



Profectus

You got the experience nobody else got. Poor guy. You were far less of a pest than Chris Lawler was, and your reward for it was a violent and hostile drubbing at my hands.

You were the first. You were also the last. After that, my foot inexplicably came off the gas pedal. I continued to be efficient after that, but I haven't really shown anything else.

They stood at what felt like a portal into a new reality. James Evans took a step forward and cocked his head to the side. Seymour examined the situation with a single sweep of his eyes. This was a warehouse gym of sorts in the most makeshift of senses, metal decking and composite shelving units with hastily left behind items giving away its previous life. He vaguely made out a set of front ring posts that towered over him, but couldn't see much of anything else beyond the noxious white glare.

"That's not William," said Maya, squeezing Seymour's forearm. They both watched as James, face now less blinded by the light, calmly and smoothly turned around and walked behind the shield of blinding photons. Legion was equally concerned, body tensed and pressed into Seymour's right leg.

"No it isn't." Seymour felt like he was repeating the obvious.

"We should go. Whatever this is, it's weird." The point of what was about to happen was lost on her. Not Seymour.

"I don't have an option. This is my job. I have some work to do." Two days before Breakdown and a rematch with Derek Adonis, he was given a memo without any subtext. This was it. *There's work to be done.*

Maya perused the backdrop of what was to host the next several hours of Seymour's life. She was so sweet in her concern. It was touching. She glanced at him, then back into the gym. **"Work? There's a weird fucking guy in there and he's just pacing back and forth. That's what William sent you here for? To take care of his problems? Are you some kind of hitman on the side? Jesus. Seymour, I don't like it. There's something off with that guy. I can always tell these things."**

Oh, the irony. **"That's James Evans. He's not a hostile."** The military jargon that sometimes just tumbled out of his mouth like a spinning spider from a single fiber of silk.

"Babe. Don't you feel his energy? It's nothing but hostile."

Seymour didn't pick up on it at all. He felt in some ways like he and James were more kindred spirits than either of them would want to admit, given the choice. Still, her barometer clearly detected shifts in pressure that he himself lacked the capacity to measure.

“I’m supposed to go in. Wait in the car.”

“Wait in the car? Did you fucking see the surrounding area? I’m coming inside.”

“I don’t think you can or should,” said Seymour. It was clear to him that William arranged a training session between two wrestlers under his banner. Maya was an unwelcome distraction.

“So, what, I’m supposed to just figure out what to do next?”

He shrugged his shoulder to unsettle his gym bag from the crest of his trapezius and let it fall into the clasp of his left hand. **“Go to the hotel and check in. Find somewhere to have dinner. Whatever you need to do. But you can’t go in there.”**

“I can go wherever the fuck I want,” the boundless free spirit regurgitated the dictates of her rural programming. Childhood spent in a provincial and indigent hellscape had equal but opposite effects on Seymour and Maya. For Maya, she didn’t know a boundary she wouldn’t cross. For Seymour, it meant being left utterly alone even in the most crowded of places. Even in relationships.

“I can’t have you seeing what’s going to happen.” Seymour was eager to improve on previous results. 14-0, but somehow, incomplete and imperfect. He wasn’t sure what it might take to accomplish that. He didn’t want another set of eyes on it either. **“I don’t know James. But from what little I know, I don’t want you around this.”**

“So you’re kicking me out. Just like in William’s office. Do you think I’m some accessory for you to just take on and off or something?” Her annoyance was palpable. Leftover tension.

“No. But this is my job. As you said, it’s in the description. This is my career, and you can’t be a part of it. Accepting that is your job.”

“It’s my job to support you. This is a part of that.”

Seymour took a step forward and turned around. He needed to say something good to dissuade any further delay.

“It’s your job to get out of the way of me finding the resolve I need to advance my career. This is me asking you to look within yourself to understand that we’re going to have to do things separately. I love you. Alright? I do. But you need to accept this is my reality. Then be ready to be my partner apart from all this. I know it’s a hard sell. But you’re going to have to get on board.”

He looked into her little hickory stained eyes. There was a slightly stunned glint behind the mounting dew.

“That’s the first time you’ve ever said you loved me first,” she said, blinking.

He wasn’t sure that he meant it. **“You know I do.”**

“I mean, in theory, of course. But it doesn’t hurt to have the occasional reminder.” She gave him a nervous smile. **“Alright, you win. You’re right. I’ll stay out, but I don’t want to leave. I’ll keep the doors locked, but if I feel in any way suspicious that I’m about to be murdered, I’m going to come running inside.”** She paused.

This fear that women had of being murdered, Seymour noted to be a constant in his dating life. It was a fear of Emma’s as well. The idea that they were helpless, defenseless, and ripe for killing. He wondered with Emma if it hadn’t been some kind of peculiar fetish. But the only thing that mattered now was that she accepted her ban.

“And Legion is coming with me,” she stated, matter-of-factly. Seymour looked down at the dog, who, head cocked, didn’t appear to mind the plan. His body was still heavy with sleep, after all, the product of a dog left to sleep for hours in the back seat. As a matter of protest, it occurred to Seymour to announce that the last swell of potential cutthroat territory was miles away, but he thought it best to let her have her murder fantasy. His dog was a different story. He was essential.

“Why?” His inquiry full of codependent weariness, he was faced with the truth of having never been separated from his faithful companion for longer than five or ten minute increments to get gas. Legion had been by his side through even the very worst of his bowel movements without so much as a whimper of complaint from a few feet away.

“Because if you’re doing it without me, you’re doing it without him, too. Legion can’t be a part of this career, either.”

Seymour tried to blink away a maturing headache. **“Legion comes to the ring with me. He’s my dog.”**

“Yeah, it’s very John Wick of you. I get that. But he doesn’t need to see it, either. And besides, I could use the company. Doesn’t that make sense?”

“Sure,” he answered with some skepticism, and totally unsure of who this John Wick was, **“I guess.”**

And then it occurred to him that Maya didn’t understand the importance of Legion to his overall grip on reality. On a lever scale, in the moment, Seymour had to choose between being free from Maya and pursuing his advancement and having his furry anchor by his side.

She leaned in and kissed him, keeping an open eye on the intermittently moving outline that now moved about behind the luminous shroud in between the visible ring posts. **“Work hard,”** she encouraged, showing her defused stance in her burrowing like a weevil into his chest. She didn’t like it. But she saw the truth in Seymour’s diatribe. That much was certain.

“I will.” There was no other choice. He unroofed her like a scab and stepped towards the brilliant floodlight.

“And I love you,” she said.

But I’m afraid that’s going to have to come to a screeching halt. Kim Williams lost our match, and yet somehow, it’s a black mark on my record. I understand why now.

You’re all learning that I can be had, aren’t you? Taking your little chances, waiting until my back is turned, then striking me with a brick. The importance of these adorable trick plays can’t be understated, because if I fail to adapt to a changing environment, I *will* suffer a defeat that I might not recover from.

All this doubt, and almost nothing to substantiate it. Surely, you understand, then, Adonis, that not only am I taking this match seriously, but treating it like it’s the biggest match of my career.

Stepping through the light, he was forced into a tight squint and an instinctive shield of his eyes with his palm. Once he was through, the scene was more clear. A wrestling ring *was* set up, but there were no ropes, and its canvas held the code of years of wear and tear and shoddy upkeep. Stains galore, nothing clean about it. There were no ropes attached to oxidized hook joints.

James Evans sat in a chair behind the far corner post. Seymour took to the chair nearest him, responding to the silence with what he perceived as a stronger and more threatening silence. James stoically laced up his boots. His energy was unlike anything Seymour had encountered before. It felt like he was preparing himself for war.

He knew of James’ accomplishments, but to this point, he felt like he had reached the level of professional dominance required to stand on equal footing. He peeled off his top to show James the physical animal he was dealing with. Then, he reached into his own bag and went for his black boots. His sweatpants would suffice for this.

He found his physique, a product of relentless weightlifting, calisthenics, and strict dieting, to serve as a deterrent for most. When he looked up, however, he noted that James paid him no heed whatsoever. He stood up, walked towards the cargo bay door, and hit a button on the side to close it. Then, he made his way to the ring.

He could feel how unbothered and unthreatened James was. It was, in turn, threatening to a man who had spent his whole life turning his body into an instrument of combat.

James slowly walked up a winter eaten set of steps into the ring. He was ready. Seymour detected the underlying threat of a physical encounter and was ready to respond in kind. He set to the tactic of taking his dear sweet time readying up his own boots. Eyelet by eyelet, Seymour set the black leather-bonded lace on its path. Making James think about it. Classic pissing contest.

“That’s not going to work,” said James, flatly. Seymour looked up. **“What’s that?”** He heard him perfectly. He wanted to see if he’d repeat it.

“I said hurry it up.” He doubled down without looking in his direction. Hands on his hips, pacing in small, disinterested circles.

“Patience,” warned Seymour. **“I’m almost ready.”**

“I know what you’re trying to do. It’s unimpressive.” He noted the responsive mind game he seemed to know that Seymour was playing.

“Tying my boots, really,” answered Seymour with an equal deadness of tone. **“Small miracles of western civilization, wouldn’t you agree?”**

“Delaying to try to get into my head. Or delaying because I’m not an ineffectual fat body. Time will tell, I suppose.” He knelt down to examine a large corroded metal ridge along the post. Not facing Seymour in any capacity.

“There’s no delay. Nothing to worry about. Just as long as we understand that you can’t get into my head, either.”

“I’m not trying to get into your head. I’m here on William’s request. Nothing more, nothing less.”

It was possible that Seymour had read too much into James’ aura, but he doubted it. **“Of course. As am I. Funny enough, he didn’t mention you.”**

“He told you to bring your gear. That should be more than enough information for a *rising star* like you.” Seymour sensed the sarcasm heavy in his voice. The fact that he had details on the content of their private conversation was not lost on him, especially since the first and only time he’d heard from William this week was to give him an address.

“Works for me,” he answered, trying to hide his anger towards the feeling of being kept in the dark, **“guess I’d better stop keeping you waiting, then.”**

Seymour avoided the steps altogether and launched himself up onto the apron, landing with a soft, sequential little hop. He rolled his shoulders and rolled his head side to side, three times a piece. James finally turned to him and smiled.

“Ready when you are,” said James, his athletic frame seemingly opening into a stance of readiness.

Seymour thought about how to approach this. Shoot for the legs? No. Keep it classic Creek. Wrestle him to the ground and target his throat. Seymour sized him up, advancing towards him in a concentric circle. James backed up in meticulous synchronic steps to match his advances. Even those steps unsettled him. Smooth and placed with elite preparedness. Incredible footwork, and he hadn’t even moved on him yet.

And then, it happened. Seymour saw his opening. He cut the circling act and cut into the interior, threatening with a fake lunge and backing him into a corner. In James' face, no panic. In fact, if he didn't know better, he'd say there was a barely noticeable hint of enjoyment. Seymour inched closer, readying his shoulders to go to work.

James had no choice but to lock up when Seymour did. He immediately adapted a defensive stance, keeping his arms close to his chest and not allowing him the inside track. Something Seymour hadn't seen yet. He was still winning the power battle, and winning it with ease. He drove James into the middle of the ring, his opponent adopting a pressurized center of gravity to resist being driven to the ground. Valiant efforts. Seymour stepped behind his leg and forced him down anyway, feeling the tight engagement of James' core radiating through his upper body and into his arms, where he was able to slip out and find himself behind Seymour.

But instead of taking advantage, all James did was give him a stiff slap to the back of the head that rung his bell hard. His tinnitus was immediately activated. Seymour suppressed his groan of discomfort.

"Show me something." It wasn't a command, but a challenge. James didn't seem remotely winded whatsoever over the scuffle. Seymour, hiding his strain.

"Nice trick," said Seymour, rubbing the back of his head.

"Just luck, I guess. Or whatever it is that soothes your brittle self-worth." James reset himself, looking down on Seymour briefly before he rose to his feet. He had to wonder if maybe he was out of his element here. After all, brittle self-worth had historically been a Seymour Murphy specialty. But that was long ago.

He took a breath and began to circle James again. James, not to be outdone, took an alternate route this time that forced Seymour to move laterally. His desperation to get his hands on James for a second attempt to prove his escape had been a fluke got the better of him. James sidestepped and swept his leg with a single-arm roundhouse chop block. Seymour was back on the ground. His Fall of Man teammate, standing above him once again.

"Almost," he said. **"Next time."**

Ear ringing and back on the canvas, he was bested again with little effort. He felt dirt granules adhering to his skin from burgeoning sweat on his skin.

No more games. Seymour had recently considered himself adaptable. But now, out of spite for James, he had a new mode. Use what James already knew was coming and prove that his opponent was powerless to stop him.

"Do that again," requested Seymour, grime coating his glisten under the di

"If you insist," he responded nonchalantly.

Seymour watched his feet and anticipated his lateral dart, and when he did, Seymour was able to catch James before he went to ground to grab his leg. Instead, he aggressively flung his arm over the top and grabbed James' head with the inner aspect of his bicep, clenching down. He stepped and flung James over the top of his hip, landing hard on the mat.

He anticipated that James would try to fight out of it. He didn't. He laid still and controlled his breathing, calmly searching the underside of Seymour's arm for a seam. He found it. That's because Seymour allowed it. He slid his hand underneath and pried the arm off the side of his neck. Then, upon scampering to his feet, Seymour lunged in and locked on his preferred hold, the Canary.

He felt the gasping gurgle in the webbing of his hand. He didn't want to take liberties with a teammate, but this felt strangely personal to him, as if a simple training exercise to James Evans was a matter of life and death. He clamped down and listened for the imminent death rattle.

But it didn't come. A head temporarily slumped over it was slowly lifted to show a face flushed like a candy apple. And James, with bloodshot, pale eyes, smiling.

And then in one fell swoop, he dropped to his feet, swatted away the business hand, and when he came back up, leveled Seymour with a stiff right hand that sent Seymour crashing back to the mat for a third time.

He rolled over, holding his jaw. It was a deflating thing, really. Seymour had never worked with somebody of James' caliber before, but it was as if James had seen a million of him come and go.

Laying on the soot covered mat and in pain where he'd been struck, he rolled over and saw the athletic, broad frame of James Evans drifting into the corner. He put his hand to his mouth. Filth and blood on his palm.

The message was unclear when it was sent, but now it was decoded. This wasn't a sign of diminishing belief. It was a call to escalate into a serious threat.

He needed James Evans to show him how to become that.

Towering over him, he didn't extend a hand. He cleared his throat, spit over the apron, and said the same word he'd hear from James for the next several hours.

"Again."

That's because it is. I alluded to the opportunity to do this with you one more time, but at the risk of being coy, it isn't *just* because I have the opportunity to put you down again.

It's because I get to show you how, in a very short window of time, everything has changed. The Waylon Creek you faced months ago has had no choice but to adapt to a changing set of circumstances. So much so that by the time you and I step into the ring together, you won't even recognize what stands against you.

A lot of change, so little time, same exact floundering, blithering, bloviating Adonis, a very different Creek.

But no matter what, now and always, prepared to pay the next fine handed down, and you'd do well to remember that.