



THE HOUSE IS ASLEEP.

THAT'S THE FIRST THING KEN NOTICES WHEN HE STEPS THROUGH THE GARAGE DOOR.

NO TELEVISION NOISE. NO TINY FOOTSTEPS RUNNING THROUGH THE HALLWAY. NO CARTOONS HUMMING FAINTLY FROM THE LIVING ROOM WHILE ALEXIS FIGHTS SLEEP ON THE COUCH. JUST SILENCE AND THE LOW MECHANICAL HUM OF THE REFRIGERATOR SOMEWHERE DEEPER IN THE HOUSE.

THE DIGITAL CLOCK ABOVE THE STOVE READS 1:14 AM.

IT'S TOO LATE TO STILL BE AWAKE, BUT ALSO TOO EARLY TO PRETEND HE'S GOING TO BED ANYTIME SOON.

KEN TOSSES HIS CAR KEYS ONTO THE KITCHEN ISLAND HARDER THAN HE MEANS TO. THE METALLIC CLATTER ECHOES THROUGH THE DARK ROOM. HE IMMEDIATELY GLANCES TOWARD THE HALLWAY LEADING TO THE BEDROOMS.

NOTHING.

Good.

HIS SHOULDERS LOOSEN SLIGHTLY.

THE SHOW HAD ENDED HOURS AGO. THE DRIVE HOME SHOULD'VE EXHAUSTED HIM. INSTEAD, THE ADRENALINE NEVER FULLY LEFT HIS SYSTEM. IT'S STILL THERE BENEATH HIS SKIN SOMEWHERE, DULL AND RESTLESS.

WAITING.

KEN OPENS THE REFRIGERATOR AND STARES INTO IT WITHOUT GRABBING ANYTHING. BOTTLED WATER. LEFTOVERS. ALEXIS' APPLE JUICE POUCHES LINED NEATLY ALONG THE BOTTOM SHELF. NORMAL LIFE.

THIS IS THE KIND HE SPENT MOST OF HIS EXISTENCE CONVINCED HE'D NEVER HAVE.

SLOWLY, HE SHUTS THE DOOR AGAIN.

HIS EYES DRIFT TOWARD THE GARAGE ENTRANCE.

THEN DOWNWARD.

STORAGE.

THE THOUGHT SETTLES INTO HIS MIND BEFORE HE CAN STOP IT.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE BASEMENT LIGHT FLICKERS ON OVERHEAD WITH A SOFT ELECTRICAL BUZZ.

THE ROOM SMELLS FAINTLY LIKE DUST, DETERGENT, AND OLD CARDBOARD. HOLIDAY DECORATIONS LINE ONE WALL BESIDE PLASTIC STORAGE BINS LABELED IN KYRA'S HANDWRITING. ADINA'S OLD CLOTHES. BABY TOYS. CHRISTMAS LIGHTS.

YOU KNOW, LIFE.

KEN MOVES PAST ALL OF IT QUIETLY.

TOWARD THE BACK CORNER.

THE DUFFEL BAG SITS EXACTLY WHERE HE LEFT IT YEARS AGO BENEATH AN OLD FOLDING TABLE.

BLACK CANVAS. WORN SEAMS. FADED GOLD STITCHING BARELY VISIBLE BENEATH THE DUST.

GODLY.

KEN STARES AT IT LONGER THAN HE SHOULD. FOR A MOMENT, HE ALMOST LEAVES IT THERE. INSTEAD, HE CROUCHES SLOWLY, RIBS PROTESTING IMMEDIATELY, AND DRAGS THE BAG OUT INTO THE OPEN. DUST ROLLS OFF THE FABRIC AS HE SETS IT DOWN.

THE ZIPPER STICKS HALFWAY THE FIRST TIME HE TRIES OPENING IT... OF COURSE IT DOES.

HE PULLS HARDER.

THE SOUND CUTS THROUGH THE BASEMENT LIKE TEARING CLOTH.

AND SUDDENLY... THERE HE IS.

NOT LITERALLY, BUT CLOSE ENOUGH.

THE SMELL HITS FIRST. OLD ATHLETIC TAPE. LEATHER. DRIED CANVAS. FAINT TRACES OF SWEAT WORKED PERMANENTLY INTO FABRIC THAT HAD SURVIVED THOUSANDS OF MILES AND HUNDREDS OF FIGHTS.

KEN EXHALES SLOWLY THROUGH HIS NOSE.

"FOR FUCKS SAKE..."

THE WORDS BARELY LEAVE HIS MOUTH. RIGHT ON TOP RESTS THE ENTRANCE COAT. BLACK AND GOLD. HEAVY. OVERDESIGNED BY NORMAL STANDARDS. GOLD TRIM STITCHED ALONG THE SLEEVES. HIS NAME, STITCHED IN THE DESIGN OF A CROSS, SPREAD ACROSS THE BACK LIKE SOMETHING ECCLESIASTICAL INSTEAD OF ATHLETIC.

KEN LIFTS IT CAREFULLY.

YEARS AGO, PEOPLE USED TO LOSE THEIR MINDS WHEN HE WALKED THROUGH CURTAINS WEARING THIS THING. SMOKE. CHOIR MUSIC. GOLDEN LIGHTS.

THE GKD, "GODLY" KEN DAVISON... BACK WHEN IT WASN'T A NICKNAME, BUT AN IDENTITY.

THE IRONY ALMOST MAKES HIM LAUGH NOW.

BACK THEN, HE TOLD HIMSELF THE PRESENTATION MATTERED BECAUSE WRESTLING WAS MYTHOLOGY. SPECTACLE. GODS AND MONSTERS.

TRUTH WAS, THE OUTFIT HAD NEVER BEEN ABOUT CONFIDENCE. IT WAS ARMOR. IF PEOPLE
FEARED THE IMAGE ENOUGH, THEY NEVER GOT CLOSE ENOUGH TO SEE THE MAN UNDERNEATH IT.

KEN'S THUMB BRUSHES AGAINST ONE OF THE EMBROIDERED SLEEVES ABSENTMINDEDLY.

THERE ARE TINY TEARS NEAR THE CUFF.

HE REMEMBERS EXACTLY WHERE THEY CAME FROM.

PHILADELPHIA. EXTREME RULES MATCH. SEXY JASON. BARBED WIRE. TWENTY-THREE STITCHES
AFTERWARD.

AT THE TIME, HE'D LAUGHED ABOUT IT WHILE THE MEDIC WORKED. NOT BECAUSE IT DIDN'T HURT,
BECAUSE PAIN HAD STOPPED MEANING ANYTHING. IT WAS SIMPLY SENSATION.

SLOWLY, HE FOLDS THE COAT BESIDE HIM. BENEATH IT SITS ROLLS OF OLD WRIST TAPE,
YELLOWED SLIGHTLY WITH AGE. ONE FALLS LOOSE AS HE MOVES THINGS ASIDE. DARK STAINS
STILL MARK THE EDGES.

BLOOD.

KEN STARES AT IT QUIETLY. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN HE MEASURED GOOD MATCHES BY HOW
MUCH DAMAGE REMAINED AFTERWARD. BRUISES MEANT EFFORT. SCARS MEANT SACRIFICE.
BROKEN BONES MEANT COMMITMENT.

THE AUDIENCE LOVED THAT VERSION OF HIM. HELL, PART OF THE INDUSTRY STILL ROMANTICIZES
HIM FOR IT.

THE VIOLENT YEARS.

THE DANGEROUS YEARS.

THE YEARS WHERE HE WALKED INTO EVERY BUILDING LIKE HE GENUINELY DID NOT CARE
WHETHER HE LEFT UNDER HIS OWN POWER.

THEY CALLED IT INTENSITY. WHAT IT REALLY WAS... WAS GRIEF.

GRIEF WITH NOWHERE TO GO.

CAREFULLY, KEN DIGS DEEPER INTO THE BAG. METAL RATTLES SOFTLY AGAINST METAL.

THE CHAIN. OF COURSE IT'S STILL HERE.

HEAVY STEEL COILS SIT BUNDLED NEAR THE BOTTOM COMPARTMENT EXACTLY WHERE HE LEFT THEM. KEN PICKS THEM UP INSTINCTIVELY, MUSCLES REMEMBERING THE WEIGHT BEFORE HIS BRAIN CATCHES UP.

COLD STEEL SETTLES INTO HIS PALM.

IT'S FAMILIAR.. THAT'S THE PART HE HATES.

NOT THE VIOLENCE.

NOT THE MEMORIES.

THE FAMILIARITY.

EVEN NOW, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, THE CHAIN STILL FEELS NATURAL IN HIS HANDS.

COMFORTING, ALMOST.

KEN TURNS THE CHAIN SLOWLY THROUGH HIS HANDS, LISTENING TO THE MUTED MELODY OF STEEL LINKS SLIDING AGAINST ONE ANOTHER.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THIS THING HAD PRACTICALLY BEEN PART OF HIS ANATOMY.

AIRPORTS.

LOCKER ROOMS.

HOTELS.

RENTAL CARS.

ALWAYS NEARBY, A TRUSTED FRIEND.

HE USED TO WRAP THE CHAIN AROUND HIS WRIST BEFORE MATCHES SOMETIMES, TIGHTENING IT LINK BY LINK WHILE OPPONENTS MADE ENTRANCES. NOT BECAUSE HE NEEDED INTIMIDATION. BY THAT POINT, HIS REPUTATION ALREADY HANDLED THAT FOR HIM.

No.

IT CENTERED HIM.

THAT'S THE PART PEOPLE NEVER UNDERSTOOD ABOUT VIOLENCE. THE WORLD ALWAYS ASSUMES RAGE FEELS CHAOTIC. UNCONTROLLED. BUT FOR KEN, VIOLENCE HAD ALWAYS BROUGHT CLARITY. SIMPLICITY. THE RULES MADE SENSE THERE.

HIT FIRST.

SURVIVE.

KEEP MOVING.

NO AMBIGUITY.

NO HELPLESSNESS.

NO GRIEF.

HIS EYES LOWER TOWARD THE CHAIN IN HIS LAP.

THERE WERE ENTIRE YEARS OF HIS LIFE HE BARELY REMEMBERED OUTSIDE OF MATCHES.

CITIES BLURRED TOGETHER.

FACES DISAPPEARED.

TIME COLLAPSED INTO A CYCLE OF PAINKILLERS, ARENA LIGHTS, CHEAP COFFEE, AND SILENCE.

LOOKING BACK NOW, THAT MIGHT BE THE PART THAT SCARES HIM MOST.

NOT WHAT HE DID.

WHAT HE FELT WHILE DOING IT.

NOTHING.

NOT AFTER AWHILE.

THAT NUMBNESS HAD BECOME ADDICTIVE IN ITS OWN WAY. EASIER THAN MOURNING. EASIER THAN ADMITTING HE WAS ANGRY AT A WORLD THAT HAD KEPT MOVING AFTER CRYSTAL DIED WHILE HE STAYED EMOTIONALLY FROZEN IN THAT CEMETERY.

THE "GODLY" PERSONA HADN'T JUST BEEN A WRESTLING CHARACTER.. NOT EVEN ARMOR.. INSULATION.

IF HE ACTED LARGER THAN LIFE LONG ENOUGH, MAYBE NOBODY WOULD NOTICE THERE WAS BARELY A PERSON UNDERNEATH IT ANYMORE.

KEN LEANS HIS HEAD BACK BRIEFLY AGAINST THE WALL BEHIND HIM.

HE REMEMBERS THE FIRST TIME KYRA SAW THROUGH IT.

NOT THE PERSONA.
NOT THE ENTRANCE.
HIM.

MOST PEOPLE APPROACHED HIM CAREFULLY BACK THEN. LIKE A DANGEROUS DOG THEY WEREN'T SURE WAS TRAINED PROPERLY. EVEN OTHER WRESTLERS KEPT A CERTAIN DISTANCE ONCE THE CAMERAS TURNED OFF.

KYRA NEVER DID.

SHE'D LOOKED AT HIM ONE NIGHT AFTER A MATCH WHERE HE'D NEARLY CRIPPLED A MAN WITH THAT SAME CHAIN AND ASKED HIM IF HE WAS TIRED.

NOT ANGRY.
NOT CRAZY.
NOT DANGEROUS.

TIRED.

AT THE TIME, THE QUESTION HAD IRRITATED HIM MORE THAN INSULTS EVER COULD HAVE.

IT WAS TRUE.

KEN EXHALES SLOWLY.

HE LOOKS DOWN AT HIS HANDS AGAIN. OLDER NOW. MORE SCARS THAN HE CAN COUNT. FINGERS BENT SO THAT HIS MIDDLE FINGER SAYS 'FUCK YOU' IN ITALIC.

THE SAME HANDS THAT ONCE BLOODIED OPPONENTS BEYOND RECOGNITION NOW HELPED ALEXIS LEARN HOW TO HOLD CRAYONS PROPERLY.

THE SAME HANDS ADINA REACHED FOR CROSSING PARKING LOTS.

THAT CONTRADICTION STILL FEELS IMPOSSIBLE TO HIM SOMETIMES.

PERHAPS THAT'S WHY THE COMMENTS BOTHER HIM AS MUCH AS THEY DO NOW.

NOT BECAUSE THEY THREATEN HIM.

BECAUSE THEY THREATEN THE LIFE THAT PROVED HE WAS CAPABLE OF BECOMING SOMETHING ELSE.

AND SOMEWHERE DEEP DOWN, BENEATH ALL THE CONTROL AND RESTRAINT AND YEARS OF REBUILDING HIMSELF, THERE'S STILL A PART OF KEN TERRIFIED THAT THE OLD VERSION WAS THE REAL ONE.

THAT ALL OF THIS—

THE FAMILY.

THE PEACE.

THE HAPPINESS.

WAS JUST SOMETHING TEMPORARY HE GOT LUCKY ENOUGH TO BORROW.

HIS GRIP TIGHTENS UNCONSCIOUSLY AROUND THE STEEL.

THEN, A SOFT SOUND. PAPER SLIDING LOOSE.

KEN LOOKS DOWN.

AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH HAD FALLEN FROM ONE OF THE SIDE POCKETS.

THE EDGES ARE BENT NOW. WORN WHITE WITH AGE.

CRYSTAL

THE AIR LEAVES HIS LUNGS QUIETLY.

NINETEEN YEARS OLD FOREVER.

SHE'S LAUGHING IN THE PICTURE. WIND CATCHING HER HAIR WHILE SHE SQUINTS INTO THE CAMERA. KEN REMEMBERS THE EXACT MOMENT IT WAS TAKEN. BOARDWALK IN BALTIMORE. SUMMER HEAT. CHEAP FOOD. NO IDEA HOW QUICKLY LIFE COULD DISAPPEAR.

HE STARES AT THE PHOTO FOR A LONG TIME... LONG ENOUGH FOR THE BASEMENT TO FEEL COLDER.. THAT VERSION OF KEN HAD DIED HERE.

NOT METAPHORICALLY. ACTUALLY.

EVERYTHING AFTERWARD HAD JUST BEEN SURVIVAL WEARING HIS FACE.

"HEY, BABE," HE MUTTERS SOFTLY BEFORE CATCHING HIMSELF.

THE WORDS HANG IN THE EMPTY BASEMENT.

KEN SWALLOWS ONCE AND SETS THE PHOTOGRAPH CAREFULLY BESIDE HIM.

FOR A LONG MOMENT, HE SAYS NOTHING.

THEN HE REACHES DEEPER INTO THE BAG AGAIN.

ANOTHER PHOTOGRAPH.

NEWER THIS TIME.

KYRA ADINA, MAYBE FIVE AT THE TIME SITTING ON HIS SHOULDERS AT A CARNIVAL WEARING A RIDICULOUS LITTLE SUNHAT.

KEN STARES AT IT DIFFERENTLY.

NOT GRIEF.

FEAR.

BECAUSE THIS PICTURE CONTAINS EVERYTHING HE HAS SPENT YEARS CONVINCING HIMSELF HE DID NOT DESERVE.

A HOME.

A FAMILY.

PEACE.

THINGS THE OLD VERSION OF HIM NEVER EVEN TRIED TO BUILD BECAUSE LOSING THEM WOULD'VE DESTROYED HIM.

THAT REALIZATION SETTLES HEAVILY INTO HIS CHEST. THE OLD KEN HAD BEEN EASIER TO BE. THAT'S THE TRUTH NOBODY EVER TALKS ABOUT. WHEN YOU HAVE NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE, VIOLENCE BECOMES SIMPLE. THERE IS NO HESITATION. NO FEAR. NO CONSEQUENCES THAT MATTER.

BUT NOW?

NOW EVERY DECISION CARRIES WEIGHT. EVERY MATCH. EVERY THREAT. EVERY MOMENT SOMEBODY MENTIONS HIS FAMILY ON TELEVISION BECAUSE NOW THERE ARE PEOPLE WAITING FOR HIM TO COME HOME.

KEN LEANS BACK SLOWLY AGAINST THE BASEMENT WALL, CHAIN STILL HANGING LOOSELY FROM ONE HAND.

SOMEWHERE UPSTAIRS, PIPES SHIFT SOFTLY IN THE WALLS, THE HOUSE BREATHEING AROUND HIM.

ALIVE.

FOR YEARS, HE CONVINCED HIMSELF THAT SURVIVING AND LIVING WERE THE SAME THING.

THEY AREN'T.

SURVIVAL IS INSTINCT. LIVING REQUIRES VULNERABILITY AND VULNERABILITY TERRIFIES HIM MORE THAN VIOLENCE EVER DID.

HIS EYES DRIFT BACK TOWARD THE CHAIN AGAIN.

THE WORST PART WASN'T REALIZING THAT VERSION OF HIMSELF STILL EXISTED.

THE WORST PART WAS REALIZING HOW QUICKLY HE REMEMBERED HOW TO CARRY HIM.

KEN SITS THERE IN SILENCE FOR SEVERAL MORE MINUTES BEFORE FINALLY SETTING THE CHAIN BACK INTO THE BAG.

SLOWLY.

DELIBERATELY.

LIKE WEATHERING A SWORD.

HE BEGINS REPACKING EVERYTHING CAREFULLY. THE COAT. THE TAPE. THE PHOTOGRAPHS.

PIECE BY PIECE.

UNTIL ONLY THE OLD CHAIN REMAINS OUTSIDE THE BAG.

KEN STARES AT IT.

LONG ENOUGH THAT THE SILENCE STARTS FEELING DANGEROUS AGAIN.

THEN, FINALLYM HHe PUTS THAT AWAY TOO.

THE ZIPPER CLOSES EASIER THIS TIME.

HE RESTS ONE HAND AGAINST THE TOP OF THE DUFFEL BAG AFTERWARD, EYES CLOSED BRIEFLY.

NOT BECAUSE HE MISSES THAT MAN.

BECAUSE PART OF HIM UNDERSTANDS EXACTLY WHY HE EXISTED.

THE BASEMENT LIGHT CLICKS OFF A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

*UPSTAIRS, THE KITCHEN IS STILL DARK EXCEPT FOR THE FAINT GLOW ABOVE THE STOVE. KEN
POURS HIMSELF A GLASS OF WATER QUIETLY BEFORE STOPPING WHEN HE NOTICES A SMALL
FIGURE SITTING AT THE ISLAND RUBBING TIRED EYES.*

ADINA

HER HAIR IS A MESS.

SHE SQUINTS AT HIM SLEEPILY.

"DAD?"

KEN IMMEDIATELY SOFTENS.

"HEY, BUG. WHY'RE YOU AWAKE?"

SHE SHRUGS.

"BAD DREAM."

*HE NODS ONCE BECAUSE HE UNDERSTANDS COMPLETELY. WITHOUT A WORD, KEN WALKS OVER
AND GENTLY LIFTS HER INTO HIS ARMS. SHE CURLS AGAINST HIS CHEST IMMEDIATELY, HALF
ASLEEP ALREADY.*

SMALL

WARM.

SAFE.

ADINA RESTS HER HEAD AGAINST HIS SHOULDER.

"YOU SMELL WEIRD," SHE MUMBLES TIREDLY.

DESPITE EVERYTHING, KEN LAUGHS QUIETLY.

"THANKS."

"YOU BEEN DOWNSTAIRS?"

"YEAH."

ANOTHER SLEEPY NOD.

THEN:

"I LIKE YOU BETTER UPSTAIRS."

THE SENTENCE HITS HARDER THAN IT SHOULD. KEN CLOSSES HIS EYES BRIEFLY, HOLDING HER A LITTLE TIGHTER AS HE LOOKS OUT ACROSS THE DARK KITCHEN.

"ME TOO, BABY GIRL." HE SAYS SOFTLY. "ME TOO."

STATIC CRAWLS ACROSS THE SCREEN IN FRACTURED RED WAVES BEFORE THE IMAGE STABILIZES.

NOT TELEVISION STATIC—SOLAR INTERFERENCE.

THE AUDIO HUMS FAINTLY BENEATH THE SOUND OF DISTANT MACHINERY SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE FRAME. RED DUST ROLLS ACROSS THE GROUND IN LONG DRIFTING CURRENTS BENEATH AN ENORMOUS ARTIFICIAL SKY SHIELD STRETCHED OVER THE MARTIAN COLONY SECTOR OVERHEAD LIKE CRACKED GLASS LIT FROM BENEATH.

MARS STILL LOOKS DEAD. HUMANITY JUST BUILT WALLS AROUND THE CORPSE.

THE CAMERA ADJUSTS FOCUS SLOWLY.

KEN DAVISON SITS ALONE ON THE LOWERED LOADING RAMP OF A CARGO HAULER PARKED WELL BEYOND THE POPULATED SECTORS OF THE COLONY. FAR ENOUGH AWAY THAT THE LIGHTS OF CIVILIZATION FEEL SMALL. DISTANT. TEMPORARY.

BLACK HOODIE. BLACK JEANS. HEAVY BOOTS STAINED RED WITH MARTIAN DUST.

NO CHAMPIONSHIPS. NO LOGOS. NO SPECTACLE.

ONLY A STEEL CHAIN LOOSELY WRAPPED ONCE AROUND HIS HAND.

THE WIND OUTSIDE THE ATMOSPHERIC BARRIER MOANS AGAINST THE TRANSPORT HULL SOMEWHERE NEARBY, LOW AND HOLLOW LIKE AN ANIMAL DYING IN ANOTHER ROOM.

KEN STARES TOWARD THE HORIZON FOR SEVERAL LONG SECONDS BEFORE FINALLY SPEAKING.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE MOST ABOUT THIS PLACE, COREY?"

A PAUSE.

"IT FEELS HONEST."

THE CHAIN SHIFTS SOFTLY THROUGH HIS FINGERS.

"NOT THE COLONY. NOT THE LIGHTS. NOT THE DOME OVERHEAD PRETENDING HUMAN BEINGS CONQUERED SOMETHING OUT HERE."

HIS EYES DRIFT TOWARD THE DISTANT STRUCTURES GLOWING AGAINST THE DARKNESS.

"I MEAN THE PLANET ITSELF."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"BECAUSE MARS DOESN'T CARE WHAT WE CALL OURSELVES."

SILENCE SETTLES AGAIN.

"OUT HERE, THERE'S NO MYTHOLOGY. NO HISTORY. NO LEGACY. NO CROWDS CONVINCING THEMSELVES VIOLENCE MEANS SOMETHING PROFOUND."

KEN SLOWLY LOOKS BACK TOWARD THE CAMERA.

"JUST EMPTY SPACE AND HUMAN BEINGS DESPERATELY TRYING TO DISTRACT THEMSELVES FROM IT."

THE WORDS HANG HEAVILY IN THE STILLNESS.

"AND THAT FEELS APPROPRIATE CONSIDERING WHO I'M TALKING TO."

THE CHAIN RATTLES SOFTLY AS HE UNWINDS IT HALFWAY FROM HIS FIST.

"I SPENT THE LAST WEEK GOING THROUGH YOUR WORK, COREY. REALLY GOING THROUGH IT. NOT HIGHLIGHTS. NOT REPUTATION. THE ACTUAL BODY OF WORK."

A FAINT HUMORLESS SMILE.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I FOUND?"

PAUSE.

"A MAN TRYING VERY HARD TO CONVINCE THE WORLD HE'S UNTOUCHABLE."

THE WIND HUMS SOFTLY ACROSS THE MICROPHONE.

"BLOOD EVERYWHERE. WEAPONS EVERYWHERE. THUMBTRACKS. FIRE. CHAIRS. TABLES. BROKEN BODIES STACKED UP LIKE EVIDENCE."

KEN TILTS HIS HEAD SLIGHTLY.

"AND EVERY SINGLE TIME YOU TALK ABOUT IT, YOU SOUND PROUD OF HOW LITTLE ANY OF IT AFFECTS YOU."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"I RECOGNIZE THAT."

HIS VOICE LOWERS.

"THAT'S THE DANGEROUS PART."

KEN LEANS FORWARD SLIGHTLY, ELBOWS RESTING AGAINST HIS KNEES.

"YOU AND I HAVE BOTH SPENT YEARS TEACHING AUDIENCES THE SAME LESSON."

THE CHAIN SLIDES SLOWLY BETWEEN HIS FINGERS.

"THAT PAIN ONLY MATTERS IF YOU ADMIT IT HURTS."

A LONG SILENCE FOLLOWS.

"BUT THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENDURING PAIN..."

HIS EYES NARROW SLIGHTLY.

"...AND HOLLOWING YOURSELF OUT SO COMPLETELY YOU STOP FEELING ANYTHING AT ALL."

THE CAMERA REMAINS STILL.

"FOR YEARS, PEOPLE THOUGHT THE MOST FRIGHTENING THING ABOUT ME WAS HOW VIOLENT I COULD BECOME."

KEN SHAKES HIS HEAD FAINTLY.

"No."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"THE FRIGHTENING PART WAS HOW NORMAL IT STARTED FEELING."

THE WORDS LAND FLATLY.

"THERE WAS NO HESITATION. NO GUILT. NO SECOND THOUGHTS."

THE CHAIN TIGHTENS UNCONSCIOUSLY AROUND HIS FIST.

"I USED TO THINK THAT MADE ME STRONG."

A BITTER SMILE GHOSTS ACROSS HIS FACE.

"TURNS OUT IT JUST MADE ME NUMB."

SILENCE AGAIN. BEYOND HIM, THE COLONY LIGHTS BLINK FAINTLY AGAINST THE ENDLESS RED HORIZON.

"THIS PLACE..." KEN GESTURES VAGUELY TOWARD THE WASTELAND SURROUNDING HIM.

"HUMANITY CROSSED MILLIONS OF MILES OF DEAD SPACE JUST TO BUILD ANOTHER ILLUSION HERE."

HIS EYES DRIFT UPWARD TOWARD THE ARTIFICIAL ATMOSPHERIC SHIELD OVERHEAD.

"ANOTHER CITY. ANOTHER ARENA. ANOTHER PLACE WHERE PEOPLE CAN PRETEND THEY'RE MORE EVOLVED THAN THEY ACTUALLY ARE."

HIS JAW TIGHTENS SLIGHTLY.

"BUT UNDERNEATH ALL OF IT?"

KEN TAKES A DEEP BREATH.

"WE BROUGHT THE SAME VIOLENCE WITH US."

KEN SLOWLY STANDS FROM THE CARGO RAMP, BOOTS CRUNCHING SOFTLY AGAINST RED DUST AS HE BEGINS WALKING.

"THAT'S WHAT FASCINATES ME ABOUT PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING, COREY."

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS CAREFULLY.

"NO MATTER HOW ADVANCED PEOPLE BECOME... NO MATTER HOW MANY PLANETS WE COLONIZE... EVENTUALLY CROWDS STILL GATHER TO WATCH TWO DAMAGED MEN HURT EACH OTHER IN PUBLIC."

A COLD SMIRK CROSSES KEN'S VISAGE.

"AND GUYS LIKE US GET VERY GOOD AT TURNING THAT DAMAGE INTO IDENTITY."

THE CHAIN SWINGS SOFTLY FROM HIS HAND AS HE WALKS.

"YOU CALL YOURSELF THE KING OF THE WRESTLERS."

A FAINT EXHALE THROUGH HIS NOSE.

"I USED TO CALL MYSELF GODLY."

KEN GLANCES DOWNWARD BRIEFLY.

"YOU KNOW WHAT BOTH OF THOSE THINGS REALLY ARE?"

ANOTHER MOMENT TO ALLOW THE WORD TO ABSORB.

"ARMOR."

THE WORD LANDS QUIETLY.

"BECAUSE IF PEOPLE FEAR THE IMAGE ENOUGH... THEY STOP LOOKING UNDERNEATH IT."

THE WIND RATTLES SOFTLY AGAINST THE CARGO TRANSPORT BEHIND HIM.

"I THINK THAT'S WHY I UNDERSTAND YOU BETTER THAN MOST PEOPLE DO."

KEN STOPS WALKING.

"YOU'RE NOT ADDICTED TO VIOLENCE, COREY."

KEN WAGS HIS FINGER AT THE CAMERA

"YOU'RE ADDICTED TO WHAT VIOLENCE LETS YOU AVOID."

HIS EYES LOCK ONTO THE CAMERA NOW.

"SILENCE."

THE WORD SETTLES HARD.

"BECAUSE SILENCE IS WHERE MEMORY LIVES."

ANOTHER LONG PAUSE.

"AND MEMORY IS DANGEROUS FOR MEN LIKE US."

KEN SLOWLY WRAPS THE CHAIN ONCE AROUND HIS FIST AGAIN.

"THERE WERE YEARS OF MY LIFE I BARELY REMEMBER OUTSIDE WRESTLING RINGS."

HIS VOICE BECOMES HUSHED..

"AIRPORTS. HOTELS. LOCKER ROOMS. PAINKILLERS. COFFEE. ARENA LIGHTS."

PAUSE.

"RINSE AND REPEAT UNTIL SOMETHING INSIDE YOU FINALLY SHUTS OFF."

HIS JAW FLEXES SLIGHTLY AS HE REMEMBERS HIS OWN EXPERIENCES..

"THE AUDIENCE CALLED IT INTENSITY."

A FAINT SHAKE OF HIS HEAD.

"WHAT IT REALLY WAS..."

A RENEWED QUIET SETTLES IN THE AIR

"...WAS GRIEF WITH NOWHERE TO GO."

THE WIND HUMS LOUDER NOW. KEN GLANCES BRIEFLY TOWARD THE DISTANT COLONY.

"I BURIED SOMEONE WHEN I WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD."

NO DRAMATICS. NO SWELLING EMOTION. JUST FACT.

"AND AFTERWARD, I SPENT YEARS PRETENDING VIOLENCE MADE ME FEEL LESS HELPLESS."

THE CHAIN RATTLES SOFTLY.

"FOR AWHILE, IT WORKED."

A FLICKER OF STILLNESS.

"THAT'S THE LIE MEN LIKE US TELL OURSELVES."

HIS EXPRESSION HARDENS SLIGHTLY.

"THAT IF WE BECOME DANGEROUS ENOUGH... BRUTAL ENOUGH... FEARED ENOUGH... EVENTUALLY WE WON'T FEEL BROKEN ANYMORE."

KEN LOOKS DOWN BRIEFLY AT THE CHAIN IN HIS HAND.

"AS GOOD AS I WAS AT LYING, SO MUCH SO THAT I CONVINCED MYSELF, I DISCOVERED ONE TRUTH. ALL VIOLENCE REALLY DOES IS SIMPLIFY THE WORLD."

THE CAMERA SLOWLY MOVES CLOSER.

"HIT FIRST. SURVIVE. KEEP MOVING."

"NO GRIEF. NO VULNERABILITY. NO REFLECTION."

HIS EYES NARROW.

"THAT SIMPLICITY BECOMES ADDICTIVE."

SILENCE STRETCHES BETWEEN THE WORDS.

"AND THAT'S WHY YOU CONCERN ME."

NOT ANGER. NOT MOCKERY. CERTAINTY.

"BECAUSE WHEN I LOOK AT COREY BLACK, I DON'T SEE SOMEBODY USING VIOLENCE AS A TOOL ANYMORE. NO, NO, NO, NO. I SEE SOMEBODY DISAPPEARING INTO IT."

THE WIND WHISTLES SOFTLY ACROSS THE OPEN WASTELAND.

"FOR MOST OF MY CAREER, PEOPLE THOUGHT I ENJOYED HURTING OTHER PEOPLE."

KEN LAUGHS ONCE UNDER HIS BREATH.

"WHAT IT REALLY WAS... IT WAS THAT I ENJOYED NOT FEELING HELPLESS."

THE HONESTY OF IT HANGS HEAVILY.

"AND EVENTUALLY I LEARNED SOMETHING YOU HAVEN'T FIGURED OUT YET."

HE SLOWLY POINTS TOWARD THE CAMERA.

"IF VIOLENCE BECOMES THE ONLY THING THAT GIVES YOUR LIFE CLARITY... EVENTUALLY YOU STOP BEING A PERSON."

ANOTHER INTENTIONALLY LONG SILENCE.

"YOU BECOME A WOUND."

THE WORDS SETTLE INTO THE DEAD MARTIAN AIR. KEN STARTS WALKING AGAIN, SLOWER THIS TIME.

"YOU KNOW WHAT THE WRESTLING INDUSTRY DOES TO PEOPLE LIKE US?"

KEN UTTERS A SOUND THAT LANDS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A LAUGH AND A SCOFF.

"IT REWARDS THE DAMAGE."

THE CHAIN SWINGS SOFTLY AT HIS SIDE.

"THE MORE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE YOU BECOME, THE LOUDER PEOPLE CHEER. THEN WHAT? YOU BLEED MORE. THEY PRAISE YOU MORE. YOU BREAK YOURSELF WORSE. THEY CALL YOU LEGENDARY."

HIS EXPRESSION DARKENS SLIGHTLY.

"AND AFTER THAT? THE LINE BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND SELF-DESTRUCTION DISAPPEARS."

THE CARGO HAULER CREAKS SOFTLY BEHIND HIM.

"I THINK YOU CROSSED THAT LINE AWHILE AGO."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"AND MAYBE PART OF YOU KNOWS IT."

KEN STOPS AGAIN.

"BECAUSE UNDERNEATH ALL THE NOISE... ALL THE MYTHOLOGY... ALL THE 'KING OF THE WRESTLERS' BULLSHIT..."

HE TILTS HIS HEAD SLIGHTLY.

"YOU SOUND EXHAUSTED."

THE SENTENCE LANDS HARD.

"NOT PHYSICALLY."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"SPIRITUALLY."

THE WIND OUTSIDE THE COLONY WALLS HOWLS FAINTLY IN THE DISTANCE.

"I KNOW THAT EXHAUSTION. I KNOW THAT'S WHY YOU ONLY SHOW UP HERE EVERY FEW MONTHS BECAUSE THERE COMES A TIME WHERE VIOLENCE STOPS FEELING EXCITING... IT JUST STARTS FEELING FAMILIAR. THAT FAMILIARITY IS DANGEROUS."

HIS GRIP TIGHTENS SLIGHTLY AROUND THE CHAIN.

"BECAUSE ONE DAY YOU WAKE UP AND REALIZE THE MONSTER EVERYBODY ROMANTICIZED..."

KEN'S VOICE LOWERS.

"...WAS REALLY JUST A GRIEVING MAN SLOWLY DESTROYING HIMSELF IN PUBLIC."

THE CAMERA SLOWLY TIGHTENS CLOSER.

"I GOT LUCKY, COREY."

THE ADMISSION FEELS STRANGE COMING FROM HIM.

"I FOUND REASONS TO BECOME HUMAN AGAIN."

HIS EYES DRIFT DOWNWARD BRIEFLY.

"A WIFE. CHILDREN. A HOME. "PEOPLE WHO EXPECTED ME TO COME BACK ALIVE."

THE CHAIN LOOSENS AGAIN IN HIS HAND.

"THAT CHANGES A MAN, BECAUSE ONCE YOU HAVE SOMETHING REAL TO LOSE... VIOLENCE STOPS FEELING GLAMOROUS."

THE WIND HUMS SOFTLY AGAINST THE TRANSPORT HULL.

"YOU KNOW WHAT SCARES ME MOS, COREY?"

KEN FINALLY LOOKS DIRECTLY INTO THE LENS AGAIN.

"IT ISN'T THAT THE OLD VERSION OF ME STILL EXISTS."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"IT'S THAT I STILL REMEMBER EXACTLY HOW TO CARRY HIM."

THE WORDS SETTLE HEAVILY.

"AND THAT'S YOUR MISTAKE COMING INTO THIS MATCH."

HIS JAW TIGHTENS.

"LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE, YOU WILL CLAIM THAT PEACE MADE ME SOFTER."

A FAINT SHAKE OF HIS HEAD.

"NO...IT MADE ME DANGEROUS."

THE CHAIN UNWRAPS SLOWLY FROM HIS HAND NOW. METAL LINKS SLIDING SOFTLY AGAINST ONE ANOTHER.

"THERE'S A DIFFERENCE."

KEN TOSSES THE CHAIN ONTO THE CARGO RAMP BEHIND HIM. THE METALLIC CRACK ECHOES THROUGH THE EMPTINESS.

"FOR YOU, EXTREME RULES IS LIBERATION."

HE STARES AT THE CHAIN FOR A MOMENT.

"FOR ME? IT'S MEMORY. IT'S A REMINDER OF WHAT I HAVE NOW AND HOW FAR I AM WILLING TO GO TO PROTECT IT."

THE WIND GROWS LOUDER.

"YOU THINK THIS ENVIRONMENT REWARDS WHOEVER IS WILLING TO DESCEND FURTHEST INTO DARKNESS."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

"AND MAYBE MOST OF THE TIME IT DOES."

KEN SLOWLY FOLDS HIS ARMS ACROSS HIS CHEST.

"BUT COREY..."

HIS EYES NARROW.

*"YOU ARE STEPPING INTO THAT ENVIRONMENT WITH SOMEBODY WHO ALREADY SURVIVED— NO!
SOMEONE WHO HAS OVERCOMETHE THING YOU'RE STILL TRYING TO TURN YOURSELF INTO."*

THAT HANGS THERE. HEAVY.

"FOR YOU, VIOLENCE IS IDENTITY. FOR MYSELF?"

A BEAT OF CONTEMPLATION.

"IT'S A LANGUAGE I LEARNED WHILE GRIEVING. AND I BECAME VERY... VERY FLUENT."

THE RED DUST SWIRLS HARDER AROUND HIS BOOTS NOW.

"AT THE PAY-PER-VIEW, THIS ISN'T GOING TO FEEL CINEMATIC."

ANOTHER PAUSE.

*"IT'S NOT GONNA BE MYTHOLOGY. IT'S NOT GONNA BE ART. AND IT SURE AS HELL ISN'T GONNA
MAKE EITHER ONE OF US IMMORTAL."*

HIS VOICE GROWS COLDER NOW.

"IT'S GONNA BE UGLY."

THE SENTENCE LANDS LIKE CONCRETE.

*"BECAUSE MATCHES LIKE THIS STOP BEING ENTERTAINING THE SECOND SOMEBODY REALIZES THE
OTHER MAN ISN'T BLUFFING."*

KEN TAKES A SLOW STEP CLOSER TO THE CAMERA

"AND COREY..."

ANOTHER STEP.

"YOU'RE GOING TO KEEP TALKING LIKE YOU'RE INTRODUCING ME TO DARKNESS."

ANOTHER

"YOU'RE NOT."

HIS EYES NEVER LEAVE THE LENS NOW.

"YOU ARE WALKING DIRECTLY TOWARD A VERSION OF MYSELF I SPENT YEARS TRYING TO BURY."

THE WIND HOWLS ACROSS THE WASTELAND.

"AND IF YOU WAKE THAT MAN UP..."

A LONG SILENCE.

"HE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT APPLAUSE. HE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT LEGACY. AND HE CERTAINLY DOESN'T CARE WHETHER EITHER ONE OF US LEAVES THAT ARENA INTACT."

THE WORDS SIT HEAVILY BETWEEN THEM.

"THAT'S THE VERSION OF ME PEOPLE USED TO FEAR."

KEN TILTS HIS HEAD SLIGHTLY.

"THE SADDEST PART ABOUT YOU ISN'T THE VIOLENCE. IT'S THE PERFORMANCE. SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE, YOU CONVINCED YOURSELF BEING EMOTIONALLY UNWELL MADE YOU PROFOUND. IT DOESN'T. IT JUST MAKES YOU LOUD. THERE'S NO TORTURED GENIUS HIDING UNDERNEATH ALL THIS, COREY. JUST A MAN SO TERRIFIED OF STILLNESS HE KEEPS BLEEDING IN PUBLIC TO AVOID HEARING HIS OWN THOUGHTS."

Fade to Black