same note, I suggest you get lost before I go inform SCW security that you’re harassing me and see if they’re competent enough to escort you off the premises regardless of who you are.”

*Before Martin could try to reply in any way, Dexter slammed the RV door shut. He heard Martin banging on it, demanding that their conversation wasn’t done yet, but Dexter had left his threat behind and wasn’t engaging any further. Just like with the social media drivel, it had reached a point where continuing was pointless. As much as Martin always believed he had the upper hand in these kinds of interactions, Dexter knew that arrogance bred holes in his logic that could be exploited, especially if they threatened Martin’s precious public image.*

*It made Dexter smile, glancing out the window of the RV after a few minutes and seeing Martin getting into a car and driving away, not wanting to even so much as risk a potential bluff on Dexter’s part. It was a small victory in the grand scheme of things, but Dexter was used to taking those at this point, knowing that enough small victories would soon build into something worthwhile.*

*He just had to keep reminding himself that the consequences would be dire if he ever gave up this fight, no matter what Martin or SCW or anyone else pulled, and for that reason alone, he needed to keep fighting.*