

I couldn't tell you what hurt the most.

Fiona held an ice pack to my ribs as I held one to my jaw, both sore from the scrap with **Jaime**. My knuckles, raw and bruised, had turned a faint shade of yellowish green, a low cost of letting them meet his face enough times to let him know who I was.

That I was *there*.

My finger tips ran across the two scabbed holes in my shoulder, the flesh surrounding them still singed and pink from the taser's barbs and the two thousand volts that they'd sent through me. A dull and piercing ache surged through my spine and into my jaw as I pressed on them.

"Maybe don't do that," she said, **"it's only been a day."**

"I don't mind it," I replied, **"what's he say in that movie? 'Pain don't hurt,' right?"**

"Well, this isn't a movie, cowboy," she sighed, **"John Wayne didn't need to reduce the swelling."**

"I think his coroner would say otherwise," I smirked.

Fiona pulled the ice pack away and slumped her shoulders. Her eyes burned a hole into the side of my head, one that seared more in that moment than even the electrified prongs from the **AEGIS** tasers.

I turned my head to her and braced for impact.

"It was just a...!"

Her finger jabbed straight into my ribs, sending a jolt of lightning up to my neck.

"That was rude," she scolded, the offending digit then aimed at my face, **"be better."**

She pouted in an obviously jestful manner, crossing her arms as she shook her head.

"That's the kind of comment your dad would make," she said, **"or, even worse, *mine*."**

"True," I shrugged, wincing at the sudden motion, **"on both counts."**

It had been months since she'd spoken to **Dustin**. The relationship had already strained after *Reckoning Day*, but she was right there, at his bedside, after the attack from **NC-17** had aggravated his already broken ribs to the point where a few weeks in a hospital bed were more than called for.

While away from competition, though, he'd changed.

Accusations flew about where her allegiances lied, with my family or her own. Things had been rocky since **Chance** and **Hannah** had broken her arms with nary a scolding from their shared patriarch, just attempts at reconciliation for past events, but they took a turn for the worse after *Cruisin' for a Bruisin'.*

He yelled at her, chided her for our continued engagement after what my pops had done. When she asked how that had anything to do with us? His reply, often laden with bitter terms, would consist only of constant indictments to my own character for the crime of actually standing by his side, let alone aiding him when I ran a distraction against **the**

DeMONSTRance so that he could get his hands on **Arthur**, so he could save **Chad Kyle** from greater injury.

As she reckoned, and I agreed, if her own father was going to act as the comforting voice of security to two people that had already rejected his aid, his *love*, so openly? That had proven they could not be trusted?

Then he could *fuck* himself.

Minutes of silence passed before either of us moved, the turn in chatter clearly having sank the mood. I stood up from the couch, sloshing the melted ice within the pack as I walked back to the kitchen, placing it into the freezer.

"How long until you'll be back to normal this time?" she asked, the implication clear.

"A few days," I grunted, **"Delilah said nothing was broken, just a little banged up."**

"He could have done worse," she said.

I clicked my tongue as I ruminated on her words.

Jaime was toying with me. With *all* of us, however indirectly it may have been. A man with his abilities and knowledge, who has undoubtedly left corpses where opponents once stood, wouldn't have decided on a fair battle of fists if he'd have perceived me as a legitimate threat to his well-being. To his *survival.*

There had to be something else to it. To *him*.

I'd seen the way that Arthur looked at me, the same sneer in his glance that existed across Chance and Hannah's, magnified by decadent lust in **DEPRAVITY**. The kind that a carrion bird gave a deer carcass on the side of the road as it spoiled in the sun. We were all *prey* to them. Nothing more.

Jaime, though, had a different story behind his eyes. He saw us as human beings. Living, breathing, thinking creatures that were cursed with the wrong side of luck to somehow find themselves in his cone of sight.

His was a tired stare, one of bitterness and broken dreams. One that could, maybe, be broken if the right tool at the right angle came across it.

"I know."



Everyone loves the underdog.

They cheer as the ragtag misfit gives it all that they've got. They root for the odds-on loser, hoping to be among the few, the proud, who can say they had faith all along. They see their own shortcomings in their own daily lives melt away by proxy of a loveable dark horse that comes from behind to keep the pace with the frontrunner.

Yes sir, everyone loves the underdog...until they realize their bite doesn't leave any marks.

And that's not meant as an insult to all that you've worked for, Chad, it's just a plain statement of fact. The people like you. Hell, *I* like you. The pizza parties, the little quips and banter on Spitter, everything. It's all just a lot of innocent fun.

The trouble is, though, that what happens between those ropes isn't always going to be *fun*. Some may even find that sort of attitude a little *insulting*, understand?

And hell, friend, you may start counting me among that group.

You see, I haven't been around here very long. And sure, my father's name and influence got my foot in the door, but everything that's happened since I signed my deal has been of my own volition.

Of my own choosing.

I didn't duck around the locker room playing Marvel Rivals on my Steam Deck while the DeMONSTRance was busy trying to hack away at this company's foundation. I was right there at the front of it, taking the brunt of their violence, and it nearly cost me my career.

I wasn't the one throwing memes left, right, and center while Dustin Kelser was struggling to breathe with three broken ribs. While he was defying every doctor's orders and still doing his best to prove he still had what it took to be counted among the elite in this sport. I was at his bedside, looking my future father-in-law in the eyes as he spewed every vile thing that came to mind about my pops, as he cursed me and my bloodline for having the audacity to put a ring on his little girl's finger.

So everyone loves the underdog...until it becomes such a nuisance that it gets measured for a pinewood box in the backyard.

I'm not saying this out of any genuine malice, Chad, and I need you to understand that. I'm saying this because I know that there's been some gears turning in your head since *Cruisin' for a Bruisin'* about just why we let Arthur do what he did for as long as we did.

And since this past year's been all about learning some hard truths? I think it may be time to shed some light on that.

You *needed* that lesson, Chad. You needed to understand that this isn't just another game to the rest of us, that there are actual consequences to be felt once you rub the wrong feathers.

Just like you need to know that *Zenith 22* is just business. I'm not out for blood and I'm not looking to make an example of you, because, and I mean this with all my heart, I do genuinely like you. You're a good kid.

But this isn't all fun and games, and if you think that I'll stop mid-step and challenge you to a thumb war when a shot at Madison Seton and the Premier championship is on the line? If you think that I'll pull back on the reins when I'm looking down the trail at Akira Tanaka and the NEO Championship? When I'm greasing my irons for another inevitable showdown with Jaime Alejandro?

You're going to be in for some rough roads and hard lessons.

And I'll keep riding true on down that trail.



I laid on the bench, the barbell loaded two hundred pounds of weight held firmly above me after the seventh rep of my third set. **Benji**'s hands hovered beneath it, less than an inch away, as he spotted me.

We'd been at Grit City for the last two hours, trading off between weight training and cardio, with another hour planned ahead for technical drills in the old ring. My arms began to shake under the weight and Benji grabbed the bar, holding it steady.

"Easy, man," he laughed, **"go easy."**

He sighed as he furrowed his brow.

"'Ey, sorry 'bout that, bruddah," he said, **"but I was jus' doin' my job, ya know?"**

It had been a week since Benji and the rest of AEGIS had tasered us, sending a thousand volts through each of us as our brawl threatened to spiral beyond control.

"It's, uh, cool," I answered, finally pushing through and lifting the barbell up to the rack above, **"I guess."**

"Jus' the job, man," he repeated, **"jus' the job."**

I'd met him earlier in the year, shortly before the *Master of the Mat* quarterfinals. He'd shown up one night at Grit City and I, too focused on the upcoming match with **Johnny Napalm** and still riding the high of *Reckoning Day*, hadn't noticed him until an hour after the Reality Check TV crew had left.

Which was astounding, given not only how he looked but carried himself. In a lot of ways, he reminded me of **Johan**, another beast in human form whose face told a long

story of hurt, but whose actions and behavior toward those he considered friends betrayed the killer exterior.

"What's ya take on him tryin' somethin' next week?" he asked as I sat up, handing me a towel to wipe the sweat from my face.

"I..." I trailed off.

Would he? Of course he would.

Jaime had a plan, like usual. Whether or not even Arthur understood it was irrelevant to how, and when, Jaime would implement it, let alone what it truly entailed.

The only thing I could do was be ready to meet him on his own terms, to take the licks and keep pushing back, no matter how deep my heels needed to dig in.

"I'm willin' to bet he will, bruddah," Benji nodded as he spoke, adjusting the black and silver paisley bandana around his head, **"so maybe we should get on that whole trainin' thing. I know it's jus' Chad, but he's been..."**

"...on a roll lately," I interjected, **"I know. Let's get on it."**

Time became meaningless as the night wore on. Turns taken holding the gloves, running the ropes, doing our best to trade holds while holding back, and so on. The thundrous snore from the office upstairs, the trademark siren of Big Grit's slumber, is what finally got us to stop, and once we checked the clock? It had been three hours.

I checked my phone to find only one missed call from Fiona and an accompanying text, letting me know that she was grabbing dinner with **Claire**, then fired a text off to her letting her know we ran late.

"Tellin' ya teine we ran late?" he laughed as he tore the tape from his hands.

"Heh, yeah," I answered, **"she's off having dinner with her roommate from school."**

“Ya papalagi all the same, bruddah,” he shook his head, **“always gotta tell on yaselves.”**

Benji's massive paw slapped my shoulder as he let out a hearty belly laugh before he began his march to the locker room.

“Can't say I blame ya,” he said, **“lo'u tina always wanted to know where I was, too.”**

...lo'u tina...

That phrase triggered a memory from months back, shortly after I met him. To a package delivered at my dad and **Karen**'s. A *threat*.

It couldn't be...?

