

*My, how easy the strings can be to pull, once one finds the proper motivation.*

*I bet you didn't miss it, did you Marcus? That coppery tang in your mouth as you choke on your own blood?*

*A true delicacy, that. I know you've given it up, but I thought I could offer up the reminder for you, for old time's sake. A little taste of the life you consider yourself too good for these days. It's always been that way though, hasn't it? You certainly always thought yourself better than me. You, the legacy, the man GCWA bent over backwards to accommodate and sign because of who your sperm donor was.*

*Then you have me, the malcontent. The guy no one has ever wanted in their promotion but signed anyways because I make everyone around me better. You're all on your toes when I'm desecrating the sanctity of the locker room with my very presence. I'm the villain for the hero to vanquish.*

*The monster.*

*You were the panic button that got hit when I got my hands on the GCWA championship. Management didn't have a choice, really. Derek Mobley had barely gotten past me to win the tournament for it and wasn't up for it in the rematch. The Ice Man faltered in that same match. And Lurrr? He never could hang with me.*

*You were the basket all the eggs had to be placed within. The great hope. The only hope.*

*And you did it. I won't make excuses. When push came to shove you got the job done. You took from me what I had worked so very hard for, and you genuinely couldn't have cared less.*

*Just there to make daddy proud, or his memory at least.*

*It's been a long time since that moment though. We went in different directions. Your lack of passion for the business betrayed you and you walked away. I kept pushing, kept working. More gold, more accolades, to the point where when the GCWA clashed with the CWF, I was the guy who was chosen to go into enemy territory and take the fight to them. I won gold there, clashing with future legends in this business in the process.*

*Hi Amber Ryan. After you're done showing Larry Tact how people like us do things we need to have a little chat about a mutual acquaintance. That's a discussion for another time though.*

*Back to you though, Marcus. You ran from the industry, and I kept at it, kept accomplishing things.*

*Hell, I even got the fans to cheer for me! They caught onto how terrible an idea that was eventually, but I made it happen. I made it happen because I do whatever it takes to get things*

*done. I know a golden boy like you doesn't have the best grasp on what hard work actually means, so I see it as my duty to show you as part of all of this.*

*Which begs the question. What, exactly, is this?*

*It's a prison, Marcus.*

*A prison of my own design, a prison I've spent the better part of twenty years putting together. Twenty years of blood, sweat, and tears to construct. All of us in the business build one, if we're being perfectly honest. A place to keep our hopes and our dreams so that they don't disappear as we endure the grief and pain of our setbacks.*

*It's supposed to insulate us from the carnage this business can wreak upon one's psyche, but more often than not it simply traps us within it.*

*Not you though, you had a plan. This was always a means to an end, a way to make sure your dad didn't talk shit about you once he was beyond the Pearly Gates to whatever bored cherub got stuck listening to him lament how much of a disappointment you were to his caveman sensibilities. An avenue to pretend like you were a dutiful son for just long enough that anyone who had taken enough chair shots to the cranium would buy it.*

*It's all so very transparent, Marcus. I hope you don't think any of us actually bought it. Fuck, I hope you didn't buy it.*

*You need to understand that you have squandered your gift. You could've easily been the man your daddy wanted you to be. You could've been a legend in this business, not just in the GCWA but across the entire landscape. One of the few who managed to surpass even the lofty heights your father reached.*

*Instead, you spit in everyone's face. You said no thanks. You let that God-given talent rot. You forgot one very important thing though, didn't you Marcus?*

*This business has TEETH.*

*While I will take great satisfaction in breaking you, I'm going to be doing so on behalf of the business at large. For all the people who worked twice as hard for half the opportunities you were afforded. For the industry that loved you but you refused to even give a courtesy breakup text to.*

*There's no escaping this, Marcus. You made sure of that yourself with this stipulation. I don't know why you think I would run, why I would tuck my tail and get out of there.*

*That's more of a "you" move, historically speaking.*

*I'm already trapped in my prison. Always have been, always will be, but now you're trapped in it with me.*

*It'll be fun.*

"I'm done with the games, Dame."

*Sitting across from me sporting what I can only imagine is one of the biggest shit-eating grins I've ever seen is Dame Fortune. I have to imagine, because as always she's got that silly porcelain mask covering her face. I asked for her help figuring some things out a while back, and lately she's been putting me through my paces, making me dig into my past.*

*As expected, all that's happened is I've gotten dirty.*

"What games, Shane? I've only done exactly what you've asked of me."

"I never asked for my ex to end up in a hospital. Or to have to give Nikita stitches."

"Don't blame me for the violences you've visited upon the people in your life. I mean seriously Shane, did you have to assault your old friend?"

"Nikita is *not* my friend!"

"Of course not, you keep attacking her whenever you're in the same room together."

*Always with the snide comments. Like dealing with a damn teenager. No, worse. She should know better.*

*Of course, when has that stopped people from trying to push my damn buttons?*

"That isn't how it went down, but that doesn't matter anyways. You were supposed to help me figure out what I need to do to get my life back on track."

"And I have fulfilled my end of the bargain magnificently, if I do say so myself."

"The hell you have!"

*At this point I let my judgment slide and grab the table in front of us. It feels heavier than I expected, but not enough to stop me from lifting it up and tossing it aside.*

*The problem?*

*My whole damn world flipped with it, sending me tumbling as the sound of thunder rippled through the air. The scent of the burning cedar, lemongrass, and myrrh that had previously been present was now gone, the air stale as I landed roughly upon cobblestone.*

*Yes, cobblestone. I must have hit my head pretty damn hard, knocked me back a couple hundred years.*

"Fucking hell."

"Things always have to be done the hard way with you, don't they Shane?"

"That's just how I'm wired, Dame."

*I give her the old one-finger salute as I attempted to regain my bearings. We weren't in Dame's shop anymore, but I haven't the foggiest idea how I got from there to here.*

*Wherever here is.*

"It's quite irritating, I can assure you. Now then, stand up so we can get this over with, I don't have all day."

"I don't operate on your schedule."

"You do if your goal is to figure out how to get from here to where you want to be, now move it."

*I spit before moving to a seated position, catching a glimpse of red in the liquid that looked on the rock. Must have bitten my tongue on the way down.*

*She must have drugged me, I have no other explanation for how I fell out of a one-story building.*

*I shoot a glance over at Dame, who is now both missing her mask and looks as she did the first time I met her, which at this point was a good fifteen or so years in the past.*

*Definitely drugged me.*

*She pulls out a clove cigarette, lighting it and taking a deep drag as she waits for me to actually get off my ass.*

*She can wait a bit longer.*

"I don't need this kind of negativity in my life."

"Shane, you *are* the negativity in your life."

"I know I've heard that somewhere before."

"From everyone who's ever had to deal with you for any real length of time, I imagine."

*At this point I have stalled long enough and get to my feet, brushing myself off before I meet Dame's icy gaze. She's taller than I remembered.*

"Now what?"

"Now you make a decision. We're in your mind's eye, and this is going to be the last time you see me for as long as I can help it."

"My what?"

"Not important. What's important is that you still have a chance to make this easy for yourself, and less irritating for me."

*She makes a gesture behind her, calling my attention to the massive structure that had somehow eluded my notice until now. Towering walls of brick and iron, with doors forced open to bid welcome to anyone willing to go exploring. Despite having never laid my eyes upon anything like it before in my life, something about it feels disturbingly... comfortable.*

*I'm going to go ahead and take a wild guess and say that entering the building is probably the "hard" way.*

"I presented you the opportunities to talk to people who you've hurt, in the vain hope that you'd get it through your thick skull that everything you go through is self-inflicted, but here we are!"

*Dame's tone was that of a scolding teacher as she steps closer to the structure, her lips curling into a snarl as she flicks away some ashes from her smoke.*

*What is it with the women in my head and cigarettes? Probably says something about me. You know, beyond what the rest of this already says.*

"You wanted clarity, this is it. Accept that you're the problem, turn around, and walk away. Go and beg the people who have made the terrible mistake of loving you for forgiveness and move on."

"Move on?"

"Get out of wrestling. The business has hated you since day one. Is it worth losing what you have left?"

*Pull a Marcus. This sanctimonious bitch wants me to pull a Marcus. Walk away after all I've done. All I have left to do.*

"Quitting isn't exactly in my blood. Wouldn't have gotten this far if it was, you know."

"Yes, I know you've got more ego than brains. That's why I'm spelling it out for you. Do you think your son is interested in you being too broken down to play with your grandkids someday? Assuming you even live that long, that stunt you pulled for your last match probably shaved a couple of years off on top of all the other vices."

"So you do watch my matches."

"We're in *your* head. I didn't need to."

*Fair point.*

"Can't say I'm terribly keen on throwing in the towel, what with the big show I made of getting this whole thing lined up and all that."

"Who cares? If you're out it's not like it would matter. I'd hazard to guess that no one is going to be calling Denzel Porter up to ask for a recommendation on you."

*I take in a deep breath, aches rattling through my old bones in the process from the fall. I'm not sure how something in my head could hurt this much, but leave it to my body to make the wrong kind of magic happen.*

*I understand what she's getting at though, even if I can't say that I agree. This is my life we're talking about. I understand sunken cost fallacy just fine, but this is what defines me. What sets me apart from pretenders like Marcus Ka'Derrion.*

*Purpose.*

*No matter how hard this business has had it out for me. How devastating a blow it deals when it kicks me while I'm down. No matter how much of my blood is spilled, how many bones are broken and tendons torn to shreds.*

*This is my purpose.*

"It's not about how everyone else would feel about it, it's about how I would feel about it."

*If we're in my head like she says then she'll know immediately that I'm lying. There are a few who I care how they feel that exist beyond the ragged confines of my own skin.*

*Marcus and Avalon.*

*Marcus because he needs to understand that I'm not a hypocrite like he is. He needs to understand that I am willing to do whatever it takes to get my point across, whatever it takes to demonstrate that for all the violent ugliness involved, this business matters.*

*And so does my place in it.*

*Avalon because...*

*Well, that's complicated.*

"You must get off on being difficult, I swear."

"Would simplify a whole lot of things, wouldn't it?"

*Dame lets out a disgusted grunt before she tosses the remnants of her cigarette towards me. As she does, the sounds of birds cawing amongst themselves resonates from behind me, which draws the eye as I see a gathering of crows watching the exchange.*

*Guess this is probably the best show they've seen in a while.*

"If only I were joking, Shane."

*She closes the distance between the two of us, a pointed finger jabbing me in the chest.*

"Your path forward is through there. I'm sure a clever man such as yourself will have no problems navigating the way. After all, you built it."

*I knew it looked familiar. Guess I get to take a grand tour before showing it to Marcus.*

"Guess this is the part where I'm supposed to thank you for all the help, isn't it?"

"Don't even start to put any of this on me. You slapped my hand away."

*Dame reaches down into a pouch she had at her waist, pulling out a compass and putting it into my hand.*

"Figure your shit out."

"Got it."

"Oh, and one last thing. Whatever happens? You deserve it."

*Before I could offer any sort of retort, Dame Fortune was gone, leaving me with the ominous building and the birds to keep me company.*

*“Any of you planning on keeping me company, then?”*

*One of the birds let out a caw, which despite the situation drew a chuckle out of me.*

*Guess we have a volunteer.*

*And I guess I have a long walk to get to the show. I glance down at the compass, the needle of which spins wildly with the same kind of motion I remember seeing as a kid when I’d take a magnet to the one I got in scouts.*

*Looks like it truly is up to me to get to where I want to be. I kick a few loose pebbles before starting down the path to the structure.*

*I’ll be seeing you soon, Marcus.*