Recommended Music:

The scene opens on a late spring afternoon in New York City. Finally, it's seventy-five degrees out. The birds are twittering, the Yoshino trees are in splendorous pink bloom, and the grass waves gently like fingers feeling a breeze. The cemetery looks gothic and dated against the backdrop of the New York skyline, but also tranquil. There are parked vehicles along the cobblestone paths and visitors freely wandering about.

Aaron Dearinger just so happens to be one of those wanderers.

The Texas native looks out of place as per usual in an army green trucker hat, a sleeveless Nascar shirt, and worn blue jeans. He's wearing gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses and has a wad of chew in the side of his mustachioed mouth, and the family mutt Maverick runs and bounds at his heels. A bystander in the background says something about the dog being off a leash, but Aaron pays no mind. He spits a glob of brown juice into the grass as his dog runs ahead of him, never breaking pace.

"Green-Wood Cemetery," Aaron says, nodding at the camera. **"When I told that boy Kaine I was comin' up here, kid had a good laugh. Now why in the hell would you cut a dang ol' promo up in some dang ol' cemetery, he asked me. That's a damn good question."**

The sun glints off of Aaron's sunglasses as he trudges through the rows and rows of century old tombstones in his none-too-fancy, shit-kickin' cowboy boots. In loving memory. Forever in our hearts. Safe in the arms of Jesus. The messages were somber, but you'd never know by the expression on Maverick the Dog's face. Slack-jawed, tongue askew, tail wagging, happy as all get out.

"A better one might be why the hell would I be cuttin' a promo without my partner? Leadin' into the single most im-portant tournament of my career? Well, Josh is helpin' me sort some personal affairs; you know, *family shit.* And I figgered while he does that, the least I could do, seein' as I happen to be one half of the Moonshiners an' all, is run my mouth a lil' bit. I don't do it often, so when I do? Y'know I mean it. But why a cemetery of all places, Dearinger?"

"I wanted to give ya'll the allegorical experience. The preacher on a Sunday bit. Take a look around us…this graveyard could symbolize any number of things in my life."

The camera pans around. It's an absolutely gorgeous day. The sky is blue and cloudless, the birds abundant.

"Hell, maybe it's 'spose to represent my marriage. Feels perdy dead since Reckoning Day, when the old lady found out in real time I done sold our house in Houston."

“Like anything else, I figgered it’d blow over. Couple days of the silent treatment max. Ain’t nothin’ I ain’t used to. What’s she really got to complain about anyways? Dearingers got everything they need right here in New York. It ain’t like I’m some loser. *I’m* the provider, she ain’t got the first clue how much worser-off she could be.”

Aaron and Maverick come to a steep hill that they begin to ascend. When they reach the top, Maverick plops down on his haunches, panting. Aaron kneels down to scratch the mutt behind his ears, chuckling before he continues.

“Boy was I mistaken. Where in the hell she get a rental car anyways? Packed up the kids, took ‘em to Kaine’s, thank the lord. At least I know where she’s at, who she’s with. At least I know Josh’ll keep her safe in case DEMONSTRance gets any more bright idee-ers.”

“I’d be lyin’ if I said things weren't rocky, though. At the end of the day, I believe Laney’ll be there come hell or highwater. That’s the truth of it. So no, we ain’t here on a beautiful weekday afternoon at the Green-Wood cemetery on account of my relationship.”

Aaron stands up, and he and Maverick resume their walk. A statue of an angel with a sword casts an imposing shadow across the grassy knoll, but the Dearinger and his family dog pass through it nonplussed.

“Well then maybe I came out here on account of me an’ Kaine’s opponents, DEPRAVITY and Sammy Rochester. They’re a couple of spooky sons of bitches, ain’t they?”

“Betcha there’s a stiff or two here in the ground been put there early by the likes o’ Sammy Rochester. Would it surprise ya? I tell you what, that mask he wears might *look* Hollywood, but it stinks somethin’ real. I wouldn’t put murder past the big feller, no siree. I ain’t the naive type.”

“What better place than a boot hill boneyard to talk shit about a blue-haired lot lizard and a seven foot corpse-fucker, huh?”

Aaron spits again and grins a tobacco-stained smile at the camera, spreading his arms out.

“Y’know, Laney told me the word for that one night. The word for corpse-fucker, I mean. Necro? Narcophiliac? ‘Sum like that? All them true crime podcasts she listens to. Personally I hate’em. Borin’ as hell.”

The Texas redneck starts walking again, this time up a row of headstones.

“Twice now the Moonshiners done gone to war with DEMONSTRance, and as it stands today, we’re one apiece. I reckon me an’ Kaine plan to fix that come Zenith”

Aaron stops and takes off his sunglasses, folding them over the rim of his shirt collar as if to talk to the camera with those sad but determined blue eyes of his.

“But no…the spooky scenery ain’t for them neither. Why cut a promo in a cemetery, Dearinger? Is it ‘cause yer wrasslin’ dream’s about to be dead and buried?”

We resume our walk-a-long monologue with Aaron and his pup. The latter paws at a bouquet of freshly laid roses. Aaron puts two fingers under his mustache and whistles and Maverick quickly jerks away.

“I sold the first home I ever bought, the home I raised my family in, to be here full-time in New York, a place I ain’t exactly well-suited for; to be here in SHOOT Project. I wagered my family on a bet that I’d finally become the man everybody been waitin’ ‘fer me to be. I come *this* close to tastin’ championship gold, but the short of it is, I didn’t win. An’ now I’m back to square one. Fightin’ with the old lady. Fightin’ with my partner, from time to time. Fightin’ for the dream. Maybe the dream come too late.”

“Is that why I came here? Lay my dreams to final rest?”

Maverick and Aaron clear the macabre figureheads and crosses, the marble tombstones and plaques, entering a long grassy clearing that reveals skyscrapers beyond. The two come upon a freshly dug grave…one without a stone. It’s cordoned off with yellow tape, apparently in anticipation of some future funeral. Aaron laughs as he shoves his hands in his pockets, halting in front of the gravesite in observance.

“Yer out of yer gawd damned mind if you believe that.”

“Naw, I came here ‘cause I wanted ya’ll…and when I say ya’ll, I mean the DEPRAVITIES, the Michael Dravens, the X-Caliburs, the Holden Nobodies, the I-AMs and the I-AINT’S…I wanted ya’ll to take a good hard look at that there empty patch o’ dirt and understand *this*…”

The camera zooms in on the empty grave.

“...that’s where yer ‘gon haveter put me to keep them Pantheon champeen belts from around my waist.”

Slowly we zoom further and further out, first from behind Aaron and his dog, then higher, above the cemetery, above the city, until the scene finally fades.

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It was nearing sunset when a dark blue Nissan Altima with a female driver pulled up in front of the suburban ranch-style home where her husband's tag team partner and his family resided. Laney Dearinger didn't know where else to go. Her daughters were in the backseat of this rental, which had been paid for by said tag team partner.

"Girls, wait here."

It wasn't an issue, they weren't even paying attention to her. Better they were distracted by their phones versus worrying about their parents fighting. Laney got out of the sedan, gently closing the door behind her before she made her way to the home's entrance. She took a deep breath and smoothed her hair back before reaching up to press the doorbell.

"Hold on a sec!"

Came a deeper voice before the front door opened and there stood Josh Kaine, shirtless no less carrying a bowl of some pasta dish. His brows furrowed in concern when he saw the expression on her face. **"Miss Laney, you okay?"**

"Aaron and I had a fight." She shook her head. **"I hate to even ask but…can you maybe put me and the girls up for a night? Wimberley feels safe with you and--"**

"O'course I can. C'mon in," He didn't even need to think about that. **"Y'all can stay as long as ya need."**

"I have to get the girls outta the car first."

"Oh right! I'll come help with yer stuff." Josh put his bowl down on the hallway table and followed the older woman out to the car.

The youngest Dearinger girl scrambled out of the car upon finally paying attention to where they were and all but tackled the son of Jada Kaine. **"Josh!! You're gonna keep us safe from the monsters, right?"**

“Course I am! Hold on tight, kiddo!”

He was grinning as he stooped down to pick the girl up, letting her maneuver onto his back as he moved to the now open trunk to pull the couple of hastily-packed bags out and shut the trunk lid. Gracie was soon out of the car as well and following her mother inside, her attention entirely on the phone. The front door was closed after them and Josh was careful when he let Wimberly slide down from his back to the floor.

“You and the girls eat yet?” Laney shook her head and Josh just smiled at her before looking to the Dearinger girls. **“Hey, Jess is in the kitchen, why don’t y’all go grab a bowl? She made her goulash and she made a big ol’ chocolate cake earlier for dessert.”**

Both girls’ eyes went wide, they’d had Jesse’s cooking before and the promise of chocolate cake for dessert sent them dashing to the kitchen. The remaining adults in the living room were left alone and Laney’s mask finally slipped as she leaned back against the wall, hands covering her face.

“He *sold* our house.”

“He *what*?” Josh raised an eyebrow as he picked up his bowl, **“I thought y’all had--”**

“Our house in Texas, we were just renting it out on AirBnB while we were up here and he just…*sold it* without even…” It wasn’t hard to tell that the older woman was distraught. The bowl was put back down on the table and Josh moved to wrap tattooed arms around Laney. She returned the embrace without a moment’s thought and it wasn’t too long before the tears started to fall. Laney Dearinger wasn’t sad, she was fucking *angry* that her husband had done such a thing. She cried silently for a few minutes in his arms, before taking a staggered breath and wiping at her eyes. **“So I left with the girls and…”**

“You don’t gotta explain nothin’ to me, Laney.” He took a step back to give her some space. **“Y’all can stay here long as you need.”**

“We’ll just stay the night and I’ll figure out what to do then, you’re already doing too much for us--”

Josh Kaine held up a hand to give her pause. **“Look, just stay a coupla’ days, give yerself time to breathe and think. My Ma’s gonna be gone for a few days anyway, so you and the girls can sleep in her room down here. Me and Jesse sleep upstairs. Ma ain’t too good with stairs no more.”**

“I…I just…” She took another ragged breath and then another before reaching out to squeeze his hand. **“Thank you for--”**

“Don’t gotta thank me none neither. C’mon, we’ll get ya a bowl of goulash and we’ll all have a movie night. Jess got that new *Avatar* movie all ready for us to watch later, yanno the one with the big blue aliens?”

Laney wiped what wetness remained from her eyes and nodded. **“Yeah, I know it.”**

His bowl was picked up again and he squeezed her hand in return, leading her to the kitchen where his sister and her daughters were already gathered. It was easier to breathe a little deeper now and the girls had their bowls of goulash. At least tonight, she could get a reprieve from her troubles and thinking about the unthinkable.

At least under this roof, she could trust that the man of this house would actually *listen* to her and give her some measure of peace for the night.