



F43.11, Home

May 15th, 0900 Hours

The rest of the world was unaware of how the weapon known as Waylon Creek fell under the stewardship of William Heaven. There was no explanation offered the moment William began shadowing a high end prospect to the ring. It was just so. The presence of the manager coincided with a change in approach in the young wrestler from methodical to hostile. It paired well with a rapid escalation to behaviors so unhinged that the company fined him, forthrightly stripped him of the Television Title weeks before he would've invariably surpassed the record reign, and the great state of Colorado attempted to jail him.

In spite of this, there wasn't a soul in administration who could deny that somehow, in short order, Waylon Creek had become a large draw. Before anyone had time to blink, Waylon would find himself involved in major money printing bouts and showcased in main events with some frequency, and William Heaven was standing behind the World's Heavyweight Champion and the tag team champions.

It was a relationship of symbiosis that Seymour Murphy had misconstrued from the very beginning. Over the last year, it had become perfectly clear that William's interest in the business side of wrestling affairs was paramount, and that he had only really chosen a masked rookie to stand at his side because of his profile. He had everything that William wanted in a candidate for his rebel army. He was a good soldier. Strong, disciplined, hungry. Imposing and willing to do the dirty work that most others wouldn't subject themselves to. He ate right, never indulged, never gave himself over to smoke or spirit, kept his body clean and ready for combat. And perhaps, most importantly of all, eager to please a male figure that showed an interest in his development at any cost.

Where the world's awareness was left to speculation, Seymour Murphy remembered well how this all had come together. He recalled the weeks of professional courting, downright meddling, the grand gestures that led to his choice to allow William Heaven into the company as his representative. He wouldn't have admitted it then, but there was something fulfilling about being pursued by a magnate like William Heaven for his talents. A compulsion for recognition that hadn't been unearthed until after he left his Iowan cell. The most addictive substance known to man, his father had once remarked with a cigarette in hand, was praise. Seymour didn't understand when he said those words how true they were. He understood them a little better after he'd been involuntarily decommissioned from military service and couldn't stand to look at his medals any longer.

As he watched the sighing ghost of steam emanate from his black coffee, he remembered that their

initial meeting had happened in a place just like this. A small hole in the wall diner that bought fresh whole eggs and meat from local farms that Seymour relied on for wholesome breakfasts on the road. He sat in a booth some thirty miles outside of Austin, waiting for the de facto leader of the Fall of Man to arrive. He did not have the same curiosity he did a year ago almost to the very day. He knew exactly what the meeting was before it even happened.

Legion, the constant variable that kept him harbored, sat upright from his place on the floor. His matte black fur held iridescent ghosts, haunted by the dim fluorescent lighting. His stooped posture made him look more vulture than dog, Seymour thought. He made no bones about his feelings in regards to this relationship, but he had learned to accept it. William would never be his favorite. But the more the manager weeded himself into the shell of James Evans, the more readily Legion was willing to accept the necessity of the battle plans. Poor spinal alignment was a considerable improvement in comparison to the utter lifeless husk he would become when exposed to William for longer blocks of time — though Seymour did concern himself over the possibility of his companion developing canine arthritis.

He looked at his watch. 0902. William had once remarked on the importance of punctuality that it was a compass for true priority. The speaker of that phrase was running behind. Seymour ran the lateral aspect of his hand down Legion's head, who settled into it like he was accepting a glove slap.

The moment the clock struck 0903, William buzzed through the door, the tail of his suit jacket whipping upwards with hurry. In spite of his rushed pace, he calmly took a seat in the booth, averted his gaze downward, and promptly removed his phone.

"Hold on. I forgot to mention something to James," said William vacantly.

"James," mimicked Seymour without inflection. The man. The champion. The figurehead. The *leader*. The thought of his tutelage no longer interested him. The rabid vines of jealousy had him in their snare. Where Seymour failed to deliver, James was able to do so. The circumstances of his own involvement in this cataclysm were unfortunate, but ultimately irrelevant. The truest self inflicted gunshot wound he had ever suffered.

William considered each padded punch carefully. His touch screen had more mileage on it towards business endeavors than it did in the direction of his own family. Seymour looked out the window, suppressing a desire to sigh, and raised the coffee to his lips. He was twelve years old again, sitting down to a birthday lunch his father didn't seem interested in.

"Alright," said William, clearing his throat as he set the sleek black window to the world down on the table, "let's get down to business." He folded his hands before him and looked across the table, sternly. "Christopher Dumont."

"Don't worry about Dumont," swiftly remarked Seymour. "He can't touch me. The world has suffered that truth enough."

William cocked his eyebrow, then sighed along with his trademark nod. "Yes, yes. We've seen you beat both him and David Striker. But something has changed in those boys recently," he warned, looking out the window. "My job is to play mind games. In some ways, I dare say it needs to be such that it casts an ominous shadow over *you*. But in this case, I may have done it a little too well."

"Well," said Seymour, shifting in his seat, "it'll be taken care of just the same."

"I don't doubt that you will," admitted William, coolly trying to hide his chill over what the Dangerous Minds might have planned for him. "Tonight, though, Seymour, I'm looking for something a little more impactful. You know what I mean by that, don't you, son?"

Seymour nodded, involuntarily fiddling with the top button of his standard flannel hoodie. "I have an idea."

“Men like Christopher Dumont,” began William, “they’re determined. Obsessed, even. They typically won’t stop until they get a taste of what they’re after, and then once the hook is in, there’s no telling how far something might go. Now I admire your confidence, son, but it’s your hubris that has me a little more concerned. Do not take men like this lightly. You never know when they could surprise you.”

It struck Seymour that perhaps William had somehow lost sight of his charge’s own ambition. “So we understand each other, then,” he responded flatly, averting his eyes from the window to William for a moment, then returning to his view of the empty parking lot. The reflection he caught staring back at him had shameful eyes.

“Do we?” asked William, rhetorically. “I suppose that brings us to an uncomfortable topic. One that I hope you know I take no pleasure in reopening with you, given...” he paused, searching for a delicate seam, “...the situation we find ourselves in.”

Seymour broke eye contact with his own reflection and glanced back over towards William, who was now all business, sitting upright and fixated on a man he considered his subordinate. Seeing the concerned nature of William’s visage, he turned himself around, squaring his shoulders back to face the puppeteer.

“I know that Giovanni and James have their concerns, William,” he said. “But they are unfounded. I haven’t done anything to earn their distrust.”

“I’m not speaking on their behalf,” said William, looking squarely at Seymour with paternal sternness. “I’m speaking on mine. James gave you your plaudits for what you did for him. For *us*. And maybe for a few minutes, I believed you had restabilized. But the things I’m detecting in you lately are...*not* commensurate with my goals.”

Seymour cocked an eyebrow. “Your goals?”

“I meant *our* goals,” clapped William, holding his hands up to halt traffic. “We have a mission, and as you know, if all the players don’t do their part, I can’t do mine. Your jealousy is raising some red flags that I can’t ignore anymore.”

“I’m not jealous,” said Seymour in a way that he knew William wouldn’t believe. “Maybe I’m just wondering where the team was when it came down to my match with Xander and why I was deployed to take care of business on James’ behalf.” And in Seymour’s mind, that was the *real* question. The team approach had benefited James. When it came to standing beside Waylon Creek, there was nobody.

“The situations were completely different, Seymour, you know that,” defended William. “You were Plan A. *You*, not us. We stood behind you and backed you to take care of business. That’s a referendum on how James and *I*,” he pointed to himself, “view *you*. We hold you in the highest regard. You were the first recruit for a reason. And in the end, in a match that could’ve gone either way, you came out on the wrong end for the very first time.”

Seymour flinched, but tried to hide it with a sip of his coffee. He didn’t like hearing about his own failures costing the group. He didn’t say anything, just took in the smell of the dark roast. Legion fell headlong on the floor, keeping his watchful eye up on William.

“When James stated his intent, that was the last gun in the cabinet. There were no more opportunities coming. Giovanni doesn’t care about prizes or top honors. We needed to take our chance and take it with vigor. That’s why it was *paramount* that you involved yourself,” said William, bluntly. “But lately, you haven’t been communicating with us. You haven’t seemed on the same page. Whether the boys trust you or not isn’t the problem, Seymour. It’s more that in a calendar year, I haven’t had to ask myself if *I* should trust that look in your eye.”

Stunned by the sentiment, Seymour peered up. He could tell from the stone cast of William’s serious expression that his concerns fell outside of the range of simple manipulation. They were genuine. He

didn't trust Seymour. It hurt, especially considering that the former Army Medic had been given information from Maya that William was meddling in his personal life behind his back — almost as a means of control. Now, William wasn't aware that Seymour was privy to that information. He also wasn't certain it was abnormal for, as William called them, a working relationship. But his uncertainty was slowly turning into something different.

"You? Don't trust me?" Seymour tried to hide his surprise, concealing his knowledge. "I've done everything that's been asked. I don't see how my commitment is all of a sudden in question."

"That's because you haven't been in the game as long as I have," said William, answering quickly. "This loss to Xander has changed you. Whether or not you want to be, you are very, *very* achievement oriented. You need success to be what you are. Answer me this, Seymour. Have you been losing sleep since Retribution?"

"No," answered Seymour, dishonestly. The sudden impact of realizing he was, in fact, just a man was a rush of reality that he had not had to cope with. Feeling as if he'd let his unit down was an added kick to the nethers. He preferred to imagine a professional failing as the cause for this as opposed to the recent upheaval in his romantic life.

"When you've worked closely with a man for long enough, you get to know what makes him tick," said William, reminding him of their working relationship as the waitress rounded on him.

"I wasn't aware you were expecting company," she said with a light smile directed at Seymour, who didn't take his eyes off of William. His manager, meanwhile, mirrored the smile with all the faux charm he could muster. "Can I get you anything, she asked?"

"No, thank you, little lady, my presence here will be brief," he said. That's the way their interactions had been since Xander defeated him. Abrupt. Business oriented. No more time spent at Seymour's side, just time spent hiding behind him.

And with that said, Seymour watched the waitress walk away. "I can stand on my feet. I don't have anything to harbor here. I understand the marching orders and I deliver on them everytime."

"Yes, you deliver," said William, brushing it off, "but do you understand your role? Xander has laid down the challenge not to James, but to you and Giovanni as well. Do you know what that means?"

Seymour knew what it meant in theory. But meaning to Seymour didn't line up with what it meant to William. He already knew that. He thought it best to wait for instruction than to answer outright.

"It means," began William, reservedly exhaling, "that he's banking on your inability to understand what needs to be done to draw a divide. I'm sure you know better than anybody on this team that a divided unit *cannot* fulfill its identity."

"I do," said Seymour, looking at William.

"Xander thinks you're so hard up for him that if he gives *you* a whiff of that world championship glory, you'll forget *all about our goals*," he said, using his palm to paint a rainbow of Seymour's own ambition in the thin air. "He thinks you're that level of selfish."

"And you've come here to remind me that we have common goals," said Seymour. "Seems like a phone call would have sufficed for that."

"I came here because I have a hunch that he's right," snipped William, "and you can't see a man's eyes over the phone to find the truth."

William's fears were confirmed. Xander, in all likelihood, *was* right about him. His failure to win the World Championship was a blight he couldn't bear. Now that he had an opportunity to do so again, he imagined what it would be like to fall in line and complete the mission. It went against everything he'd come to want.

As William searched his eyes, he felt the deep loyalty he felt towards the man who'd picked him as his stalwart bubble to the surface like peroxide out of a fresh wound. Weeks before Taking Hold of the Flame, he had no idea what was going to happen. What his own motives were. Whether or not he could resist the desires lurking deep.

"William," said Seymour. "I *do* want that World Championship. But not enough to mortgage our efforts." He tried to keep his eyes as direct and sincere as he could, unwavering in the face of what William deemed ultimate control. He was calling the shots. He had Dumont and Striker, the only two people who really seemed to understand the grand plan, on leashes. They had the titles they needed to dominate the ranks. That was enough, wasn't it?

After a few moments, William broke his probe and nodded, pursing his lips. "Okay. Alright. But son," he said, "do understand that your time is coming. It's just not now. It can't be. There's too much riding on us having control. Anything else is unacceptable."

And with that said, he stood up from his spot, fixing the lapels of his suit. Legion groaned cancerously from the floor.

"Take care of Dumont for me, son. Use this match as an opportunity to reaffirm to both the boys and I where your allegiances lie. Because where I believe in you..." he trailed off.

Seymour nodded. "I'll send him home. Nothing to worry about."

William only nodded, turning around.

"Why the hurry?" asked Seymour, trying to hide the appearance of insecurity with subtle curiosity.

"I have some things to attend to," said William. "I need to remind management of the restraining order and make sure that contingencies are in place in the event that things go south. Rules number one through five, always have a back-up plan."

"William," said an annoyed Seymour, "I said I'd take care of him."

"And I believe you," answered William, turning back briefly. "But winning the match is only phase one. Phase two involves appearances. And out of all of us, I'm the only one equipped to make sure not all things are as they seem."

When William spoke like that, Seymour wasn't entirely sure what it was about him that he so implicitly trusted. Was he so pathetic as a man that he needed the approval of a fatherly figure? Was he *really* that pathetic?

"What does that mean?" asked Seymour.

William smiled. "The seeds that were planted by the gardener were unknown to the crows until they bloomed," he cryptically said, before turning and walking off, leaving Seymour feeling equal parts interrogated and hungry for answers.

Somewhere tucked away neatly in a reintegration file is a diagnostic screening tool for fitness to serve.

Does not work well with others. Intermittently explosive. Isolated. Negative for antisocial personality markers.

When he was decommissioned, it didn't have anything to do with personality traits or failure to perform duty. The simple fact was that his episode came at a time when the military was looking to pair

down its numbers. The uncontrollable fit he had in front of members of his unit was the excuse they needed to deem him unfit.

***F43.11** Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, acute. A nice little bit of cliché to go with the fact that he'd never really done a great job of making friends. There were repeated witness accounts, too, of his escalating solitude amongst his units following the slaying of Pvt. Callahan.*

"Has lost all means of comradery."

"Does not speak with other members of the unit unless directly related to duty."

"Paces at night, does not seem to sleep at all."

Little flashes came back here and there of Callahan getting his head peeled back. They started in his sleep, so why wouldn't it make sense for him to avoid it if he didn't feel like he needed it? This was the argument he presented when pressed by the Army Physician about why he felt it didn't make a difference as to whether or not he should be allowed to continue active duty.

"LT. SEYMOUR MURPHY IS FUNDAMENTALLY IN PEAK PHYSICAL HEALTH AND ABLE TO PERFORM HIS DUTIES WITHOUT DIFFICULTY"

The first half of a statement written by the doctor that gave him hope that he'd be able to go back in.

"SUBJECT HAS SUFFERED NO FEWER THAN (3) INCIDENTS RESULTING IN SIGNIFICANT PTSD RISK. POST-DEPLOYMENT HEALTH REASSESSMENT ADVISED."

Okay, so it wasn't all bad. After all, it was just a reassessment. It wasn't hope as far as he was concerned. It was inevitable he would return to duty. This was his calling, and if his own unit didn't need him, they'd certainly find one that did.

And yet, when the reassessment papers came, he was passed over. Imagine your whole life's purpose revolving around a compulsion to return to whizzing bullets past your ear without a gun of your own to defend yourself with. The cost of all his valorous ventures had been a further ostracization, even deeper than the one that grew up with him.

Maybe they don't like you, fine.

But now? Now you know they don't even need you.

Emma did her best to support her man, but it wore on her. The day he came home he melted down the medals he hung proudly on the wall and used a dye cast to mold them into bullets. .38's that fit a Colt he wouldn't ever own. That wasn't the point. It was meant to be a symbol of his own hurt. And maybe if things broke especially bad sometime down the line, he quipped to his wife, they'd find a purpose

somehow. Not strictly sane thinking. In retrospect, it would eventually make sense why he was honorably discharged.

But what'll you do when she doesn't need you, either, Lieutenant?

The heart. The stability. Seymour loved her. He truly did. But when things started to go south with Emma, they started to go south with him. He wasn't like most veterans. He didn't have the coping mechanism of alcohol. He didn't smoke weed or have friends to lean on. He had only his body. So he devoted himself to the pursuit of achieving physical excellence. From there, the only choice was wrestling. An individual sport that left him without a need for a unit. A fight unto himself. Single combat. Winners and losers, no wives.

You should've brought her along.

You should've taken her.

Included her in this.

You know why you didn't.

Seymour tried not to think about what had transpired with Emma. It was almost psychotic how his mind repressed the lengths he went to in order to make sure she left him. He couldn't tell if he was seeking solace of his own or if he was subconsciously trying to protect her from his own hurt. But when the memories came flooding back, he was adrift, unreliable, and fractured in every corner of his mind.

You owe him.

The only thing that kept him together when all of this was going on was his relationship with William Heaven. The painful memories could've pulled him apart. William gave him purpose. A unit to replace the one that had been taken from him. And not only that, but he felt appreciated where others couldn't quite find the way to lead him to feel. This appreciation was more than just simple gratitude. It was *home*.

you failed you failed you failed you failed you failed you failed you failed you failed

to nobody's surprise

But as quickly as it came, it went. Home wasn't home anymore the moment he was stacked up. It was just another taste of what home should be like. And so now here he was again. A man with no wife. A man with no medals. And a man with no home.

"Ain't no such thing as a consolation prize," said Len Murphy to his son, wincing and slamming the trunk door over his wrestling boots, entombing them inside. His hand sheepishly migrated to his lower back, groaning. "Losing is losing, and nobody's gonna think twice if you after you lose."

Len had, in fact, lost his match in the Buckhorn Bingo Hall. It was a six minute affair that had seen Len summarily dispatched at the hand of a young kid that looked the part. "You tried, dad," said the boy, aged eight, to his father. "I'll always think you're great."

Len nodded, then spit off to the side. "That ain't true, either."

It made sense to Seymour. Truly, it did. But it was the suddenness of it that really hit him. The moment William inserted James as the solution, he wasn't *just* the forgotten kid from Iowa. Even in rehabilitated dominance and nothing but wins, he no longer existed.

But there's a way you can show them.

Seymour had, since he left Buckhorn, done *nothing* but win, and all he had to show for it was three bullets he probably couldn't even fire. Cutting off his nose to spite his face. Hurting himself all the while. Wondering why no matter what he did, it was never enough.

This could be your last chance, and William wants a token symbol of your loyalty. He's asked as much. He deserves as much.

But what about what Seymour deserved? Why should he be the one to surrender his opportunity so that lesser predators can be exalted? It was what went through his mind after William left the diner on May 15th, then again when he watched Xander Valentine plant James Evans on his head.

You know why you let that happen. You might have even been able to stop it.

Aside from Legion, he was all alone in the locker room. He didn't even have one of these last year when he started. There was no team surrounding them. Legion was okay with it. Seymour wondered what it meant.

F.43.12. Post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic.

"I think I may have upset them, Legion," he said to his companion, who crept over to him, taking a seat. Legion panted, tongue hanging out, absorbing Seymour's anxiety. Breakdown wasn't finished yet. He had no idea where James, Giovanni, and William were, but there were no further plans. He had a big week ahead. He needed to get out of the building, get some sleep, and set himself to training.

Give it all up to be a man. Put your traumas aside.

Once everything was folded away and packed, he slung the military sack over his shoulder and set for the parking lot. All the things on his mind, history both recent and distant, that had been weighing on him, would have to take a back seat for now.

"It's going to be a long week," he said to his dog through the backstage hallway. Legion acknowledged this reality with his silent trot. He wasn't receiving any information he didn't already know.

When he opened the door to the lot, Legion led the way, but something made him skittish. Seymour wasn't sure what it could possibly be. "Boy? You alright?" He asked with a bit of concern. He stepped into the doorway and looked across the lot as Legion did a singular frenetic circle before settling. William Heaven stood across the lot, next to his truck. He wasn't sure what the meaning of the smile plastered across his face was, but something about it unnerved him. He felt like he was walking into an ambush — something he made it a point to instinctively avoid earlier in the night.

Paranoia bundles. Cute little traps. You're not cut out for this.

"Waylon, my boy," referring to Seymour as his preferred pseudonym, "leaving so soon? Without a proper goodbye?"

Seymour held back a nervous swallow. "You weren't in the locker room," he confidently collected himself before taking shortened strides towards his truck. "I was going to text you after I got back to my room."

William nodded. "You and I both know you don't like texts or phone calls or birthday cards," he said with a laugh. "And I can't hold that against you. You're a specific man with a specific taste. You are who you are. Hell, that's why you're in my employ."

"Mhmm," said Seymour, approaching, looking around. "Where are James and Gio?"

"Milling about somewhere," said William. "Giovanni is probably having one of those damn cigarettes. I'll tell ya, I've never understood how somebody in this field can wrestle with lungs full of tar, but it doesn't seem to slow him down any."

No, lack of ambition does. Seymour almost said it, but held his tongue. As he approached William, he felt something uneasy about the interaction to come. As if he knew preternaturally it was going to be an elevation of recent unpleasantness and mistrust.

"Well, let me have it," said Seymour.

"Let you have what?" asked William with a snide raised eyebrow.

"A recounting of your lack of trust in me," replied Seymour. "I know I didn't do our world's champion any favors tonight. I'm sure he's been in your ear."

"James? No," waved off William. "James understands. Better than you think. In fact, James was telling me he probably would've done the exact same thing, roles reversed."

Seymour didn't believe it. "Was he now?"

"How-ooh," groaned Legion like a rusty door opening, settling behind Seymour's legs.

“Would it make a difference if he did?” asked William. “Something I’ve lost sight of...men in this industry that are aligned in partnership can get a little tense with each other when it comes to the big prize,” he admitted. “And maybe I’ve been guilty of playing into this cold war between you and James, inadvertently of course. It doesn’t make it right, but maybe I was hasty in questioning your motives last week. It took me a while to realize it.”

“Is that your idea of an apology?” asked Seymour.

William smirked. “At my age, if I’m apologizing, I’m weakening my position. I’m more reaffirming my investment in you.”

And with those words spoken, he extended his hand, Rolex watch dripping with gold, and extended towards him an oblong black oval on a keychain. “Happy early Birthday, son.”

He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the gesture. In one month, he would turn thirty-one years old. But that seemed unrelated to the question of his trust.

“William,” said Seymour, unsure.

“Waylon,” smiled William. Then, he raised the object, pressed down twice, and across the lot, a lifted silver truck animated with a monster’s roar as its rear headlights kicked on. “Well? Don’t be shy, kid, let’s take a look.”

Uneasily, Seymour turned to William, then back to the truck. He’d never been given a gift in his life that wasn’t bought at a dollar store or a pharmacy somewhere, and even those were sparse. William, on the other hand, liberally gave to him — including a land trust on which he built a rather state of the art log cabin where he received his mail and stayed at when it was convenient for his travel schedule. *Home*.

Seymour mulled this over as he approached the truck, with all its bells and whistles, thunderous exhaust and chrome tailpipe, crisp running boards. “The interior is Italian leather,” said William, proudly. “It was a hell of a thing for James to do, footing the bill for that. It was his idea.” The license plate read CNSQNCS.

He looked at the truck like it was a casket. Something to be buried in. Accepting the gifts that had been given to him already was challenging enough. This didn’t feel like a simple gift. It felt like a contract renewal of sorts.

“William,” he said again.

“Stop saying my name and just enjoy this beautiful lifted Ram,” he said coyly. “Yours is about twenty-four years old. It’s time for an upgrade. A truck fit for a *star*.”

A star. This was exactly the kind of language Seymour had always needed. Except...somehow, this grand gesture felt a little more than disingenuous. Seymour Murphy had never been one for nice, state of the art things. He preferred functionality over appearance. His clothes were loose fitting and comfortable. His truck turned on, off, and drove smooth due to good maintenance. He would never be the wrestling superstar or icon wearing expensive sunglasses and shoes. He only wore a suit to his trial because court decorum demanded it.

“Consequences,” said Seymour, reading the license plate out loud.

“That’s right, ask Dumont what that means,” laughed William. “Sey— Waylon,” he corrected himself, putting his hand on Seymour’s shoulder from behind. “I’ve told you in the past that you really are like a son to me, truly. And I meant it. Today, I feel no differently. I have big things planned for you, for *us*. And the simple reality is, without *your* contribution, the Fall of Man can’t do what it does, which is dominate. And sometimes, son, that means...” he sighed, “...that means doing the difficult things nobody else can do so that the rest of the group can prosper. It’s not a sexy job. But it’s the most important one. And that’s a fact.”

Seymour said nothing. “*Rrrrrr*,” reverberated Legion, vibrating from xylophone ribs on behalf of his owner.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Seymour, examining what surely must’ve been a sixty-thousand dollar truck at minimum.

“You don’t have to say anything, kiddo,” said William. “You just need to keep showing me who you are and what you do.”

Seymour fit the profile that William was looking for in some ways, but not in others. Where Heaven saw an incubating monster, he got it. He saw the willingness to do awful things for the sake of personal gain. What he didn’t account for was Seymour’s surprising but silent intellect and awareness. In many ways, what made him a more dangerous monster than most was his ability to think. It didn’t really fit what William was looking for. Blind and unadulterated loyalty that almost bordered on obedience.

And Seymour had already served a master like that. The United States Military had so indoctrinated him that when he returned briefly to Iowa from basic training, he did everything that was asked of him to such a great degree that if Len had instructed him to go *fuck* himself, he’d have curled himself into a ball without a question and at least made an attempt at it.

But never, *never* again. It took him years to recover from that level of conditioning. Years to get to this improved level of *not okay*. He didn’t know who he was. But he knew what he didn’t want to be.

“William, I can’t accept this truck,” said Seymour, taking a step back. Legion’s limp noodle neck stiffened up.

“Yes, you can,” noxiously laughed William. “It’s a damn birthday gift. And if you don’t like it, we’ll just get you another one.”

Seymour thought carefully for a minute. He needed to navigate this matter cautiously.

“No, thanks,” said Seymour, tensing up. “But I appreciate the gesture.”

Standing in the spectral exhaust and bright lights emanating from the rear bumper, William appeared stunned. “Huh.” Unblinking, he reached into his pocket where he’d tucked the key and clicked the button twice.

“William, I hope you know that I am grateful for everything you’ve done for me. Truly.”

“But?” said William over the sudden silence of a dead engine.

“There’s no but,” answered Seymour. “I can think of few people in my life who’ve done for me what you have. It’s not something I say lightly.”

William, now, was uneasy in his smile. “You’re thinking that I’m trying to buy your loyalty here.”

“No,” lied Seymour, “I think you’re extending yourself in a way that you don’t need to so that I feel appreciated.”

William’s chuckle was masked by an exhalation. “You know, you’re probably right about that in a way. I haven’t ever been particularly good at expressing myself to those people I have an affinity for. It’s one of the reasons I’m probably so generous with the gifts.”

Seymour nodded.

“A lot of people in this industry, kid,” started Heaven, recollecting himself, “don’t understand that at the end of our workday, if we’re not making a product, we’re not making a profit. The wrestling business comes down to dollars and cents. Nobody wants it to be true, but it *is*. It’s about money. It’s an ugly thing to say. Even uglier is how...” he sighed, “how much people like CHBK and his cronies try to make it about honor and legacy and sport and yada yada...but money is what kept them going the whole damn time. It’s green that fuels it. Everything else is a mirage. You understand.”

Seymour nodded again. “So where I have this affinity for you and your admittedly special gifts, I also feel a natural pull to remind you of some things. My bent has always been to teach you, and to my surprise, in most cases, you’re willing to learn. And my, with what you’ve learned...” he laughed, “...you’ve become almost prolific. Larger than life. Inimitable. And if there’s one lesson I want to teach you today, kid, it’s this.”

Seymour squared his shoulder back as Heaven's demeanor morphed from educational into something more strictly sterile. Devoid of life. It unnerved Seymour — how immediate he shifted from seeming uncertain to rooted in this rhetoric.

"I *am* buying your loyalty, because money is the only thing that matters. Any guesses as to where the big belt goes, kid?" He didn't wait for an answer. "It goes where the *fucking* money does."

A sharp twist in his gut. To Seymour, William was summing up his poor candidacy to become champion and then shoving it back down his throat. It wasn't a bitter pill. It tasted like straight poison.

And then, suddenly, he smiled, looked Seymour in the eye, and patted him in the shoulder. "I need you to come correct. Make sure that heavyweight belt stays with the Fall of Man. *We*," he said. "*We* need that. I need Waylon Creek to do Waylon Creek things. But I also need him to do the unpopular things. You understand."

But once again, Seymour didn't. Push, pull with William. Always. He didn't know exactly what to make of the conversation. What it meant. He only knew what his directive was.

But that directive was skewed. Maybe it was his desire for more. Maybe it was how cold William had suddenly become. Whatever it was that brought the question to the forefront didn't matter. The question needed to be asked.

Phase two involves appearances. William's words bouncing off each wall in the vault.

"I do," said the good soldier to his commander. "And I will do what needs to be done. In the meantime, maybe *you* can answer a question for me." Seymour was half-speaking through his teeth.

"What question is that, son?" asked William.

"Why does Maya seem to think that you were monitoring me through her?" asked the unearned tag team champion.

Silence. Followed by shifting feet. "Son, are you referring to the woman who just ended things with you? Let me tell you a thing or two about scorned women," instructed William.

Seymour *had* initially told William it was Maya that had terminated the relationship. Perhaps a little mislead he'd picked up from William along the way.

"I ended the relationship," said Seymour, staring at William. "After she told me that you made it her job to encourage me to do the things you wanted me to do. A part time job that was a sweet gig. Had the pay scale of 'not telling Seymour that she was visiting her ex in prison'."

William couldn't conjure up a defense for himself. He cleared his throat, searching for the right answer.

“In hindsight, it was a stupid thing for her to hide from me,” said Seymour. “She probably assumed in some way I would think she was still in love with Kevin. And maybe she’d have been right. There’s no telling now. But you,” he huffed. “*Your* betrayal here? That’s the one that matters.”

William breathed deeply. Seymour watched as he tried to inflate himself back to his previous standing with a fresh influx of air. But he was leaking.

“Alright, son,” said William with a nod. “I’m going to level with you. I’ve had some concerns about you for...a little while now. I didn’t mean to get involved in your love life, but I needed assurances. I took the avenue I needed. For the *group*.” He was so full of communal rhetoric. It burned Seymour to his core.

“I drove an ambulance into a goddamn wall for you,” barked Seymour. “Rrrrrrr,” rumbled Legion at his side. “I faced charges for you. There was nothing I wasn’t willing to do for this group. You knew that. My commitment to this group has *never* been in question.” Seymour’s anger was overpowering William’s drive to pull the strings. He was fumbling the handle.

“I...” scoffed William, wild-eyed, looking for a branch to cling to as he was swept away by an irresistible current of questioning. “Wayl— Seymo— son, you have to understand—”

“That *my* commitment is under review?” he hissed so loud he felt his booming whisper echo in the lot. “That my priorities aren’t straight? Let me ask you this. How do you think the boys would respond to knowing your meddling in my life cost me? Do you think they’d start looking into their own lives for similar evidence?”

William didn’t say anything. He just stared at Seymour, lead-breathed and bewildered.

“What would they find, William, if they knew where to look?”

No more cards. No more strings. The truth was all that mattered, and he couldn’t dig himself out from under the weight of it.

“But don’t worry, William. Because *I’m* a team player, I won’t let them know. Because it’s between you and I. It’s our problem. And it would hurt the unit if this were to ever, ever come out. Just know,” said Seymour, stepping back, “that it isn’t *my* commitment to the group that needs to be reviewed. It’s yours.”

And with those words spoken, Seymour and Legion detached from the deflated William Heaven and set towards the late model truck, without the bells and whistles.

“Seymour,” William called after him, voice breaking. He cleared his throat again.

“Tell the boys there’s nothing to worry about on my end,” called Seymour, opening the passenger side door for his bipedal partner, who seamlessly torpedoed himself inside. “Tell them I went home. I’ll see them in New Orleans.”

“Idaho is a long way away from Louisiana, son. Your travel plans don’t make a whole lot of sense,” said William with an abbreviated, desperate chuckle that carried no assurance.

Seymour rounded the tailgate, bag slung over his shoulder, and smirked — maybe for the first time in a year.

“I’m heading to Iowa,” he boomed, and then disappeared behind his rickety old truck.