



**A History of Violence: Book VI: The Conflict of Ghosts: Chapter Four**

**Now**

I sat in my locker room, within the Smoothie King Center, all alone. Bree had gone with Amy, as I needed the silence. The SCW World Heavyweight Championship rested across my lap, and a hand ran through my hair, as a sigh escaped me.

We were over a week away from the next SCW pay-per-view, ***Apocalypse***, and Amy was to be my opponent. With the return to television, I had had quite the interesting follow-up to my victory at ***Rise to Greatness***. My first night on TV, as SCW Champion, was chaotic. I dealt with Xander, Kandis, Kirsten Scott, and even Selena.

The usual suspects.

But not only that, Blake Mason returned, coming after me because of the title. Or so he claimed. I didn't buy it for one bit. He'd gotten one over on me back in 2020, but we both disappeared from SCW shortly after.

Blake had spoken about how I'd gone after all his exes, and how it was weird.

***We're human, Blake. All of us.***

***We're 40s at a keg party, getting passed around.***

***Humans connect in a variety of ways. When that happens, the turnout cannot be helped if one truly wishes to live.***

I know he told Bree his intentions. It was all on camera for the world to see and hear. But Blake, being the businessman he's always been, was able to spin his narrative. There's that word he's always loved to say, using it in every other declarative statement he's ever made. He spun his narrative to where only the title was important.

***I've done everything Blake has wanted to do. That's not ego talking. That's the truth. I have worked harder. I have put in the hours. I've put in the mileage in the sky, in the car, and to my body!***

I clenched a fist as my brain screamed such a thought. I knew I wasn't telling myself anything that no one else didn't already know themselves. Blake wanted the SCW World Championship, and despite what he claimed, I knew he wanted to take it off me.

***I mean why else would he walk out with Selena?***

***I want that match. No, no. I want that fight.***

I looked up and across the room, staring at my reflection in the mirror. "Kandis wanted a fight. She got one and it didn't go the way she wanted. I heard you too, Xander. You want to win Trios. You want the World title. I want that fight, too. Come and take it."

***What about Selena?***

I scoffed, "It's not surprising." I looked down at the title as I continued, "She wants you back. I had some hope, I can't lie, that losing at Rise to Greatness would wake her up, but she remains blinded by her ego. I pity her, still. I just don't know for how long."

"She can threaten with her contract. The SCW gained a little bit of its power back when I won you," I stated, bringing the title up a little closer to my face, "but the man who was once known

as the Master of Mind Games...well, Selena has his balls in a vice. He won't fight to regain his own power, and it's a battle I can't fight for him."

I let the belt rest upon my lap once again as another sigh escaped me.

***You wanted to inspire. You wanted the Wild, Wild West. The very aspect Selena wanted to destroy, and yet it is here, alive and well.***

***Do you regret it, old man?***

"No, no. I said that I didn't, and I meant that."

***Madness rules the SCW, currently.***

"Madness has always been part of the very fabric of this industry. That'll never change. People, or wrestlers, will have their own mindsets. Their own codes. They can control certain things, as it is in their personal lives, but they should also realize they can't control everything. This sport isn't something to be controlled."

***You do know that if you make it past Amy, Selena is likely to use her contract to get to you. And if she wins Trios, then she will have far more control.***

I scoffed. "I'm not afraid of Selena having power. She's proven that she can't handle all that is given to her. It goes to her head. Winning Trios will be no different. If my body and skillset hold up, then I'll fight her forever. She needs a reality check and wake-up call. She takes the cake over anyone, and everyone, when it comes to that aspect."

***And what about Amy? You saw what she did to beat Simon.***

"Yes, I did. I stooped to that level of violence when I fought him, too."

***It was far more personal for her than it was for you.***

"I know."

***Does that not worry you? About Amy?***

I shook my head. "No, why would it?"

***She wanted to rid herself of Simon. She dug down deep or stooped to levels the SCW had not seen her go to, in order to get what she wanted. What she felt that she needed.***

"I've not threatened her life or her family. I know she will fight tooth and nail against anyone who does that. I mean, look at how she handled James all those years ago."

***She wants the SCW World Championship.***

“Just about everyone else does, too.”

***There will be no stopping her. She’s tasted blood. She’s like a dog in that regard. She’s tasted blood and nothing will ever be the same. She said the moment was for you and her, and you stepped back, saying it was for her.***

***You can’t slack off, old man.***

***Not now.***

“I’m not slacking off. When the bell rings, I’ll do what I do.”

***You need to remember what you’ve gone through to get back to this point. Back to being champion. You can’t throw it all away because of a friendship. Because you don’t want to hurt anyone, or their feelings.***

***You need to remember.***

**Then**

“Does any of this look familiar?” my brother asked me as we sat in the driveway of Eddie’s residence. It was a double-wide, much like Tiffany’s and in far better shape than the one I grew up in.

“I wish that it did,” I said, feeling the desire in those words. There was nothing less than the whole truth in each one. It was a wish I wanted to come true, for my memory to open up and welcome me with the truth, no matter how ugly.

“Well, are you sure you want to do this? I mean, you weren’t doing so well at school, ya know?”

“I’m not sure about anything if I’m being honest, little brother. But,” I said, “this is still something that I have to do. That I need to do.”

“I think that I understand,” Jacob said. “I guess I could compare it to going to all those meetings to get sober. They had us confront our pasts so that we could move forward.”

“The past can be a scary place,” I replied, my eyes on the front steps, leading up to the porch of Eddie’s home. I wondered how many times I had run, or even walked, up there. I wondered how often I knocked on the door with a big smile on my face, asking to come inside, or if Riley was even home. “I know that I don’t like revisiting mine, even when I’m able to actually remember it,” I laughed weakly. “I guess I need to get this shit over with. Let’s go.”

"I'll let you lead the way this time," Jacob said before we both climbed out of the truck. Eddie met us on the porch. "I want to thank you again for this Eddie," said my brother.

"Yes, same here," I added, hoping that I didn't sound as unsure to him as I did to myself.

"I just hope this helps, Josh."

"As do I."

"Well, come on in," Eddie said, opening the front door. We followed him inside, and the home reminded me of my own when I was a child. There didn't seem to be any life. It wasn't like what I had with Bree.

I looked around, taking it all in, when I saw one of the living room walls that was littered with photographs. I approached, taking my time to look at each of them, examining every face, every single detail.

"Here you go," I heard Jacob say. Turning to my left, I saw he was doing the same as me. I walked over, "I'm pretty sure this is you and Riley," he pointed to a particular photo. Standing beside him, I looked at it, studying it, "that is you, right?"

"Yeah, it is." I said.

"Yep, that's you and my boy. I'd say you two were around seven or eight at the time."

*I ran, pushing forward through the Glen Alpine Elementary School gym. Everyone was passing me, but I kept moving forward, trying to pick up the pace, when I passed this kid. He had a bowl-cut like mine.*

*"Everybody beats you," he said, causing me to slow down. "Everybody!"*

*"Shut up!" I said.*

*The gym teacher, Mr. Gant blew his whistle, telling us to knock it off. I ran some more, going to the other end of the gym, nearly passing another student named Dustin, but he kicked it into a different gear, I guess. He took off and I felt myself getting tired. That's when the same kid, said the same exact thing, "Everybody beats you. Everybody!"*

*I stopped, turned around, and ran over. Mr. Gant blew his whistle again, but we were already fighting, throwing fists. My father always told me to not take shit from anyone. If I didn't fight back, I knew he'd take a belt to me.*

*I did what I felt I had to do, but the kid fought back. He was hitting me a little more than I was hitting him...*

“You okay, Josh?” Jacob asked. My head was beginning to throb and my body felt like I had strained as hard as I could. I was still standing which I was thankful for.

“Yeah, yeah. I think so,” I said, keeping my eyes on the picture for a few more moments. I wanted to see, or remember, more.

***Come on, old man.***

***Remember.***

***You have to.***

***You need to.***

*I sat outside the principal's office, a tissue stuck up my nose. To my left, sat the kid from the gym, with an ice pack against his left eye.*

*“Our dads know each other,” he said.*

*“They do?” I asked, pulling the tissue out. It was covered in blood. I took another look at him, telling myself we must've hurt each other pretty badly.*

***Maybe he's just as angry as you.***

*“Yeah,” he said, turning to face me. “My name's Riley. Yours is Josh, right?”*

*I turned to face him as well. “Yeah.”*

*“That was a good fight, don't ya think?” Riley asked with a grin.*

*I smirked, and it felt like a comfortable one. It wasn't forced like the smiles I had to give at home.*

*“Yeah, I think so. I've never been in a fight before. Well, not one like that, at least.”*

*“Well,” Riley removed the ice pack, “you hit really hard! I'm going to have a black eye!”*

*“I did that?” I asked, trying to keep my smirk from growing.*

*“Yeah, no shit,” Riley cackled now.*

*“Oh, wow.”*

*“What?”*

*“You said shit, dude.”*

*"I did. I say it all the time."*

*"Shit?"*

*"Shit."*

"I remember how we first met," I said. "We'd gotten into a fight during P.E. at school."

Eddie chuckled. "Yeah, I remember that. I was so mad. Riley had gotten into so many fights by then. I was ready to jerk a knot in his ass. But then, I saw your dad there and we ended up having a good laugh about it. You two became best friends after that."

I scoffed, feeling a little weak in my chest because it felt as if I had missed out on a big portion of my life and didn't seem to know it.

***You can't stop now.***

"Do you have any other pictures of Riley and me?"

"Of course," Eddie said. "They're packed up with his letters. They're in the attic. Come on."

Eddie pulled the ladder down and I got another flash, or memory. It was Halloween. I assumed Riley and I were teens by that time. We went into the attic, and waited for his mother to come up there, as it was where she kept the decorations, and planned to change from All Hallows' Eve to Thanksgiving. I smiled as I recalled how badly we scared her when she reached the top of the ladder. Riley had a demon mask, and I wore a **Green Goblin** mask.

My smile widened as a chuckle escaped me, remembering how his mother beat the hell out of us for doing so. That part wasn't funny. Not then, at least. Thinking about it then, I felt an ounce of happiness, which I needed given my situation.

"Here we go," Eddie said, grabbing a box off a stack to the left. It was marked **Riley** in big, bold lettering. Jacob and I stood back while Eddie opened the box, rummaging through it. "Aha," he said as he pulled something from inside. "This is the last picture I got of you two. It came with a letter. He said you two were going on a mission," he handed the photo to me.

There we were Riley and me. We were grown up, all smiles, like we were doing something important.

"So, this was before the letters grew cold as you said?"

Eddie nodded. "He wrote something on the back of the picture. I'm not sure if he meant to, but it's there." I flipped it over and there was a single word. I mouthed it as Eddie actually said it, "Abigail."

“Abigail?” Jacob asked. “Who’s that?”

“That’s what I’ve wondered for years,” said Eddie, sadness in his voice.

“Does that connect with you, Josh?” my brother asked.

“Abigail, Abigail, Abigail,” I said, repeating it like a mantra, waiting for it to unlock something within my mind. Waiting for a secret to come to light, to become visible.

*“Alright boys,” Talbot stood before us at his desk. “I’ve handpicked you two for this mission. Codename: Abigail.”*

*“Does it have to be called that?” Riley joked. “Can we rename it...I don’t know...something manlier?”*

*“Oh, shut up, man,” I snickered before looking at Talbot, who was none too pleased with our behavior. “Sorry, sir. Please, continue.”*

*“I appreciate your permission, Hudson, As for you, Moses...when you get to be in my position, when you’ve obtained status as I have, then and only then, can you name missions.”*

*“What’s the purpose of the mission?” I asked.*

*“You two have a target. He’s the enemy. All you need to know is when, where, and how to take aim and pull the trigger. Got it?”*

*“Sir yes, sir.”*

*We were briefed before being dismissed. Outside Talbot’s office, Riley flicked me in the side of the head. “What the hell, Josh?”*

*“What?” I asked as I rubbed my temple.*

*“You don’t have to brown-nose, dude. He’s already got a hard-on for you.”*

*I shook my head. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. Look, I’ve been here longer than you. I know how he operates. If anything,” I gave him a gentle push, “I’m trying to protect you and keep you off his bad side.”*

*“I think I can handle myself.”*

*“Yeah, this is your first mission. I guess we’ll see.”*

*“You put the gun in my hand, and I’ll show you how I get down, son.”*



*“You want to take the shot, huh?” I asked.*

*“Absolutely. I know I’m ready.”*

*I scoffed. “Only time will tell.”*

I was sitting down in the attic. Jacob and Eddie had left me be. With the box in front of me, my hands went to work, pulling out letters. I began to skim them all, trying to find a connection to where things seemed to have gone wrong.

“Hey Dad...Dear Dad...Dad...” I whispered as I continued flipping through them. “Dad...I can’t say much. Just know I’m alive,” I pulled the piece of paper a little closer, “I’m not okay. I want to come home, but I can’t. Just know I’m sorry.”

I found another letter, whispering the words, “I don’t have much to say. I’m alive. I’m sorry,” I shook my head, unable to wrap my mind around what was going on. “What was going through your mind, Riley? Give me something, man. Something. Anything.”

Leaning to my left, I went through the other letters, moving them out of the way before finding the picture once again. I looked at the writing on the back. “Abigail. Who, or what, was Abigail? Think damn you, think!” I slammed my left palm into my forehead once, twice, and a third time like I was going to crack it like an egg and have the truth ooze out like busted yolk.

***If only it was that simple, old man.***

***If only.***

“Come on, Riley. Talk to me, old friend. I’m sorry I forgot you. But I’m here,” I exhaled. “I’m trying. I want to remember you now. Talk to me.”

*“This is the place?” Riley asked, as we sat in our motel room. The building was across from another. It was also filled with important military personnel. That personnel was the target of our target.*

*“Yes,” I whispered. We’d been waiting hours for our target to arrive, and Riley had grown impatient. “Keep calm, old man. Keep calm.”*

*“You keep calm,” he fired back. I knew how my friend felt, however. He hadn’t killed anyone yet, and I learned that when that’s what you’re trained to do, you feel nothing short of useless if you’re not engaged in some sort of life and death situation. You have to be in the center of the conflict, finger on the trigger, welcoming war and the horrors that come with it.*

*“You’re going to get your kill, man. You just need to chill out. Trust me, I know.”*

*“Oh, so you’ve killed someone?”*

*“Yeah,” I muttered, remembering my first mission with Talbot and the failure that it was. It made me never want to fail again. But it was also why I was more than willing to let Riley in the driver’s seat, so to speak. I didn’t know the effect a kill would have on him, and that worried me, though I wouldn’t let him know something like that.*

*“What was it like?”*

*Looking through the binoculars, I replied, whispering through the darkness of night as it shrouded the desert, “You’ll find out soon enough. We’ve got movement.” A vehicle, heavily damaged and covered with rust slowly made its way towards the building, stopping just a few feet from it. “Can you see the driver?”*

*“Yeah,” Riley said. I heard him cock the rifle. “You?”*

*“Yeah. It’s him.”*

*“Why’s he stopping?”*

*“I don’t know,” I said. “Making it easier for us, hopefully.”*

*The driver’s side door opened, and our target stepped out as Riley said, “I think you’re right.”*

*“Yeah...wait...He’s not alone?”*

*“What the fuck do you mean...is that...” I could hear the panic in my friend’s voice. It clung to his words as well as his breathing, which had become heavy.*

*“He’s got a kid, Riley. He’s got a kid.”*

*“That son of a bitch,” Riley said, as I watched the kid get handed something and pushed forward. The child looked back at our target then at the building opposite, before beginning to walk towards it.*

*“We need to call this in,” I said.*

*“I can’t shoot a kid, Josh. I fucking can’t,” Riley cried out, and I knew his pain. That was the result of my failed mission. An innocent child caught in the crossfire. Nation against nation. Nothing more than a casualty of war.*

*“We have to stick to the mission, Riley. Stay calm.”*

*“I can’t...fuck, he’s getting closer.”*

*“We have to stick...”*

*Riley cut me off. “He’s right fucking there... Shit. Jesus. I can’t...”*

*I sat up and pulled the rifle away from him, telling myself that it was about the mission. The mission and nothing but.*

*“Josh, what the fuck are you doing? Josh! Josh!” Riley screamed and tried to grab at me, but I managed to shove him away. The gun went off, either way. Riley was running out of the room before I knew what had happened.*

*I looked through the rifle’s scope. The child was down, and our target was in the car. Riley was next to the kid. He pulled a pistol out and began firing at the car, which backed up, and sped away into the night. Riley dropped to his knees. I watched as he shook the child. I could see my friend crying.*

***You did what you had to do.***

***For the mission. For God and country.***

***You did what you were told to do.***

***You saved lives.***

***And yet, I ended another.***

*I wanted to feel what Riley felt. I told myself I deserved to feel that and far worse. And yet, the only thing I could feel was that I was nothing more than a monster.*

*A byproduct of war.*

I gasped for air, wanting the memory to stop, wanting it all to transition back to being forgotten once more. But like an addict in need of another fix, I couldn’t stop myself as I returned to filtering through the letters. Eddie was right. They were all cold. Filled with dread.

“Dad. I’m okay,” I read. “Everything is going to be fine. I can’t tell you anything but just know, everything is going to be fine.” I flipped to another. “I’m having nightmares, Dad. Terrible, terrible nightmares. They won’t stop. They won’t...”

***You wanted this, old man.***

***Remember? You can’t stop.***

***No, not now.***

I began with another, “Hey Dad. They’ve got me set up with a shrink. Me and Josh...” I paused, as I didn’t remember speaking with a clinician during any of my tours.

***The ghosts of your past continue to unravel.***

I unfolded another letter. “The doctor isn’t helping. The pills aren’t helping. I can’t get the nightmares to stop. They keep coming back. Like his face.”

I curled my fingers around the piece of paper, crunching it up into a ball as I formed a fist, pressing it against the base of my forehead.

*“Good morning, sir.” I stood outside Talbot’s office. He looked up at me and motioned for me to enter, which I did. I saluted him before taking a seat as he instructed.*

*“What can I do for you, soldier?”*

*“Have you seen Moses?”*

*“Yes. Haven’t you? You should, as you two have been seeing the doctor after that clusterfuck of a mission and how it ended,” I felt the coldness of Talbot’s words. He was ashamed of us. I told myself that the shame was directed more at me than Riley. I could feel that, too. In my bones.*

*“Well, I have sir,” I said, trying not to choke on my own words. “He just...he just hasn’t seemed like himself, sir. That’s all.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“He just seems different, sir. I believe the mission, failed or not, has affected him in ways none of us can truly comprehend.”*

*Talbot scoffed. “Do you think Moses is different from any other soldier who has witnessed a child die? This is war. That kind of shit happens. It’ll continue happening long after you and I are gone. What he’s going through doesn’t make him a special case.”*

*“He’s said he’s had nightmares, sir.”*

*“We’ve all had them. I’m sure you’ve had them after your fuck up.”*

*I wanted to tell Talbot to go fuck himself. That I wasn’t there to talk about me. That I was there to talk about Riley. That I was concerned about my friend, and that those concerns needed to be taken seriously.*

*“I just want to ensure he’s okay, sir.”*

*“As I said,’ Talbot leaned back in his chair, a smirk on his face, “this is war. None of us are ever going to be okay.”*

*“What if he...I don’t know,” I shrugged, “what if he goes postal?”*

*“Postal?” Talbot laughed. “Let me ask you this, soldier.” He leaned forward then. “Do you feel safe?”*

## **Now**

“I do remember,” I said. “Despite what happened after ***Rise to Greatness***,” I scoffed, “there are some things that I just ***can’t*** forget.”

***So, you remember the feuds with CHBK?***

“Feuding with him, redefined my career,” I said. “I’m not the biggest fan of what I did to him when I look back, but I can’t change what happened. I know I took years off his career out of this desperate need for revenge, as I felt he wronged me.” I shook my head, “But that’s the thing. He didn’t wrong me. If anything, he educated me.”

***He educated you?***

***What gives you that idea?***

“He let me know that I wasn’t ready. I challenged him at Apocalypse for the very title I carry now,” I chuckled. “I thought I was hot shit, because you,” I said, pointing to the left side of my head, “because you told me that I was. You deceived me.”

***I’ve never deceived you, Josh.***

***I’ve always wanted the best for you. You weren’t going to go after what you wanted, or deserved, unless I pushed you to do so.***

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “look how it turned out. CHBK took me out. The Mercenaries beat the hell out of me. I went home empty handed, and with a concussion. I knew, deep down, in the pit of my stomach that I wasn’t ready to be in that position.”

***And what about now? You stepped up and finally...FINALLY!...obtained what you wanted. You won Taking Hold of the Flame. You were in the main event of Rise to Greatness. And you became the SCW World Champion. Do you think you’re ready?***

“Why do I feel like you’re referring to Amy, once again?”

***Because I am.***

“And why’s that? Are you worried?”

***Shouldn’t you be?***

I sighed, “Why should I be? I defeated Selena when not many thought I could do so. I told her, and the rest of the world, that if she beat me and I left Rise to Greatness empty handed, that I would be fine. That I would continue on.”

***And you actually believed that?***

“I meant it.”

***This is something else you need to remember. The feelings you experienced when you lost your first SCW World title to Damian Angel. You had waited nearly four years to capture the championship, and it was over in a flash. Three years later, after decimating the roster for months, you finally regained the title, but it was over in a month. And your last reign? Should we even go down that road?***

“I know what I felt. I felt ashamed. I felt disappointed. But,” I shrugged yet again, “that was then. This is now. I’m in a much better place.”

***And if Amy defeats you? What then? It’s not like you’ve had the best track record at this event. Losing to CHBK. Greg Cherry the following year. And then, to Orion the Scar and his tag team partner. All title matches, old man. All of them, and you lost!***

“I’m well aware,” I growled before drawing in a deep breath. I held it to calm myself, before slowly exhaling. “I was full of myself. Cherry was, and still is I’m sure, worse than Selena is now. But back then,” I sighed, “he was ready to carry that weight. I wasn’t. Everything he said, the world knew he believed it. I didn’t always buy what I tried to sell.”

***And you believe in yourself now? More than ever, eh?***

“Yes,” I replied. “Do you think that I don’t?”

***Your words were powerful against Selena, but you seemed comfortable. You seemed content. You were very convincing when you told her you’d be okay if you lost. I don’t believe that. Just as I don’t believe that you’ll be fine, should Amy beat you.***

“If Amy beats me,” another shrug, “then, she wanted it more than me. If she beats me, then she most certainly, and undoubtedly, deserved it.”

***Oh, I don’t doubt that she’d deserve it, but as vicious as you can be, or should be, in the ring then there’s no way that Amy should beat you.***

“I’m not going back to how I was, or who I was,” I said, keeping my eyes on my reflection. I knew what my *ego* wanted. “You want me to be the man that beat someone like CHBK to a bloody pulp. You want the man who did the same to Justin Davis. The same guy that attacked Syren and left her in a pool of her own blood.”

*Think about your reign as United States Champion for a moment, and what led to you capturing that title for a second time. You took Owen out. You were tired of losing. You won an entire tournament, hurting everyone who got in your path. Look at what you did to Glory’s protégé. There’s no denying that you turned her into a contortionist with the way you bent her for the world to see.*

“Are you done?”

*And what about your submission match against Owen? The way you tortured him, making him do the one thing he SWORE he’d never do. He tapped and it was because of that bloodlust. Of course, you lost it to Glory the following event, which is what I’m afraid is going to happen against Amy. You showed weakness against Glory, and it’s obvious you’re doing the same with Amy.*

“I told you that I’d do what I do when the bell rang. That’s not showing weakness. I’m not going to go out of my way to torture Amy or beat her into submission. She’s a friend. Hell,” I shrug, “she’s more like family at this point.”

*With all you’ve learned about your past recently, it’s fair to say that it’s not like you’ve taken out a friend, or someone you consider family, to preserve what is yours.*

“What did you say?”

*You know I’m right. You may have forgotten at one point, but we both know you’ll never forget your old friend Riley, and what happened that led to his demise, ever again.*

**Then**

“Sir?”

Talbot grumbled. “I ask again. Do you feel safe?”

*Before I could reply, one of my worst nightmares seemed to become a sudden truth, as gunshots began to ring throughout the base. Talbot looked at me and nodded.*

*I knew what it meant. It was time to lock and load. That we were at war.*

*The gunshots continued, followed by shouting. As I reached my bunk and grabbed my M-16, I realized all the voices were American.*

Where was the enemy?

*"Do you hear what I hear?" I whispered to Talbot, my eyes peeled with my finger gently caressing the trigger.*

*I had to be ready.*

*"What? Well, speak up soldier," he commanded.*

*"I only hear American."*

*His eyes grew wide for a moment and I wondered if he thought what I had been.*

*But, shaking his head, Talbot said, "Maybe we stopped whatever breach those dot heads tried to pull."*

*"Maybe," I said, though I didn't believe it. I felt he didn't, either.*

*That was confirmed when more gunshots echoed. We were drawing closer and the shouting amped up once again. Still American.*

*"What the fuck is going on?" Talbot whispered as he sat behind me. All we had to do was turn the corner and we'd see who was behind all the unsuspected commotion.*

*I said nothing as I heard another voice. Now that we were that close, I knew who it belonged to.*

*I knew who the enemy was.*

*And I didn't want to call him one.*

*"It's Riley," I called over my shoulder. I could taste the disdain on the tip of my tongue. It grew as each word slipped out. "This is exactly what I was afraid of."*

*"Don't get upset with me, son. I make soldiers. If they can't handle..." He was cut off by more gunshots. I heard the cry of another soldier. My friend, Abernathy. Looking around the corner, I saw he was clutching his leg, tears in his eyes.*

*"We have to stop this," I said.*

*"Do you have a shot?" Talbot asked and I wished he wouldn't have. Because he had, I knew I had to give an answer. An answer I didn't want to provide. "Do you have a shot, goddamnit?"*

*Peering around the corner, I saw Riley. His back was to me. He had everyone else against the wall. None of them had their weapons handy.*



*“Yes,” I managed to say. “But I want to try and talk him down.”*

*“Fuck that,” Talbot growled. “He’s killing our men...”*

*“He’s not killed anyone that I can see. Just one wounded. I can try and talk him down.”*

*“You listen to me...”*

*Ignoring Talbot, I stepped out from my hiding spot. “Riley...” I called out to him. His ranting stopped but he kept his back to me. “Riley, please look at me, man. It’s me. Josh. Look at me.”*

*“I can’t. You know what we did.”*

*I had my rifle raised but lowered it as soon as he said that. “We did what we had to do, Riley. Nothing more, nothing less.”*

*“If you were Josh then you would know how much bullshit that is.”*

*I bit my lip. Despite our programming, it was nice to see we, as soldiers, could still feel human. I wanted to tell him how much I agreed with him. But I couldn’t. Not with Talbot watching. Not with the lives of others at stake.*

*I raised my rifle once again, knowing I couldn’t reward his faith, no matter how true it was.*

*“You have to stop this. You’ve hurt one of our brothers,” I hissed. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”*

*“None of them,” Riley said as he slowly turned, “are my brothers.” We locked eyes. “Are you? Huh? Are you still my brother or has this shit,” he looked all around us and I saw his finger was near his trigger, “changed you as well?”*

*“I’ll always be your brother, but you know why we’re here. You know what we signed up for. We did what we had to do, and what we had to do,” I shrugged, “we can’t change.”*

*“I can tell,” Riley choked back tears as they began to well up, bringing sadness within his voice, “that you mean that. You truly believe it, don’t you?”*

*“I’m a soldier, Riley. Just like you.”*

*“This isn’t fucking helping!” Talbot shouted to my left. I kept my eyes on Riley, knowing our leader was correct, as much as I hated it.*

*“I got this,” I said, lying through my teeth.*

*“If you’re a soldier,” Riley exhaled weakly, “then...”*

*“Riley, stop. Don’t do this. I’m begging you...”*

*“...then you know what’s going to happen here. It’s what has to happen. We both know that.”*

*“It doesn’t have to be this way, Riley. We can talk about this. We can get you some help,” I pleaded. “Just put your gun down. I’ll put mine down, too.” I knew he wasn’t going to budge. And in the end, it was him or me. That was the programming. Riley gave me no choice, as what happened was something I never expected I’d ever have to do. It was something that I felt I’d have to live with forever. Something I’d pray to forget.*

“Are you okay up here?” I returned to reality at the sound of my brother's voice. I saw him standing shoulder height into the attic’s opening. “You’ve been up here awhile.”

I had no idea how I appeared, but I knew how I felt. I was shaken to my very core. “Yeah, I know,” I managed to say.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve been going through these letters, and each of them triggered something. A memory.”

“Something about the way you’re looking at me,” Jacob said, “tells me none of it was good.”

“It wasn’t,” I replied. “Where’s Eddie?”

“He’s in his living room, having a beer. That’s another reason why I came to check on you. I can’t be around that shit.”

“I understand but after what I just re-lived,” I exhaled deeply, though a weight seemed to remain on my chest, “I could go for a drink. Not that it’ll help.”

“What did you see?” As it had been with Talbot, I wish my brother hadn’t asked.

“The less you know,” I said. “I need to get out of here. Need some air.”

Climbing down, I found Eddie waiting for us, no longer in the living room. “Everything alright?” He asked, keeping his eyes on me. I didn’t want to look at him, but I didn’t want to show any sort of disrespect if I could help it.

“Josh said he remembered something.”

“About Riley?” Eddie asked, still looking at me.

“Yeah,” I replied, knowing I couldn’t avoid it. I just didn’t know what to tell him. Even if I did, I wasn’t sure how I’d break the truth to him.

“Well,” Eddie shrugged, “what can you tell me?” His eyes filled with wonder, mixing in with what seemed to be ever present gloom.

*I sat in Talbot’s office. I didn’t want to watch what was happening. I knew Riley’s body was being removed from the base while the rest of us had been debriefed, before the blood and brain matter were collected and cleaned from the floor.*

*I had been questioned until I felt like my ears were going to bleed. I wanted to claw my eyes out.*

*“Are you alright, son?” Talbot asked as it was just the two of us in his office by that time.*

*“What do you think?”*

*“As you told him, you had to do what you had to do.”*

*“I didn’t want to,” I fired back.*

*“You tried to talk him down but that didn’t work. In the end,” Talbot raised his eyebrows and turned his thumbs out as if he happened to display the obvious, “it was going to you or him, and you...well, you chose you.”*

*“He needed help,” I shook my head. “Help that not even I could give him.”*

*“He was going to therapy. They tried to help him. They tried to make him forget and move on. Whatever they did, didn’t take. That’s normal. It happens.”*

*“There was nothing normal about that!” I fumed. “He couldn’t forget. It’s not that they couldn’t make him or teach him how. Riley just couldn’t. He wouldn’t.”*

*“They have their ways,” Talbot said as he leaned back in his chair. “They’ve helped me when I’ve needed it. It was a long time ago but it helped. I think they used LSD back in those days.”*

*“I don’t want to be drugged,” I scoffed.*

*“They don’t use drugs any longer,” Talbot waved me off, “but you don’t need to worry yourself about that.”*

*“How can they make you forget something like that? There’s no damned way.”*

*"I don't think you'd want to go that route. They have their ways," he said, "but I don't think you can handle that. It'd take away your killer instinct, and you need that, son. It keeps you sharp and doing what you do, you have to keep your head in the game."*

*"I don't want to have this play over and over in my head," I said. "If it'll help, I'm willing," I lied, knowing that I was going against my better judgment.*

I lied, knowing that was going against my better judgment, going against all the work I'd been putting into bettering myself, "I know how Riley died, and he died," my voice cracked, "he died a hero. He was," I shook my head, feeling weak in my knees and sick to my stomach simultaneously, "he was trying to protect a child."

Eddie's arms wrapped around me and pulled me in tightly before I could say anything else. "Thank you," he said between sobs, "thank you. You have no idea how good it is to hear that. To finally know," I wanted to tell him how damaging it was to know, and to lie to him, but I said nothing. I hugged him back as Eddie added, "Thank you, son. Thank you so much."

*A face in scrubs stood before me. "Do you feel safe?"*

*I didn't know where I was. I saw other soldiers with me. All of us in a circle. Abernathy was there. His leg was wrapped, indicating he'd been wounded.*

*"Do you feel safe?" The voice came again.*

*"Yes," I said. "Why wouldn't I?" I asked, working to mask any confusion. My memory was a blur as I tried to figure out where I was and why.*

*"Does your colleague have a gun?"*

*"I don't see anyone with a gun. And these aren't my colleagues," I said. "They're my brothers. With them," I motioned to the others, "I know I'm safe."*

*"That is exactly what we needed to hear."*

*"And who are you?"*

*"You don't need to know who we are. All you need to know is that we're not the enemy, and that we saved you. All of you."*

*"Saved us from what?"*

*"From yourselves."*

"I know I've asked this already," Jacob began, as we drove towards his home, "but are you ok?"

"I'm not," I said with a bitter taste remaining in my mouth. The lie lingered on my tongue, while the truth ripped through my heart, burning into my brain all over again.

"Why?"

"The less you know."

From the corner of my eye, I saw my brother shake his head. "You need to stop saying that. I'm your brother. I feel I learned more about you today than I have in years. Don't close up again."

"About this," I sighed, "I have to."

"You lied to Eddie," Jacob looked at me. "Didn't you?"

I said nothing. I just wanted to go to Tiffany's. I wanted to be with my daughter. I wanted to take her back home, to our family. To find another way to forget the Hell I returned to the surface.

"You did. Son of a bitch."

"I'm not happy about it," I said. "But Eddie didn't need to know what happened. I wish I didn't know now."

"What happened to Riley? What happened to you? And no more of that 'less you know' horse shit."

I wanted to tell him. I wasn't sure how Jacob would've reacted, just as I didn't know what I was going to do once he was out of the truck and I was alone with my thoughts.

We reached his driveway. "I guess you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"I can't," I said, remembering how many times I uttered those words before Bree managed to drag the truth out of me.

"Fine. Fuck it. See you around, Josh."

Jacob climbed out of the truck and I called out to him, regretting what I was going to ask of my brother. "Don't tell Eddie. He can never know." We locked eyes. "Promise me that." Silence. "Promise me."

Jacob scoffed then nodded. "Sure. I'll back you up. We're brothers. We back one another up, right?" I said nothing, as he nodded once again. He then closed the door, walked inside, and I backed out of the driveway, hating myself all over again.

**Now**

***Is that what you're afraid of?***

“What?” I asked, glancing back at my reflection. My ego was persistent, just like Bree had been. She wanted me to be better. My ego wanted me to better its strength, giving it control over me.

***Hating yourself all over again? If you attack Amy's injured limbs? She's been through a lot. You could apply just a little bit of pressure and do more damage than her body would want to comprehend.***

“That's enough from you.”

***What was that? Trying to tell me what to do? You want to get rid of me?***

“When I told Selena that my ego didn't control me, I meant it. You don't control me. I control you.”

***I only want what's best for us, Josh. Amy, you call her a friend, but I'm your real friend. Your only friend.***

“I can hear you. I can see you. I know what you are, just as I know who I am. I'm not who you want me to be.”

***You can't get rid of me, Josh. You know that.***

“You can stick around. In fact, I want you to be. Hell,” I chuckled, “you need to be.”

***And why's that?***

**Two Days Later**

“I thought I told you I didn't want to see you ever again?” Talbot asked as we sat across from one another once again, separated by glass.

I grinned as I spoke into the phone, “This will be the last time.”

“I take it that you found what you were looking for,” he stated. I nodded. “And how'd that go?”

“I wish I never remembered.”

“What unlocked the mysteries of your brain?” Talbot asked, his words thick with sarcasm.

“I visited Riley's father. I read his letters.”

“You were a hell of a marksman son, but...” he rolled his eyes, “you're not very smart when it comes to keeping yourself out of the shit.”

“I took a page from ‘their’ book.”

“Which was?”

“I told his father what he needed to hear. What he deserved to hear.”

“Isn’t that sweet?”

“I wouldn’t call it sweet,” I said. “The truth isn’t always enough, as much as I hate to say that. It’s not always good enough. He deserved to remember his son as a good person.”

“So, tell me Hudson,” Talbot shrugged. “Where does that leave you in the grand scheme of things?”

“I deserve to remember myself as a good person. That’s what I want for my family to see me as.”

“We’ve been here before, son. How long before you come back here to see me? So we can have another one of these discussions?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to see or talk to you anymore. You, and Riley, are ghosts that I can bury. Riley was my friend and he didn’t deserve to die the way that he did. I’ll remember the good times. You, on the other hand, deserve whatever comes to you.”

“I was only trying to protect you.”

“No,” I shook my head. “As it was with Erica, you wanted to be superior. You wanted to show those above you that you were always in control, even when Riley went...*postal*. But today, I can tell you, man to man, that I’m the one in control. You’ve always needed me. Now, you’re on your own. I have a family to take care of.”

“You’ll be back,” Talbot growled.

“Maybe when you die,” I said before hanging up the phone. He tried to say something else but I just grinned and gave Talbot a gentle nod before walking away.

***That was eventful.***

***Do you feel any better?***

“That was for you, too. Now, leave me the hell alone,” I said as I reached the parking lot. I saw Bree in the passenger side of my truck. Heath and Jalyn were standing in her lap, smiling as they waved at me. I saw them, knowing that what I saw was my future.

***And what will you do without me?***

“Make some good memories.”

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### Promo

**I could see the Rogers Arena just across from my hotel balcony. It wouldn't be long before I found myself strapping up my boots and taping my fists as I prepared to defend the SCW World Championship.**

**In the weeks leading up to that match, I didn't go out of my way to cause a lot of drama like the former champion, Selena had done. Despite what she, and some others, deemed to be chaos, I felt I was thriving. I was having a blast, despite what had been taking place in my personal life.**

**As I sat on the balcony, the SCW World title rested on the outside table next to me. I looked at it, telling myself it was time to shift my focus to what would transpire between the ropes in the coming days.**

*Evening, Amy.*

*I've been looking forward to this.*

*And it's not for reasons you, or anyone else, would think. It's not because I've no doubt that we're going to have the type of match that will succeed whatever hype surrounds it. We've had two weeks of build, so to speak, and I've no doubt that we're going to knock it out of the park once the bell rings.*

*We will go hold for hold, toe to toe, strike for strike. The Black Out against the Kingdom Come. The Tourniquet against the Severin-Mission. That's all window dressing, in my mind, at least. Those are just taglines used to sell the match and the rest of the Pay-Per-View.*

*So, quit beating around the bush...right, Josh?*

*When I came back for Taking Hold of the Flame, no...no, even when I returned to face one of our greatest foes in Simon Lyman, I discussed all these emotions that I've decided to no longer run from, but to embrace. The main one I've brought up has been...fear. A fear of struggle. A fear of this and that, as fear has come in many shapes and sizes for me.*

*I've used that fear as motivation. I have found strength in that fear, and that is why I'm able to admit to you, the SCW roster, and Universe that follows this place and keeps it alive, that right now, as we draw closer and closer to Apocalypse, I'm as nervous as they come. And why wouldn't I be? This is my first defense of the SCW World Championship since I won it at Rise to*



**Greatness.** Hell, I've not had the best success rate at this event. I've lost championships here, which is a key detail that my own **ego** has not let me forget.

The same could be said of my time spent competing on our biggest stage. I've lost more than I've won at **Rise to Greatness**, but as I said just a few moments ago, I've learned to embrace these emotions. Because success or failure, neither will define me as a person, as a human, or even as a wrestler or competitor. No, my reactions will. How I handle those losses, or those wins. These are some of the key ingredients that fuel my strength.

It is when Selena decided to show up and hit me with the Glass Shard towards the end of my match against Rayvn Taylor, I didn't throw a fit on social media. I didn't complain a single bit. I walked out for the main event, and I beat Selena for the richest, most important championship in the history of our industry.

And it may sound cocky, but I finally added weight, so to speak, to my Hall of Fame status. I earned the ring in 2013, but I think that I finally earned the right to be called a legend these past few years. I feel I've finally lived up to all the words I used to spew, filling them with truth instead of grade A bullshit.

I guess you could say that something clicked. Something finally registered that it was time to be the man, to be the wrestler, I had always sought, and fought, to be.

That's why you don't see me losing my cool over Blake attacking me. That's why I continue to embrace the **Wild, Wild West** mentality. I know what I've been through to get here, and to be frank, I'm not ready to let go of what I fought for.

People can call me a legend but if you want to ask me, I'll tell you that I'm just getting started.

That's why when I say I've been looking forward to this, I mean it.

You and me, we've come from the same shadows, working our way to the top of every company we've competed for. You've earned that title of legend in your own way. Just as you have earned the shot at the SCW World Championship.

I know there are those who will certainly think otherwise, but I know your worth in this ring, and as a person, Amy. In this ring, it'd be hard to find anyone who works as hard as you do. Look at what you've overcome recently. The attack in VWA. You survived that. And the war you found yourself in with Simon.

You were the last person standing but that's not the only reason you're here in this position. Look at your history with SCW. You achieved the status of 'Supreme Champion' faster than anyone. It's something I've not even obtained. You've faced the best and you've beaten the best.

*Just as I have.*

*I'm not only ready to see how well I'm going to be able to handle the spotlight as it shines brighter than it ever has upon me, but I'm curious to see how you're going to react, too.*

**I thought about how, just as a wrestling fan, I watched Amy defeat my old protégé, Regan Street not once, but twice, over the very title I held. She had come out of nowhere, winning a tournament, defeating another protégé of mine in James Evans, to earn the chance to compete at that very stage.**

*You and I, well we both know how this industry works. We've been around the block more times than we may care to count, but we know the in's as well as the out's. We know opportunities such as this aren't handed out for free. Not for the type of wrestlers we are. We know there are those who can afford to piss on their opportunities because they know they can turn around and get another shot.*

*You and I...we're the type to fight, scratch and claw, to get everything we've ever earned. We know that having a shot like this, a match like this, for a championship like this, is something that could take a long time to come back around again. That is why when wrestlers like us, when the bell rings, we give it our all, no matter the card position.*

*That was evident during your match against Simon. Despite the World Championship being defended after, you stole the show, so to speak. You went above and beyond, tapping into a side of yourself that not many have ever seen. That has me on the edge of my seat, because despite knowing you as a friend, or even family, I don't know what I'm going up against Sunday night. I don't have you figured out Amy, like I did with Selena. You're more of an enigma than the one Deanna is facing.*

*What I have figured out is that you'll do all you can to make the most of this shot. That you will do all that you can to earn the World Championship.*

*Unfortunately, I'm going to have to do all that I can to shut down your hopes and dreams.*

**I sighed.**

*If you look back at my career, you'll know I've never had an issue with crushing the dreams and aspirations of my opponents. I reveled in it, but with you, I'm not sure I'll have the same experience. Stopping you from taking this...*

**I placed a hand on the World Championship as I continued.**

*...from my grasp, will not please me, friend. It will be done out of necessity.*

**Another sigh escaped me.**

*This type of situation reminds me of my time in the military. I had to do terrible, terrible things, Amy. Things that no Seven Circles of Hell match, or submission match, like we've been in, could never come close to in comparison.*

*Those things I had to do in order to survive. The type of matches many of us have competed in, has boiled down to pride. Ego. We make the choice to compete. Sure, you have a choice when you're in the desert or the jungle, or wherever you may end up. You can tuck and run, or you can fight. You can choose to do nothing and die, or you can choose to fight for survival.*

*Choosing survival, choosing to fight, that will result in doing things you normally wouldn't do. What you do is out of necessity.*

*That is why when I say that when the bell rings, I go to war. I treat every match, no matter the opponent, the exact same.*

*I have to survive.*

**I remove my hand from the title and bring it together with the other as I lean forward in my seat.**

*And I will fight to seize the victory, or I will die trying.*

*But as I said earlier, I'm just getting started. You and I will give the fans a memory that will last forever. I just refuse to lose. I feel like I can't. Not right now. I know I can't win them all, but I have to win this one.*

*I fought with all I had to earn this. To become SCW Champion, and to wrestle the SCW, with its roster and its fanbase, away from Selena. While I have no doubt in my mind that you would make a great champion, as you've done it before, this isn't the time.*

*You could beat me any other day, but not Sunday.*

**I reached over and grabbed the title before placing it over my shoulder.**

*And this may sound personal to some. Maybe even to you, and that's fine. It is personal to me. I will never shame the talent of anyone, especially not you, Amy. Before and after the match, no matter the result, you'll be a friend. You'll be family. But when the bell rings, the gloves are off.*

*You can tap into that side of yourself that you did with Simon. Sunday night, it may be recommended. You and I have never fought, and it's a match many have been dying to see just because of how long we've been doing this, how much our styles match. They want to know who is the best out of you and I.*

*I know that you will show up and you'll be brave.*

*I have to be brave as well. As I said, I've never won a match at Apocalypse. Hell, the first time I competed at this event, it was for this title, and it was against CHBK. Things didn't go well for me. I wasn't ready. Sunday night will be a different story.*

*And that's what we do between those ropes. We tell stories. We make those memories I mentioned. We captivate audiences. I know we both want that happy ending. I just have to prove I want it a little bit more than you, Amy. So, hit me and hurt me. I just have to drive my knee into the side of your head and make you black out, before I get the three.*

**With the title resting over my shoulder still, I leaned back in my seat. I wasn't sure of what would happen when the bell rang. I knew I'd do all that I could to ensure my words were more than words. I knew I wasn't going to cheat Amy out of a win. If she were to beat me then to her, the spoils. I just wouldn't make it easy, and I wasn't going to let up. If I had the chance, I knew I'd move in for the kill and make the shot count.**

*You don't like to make promises you can't keep, Amy. Neither do I. So, may the best wrestler win, and friend, I intend to.*

**I smirked before looking at the title one last time. I then got up and walked out of the camera's view, letting it all fade to black, knowing the time for talk was over. I didn't know what Amy would say, but I knew where my focus needed to be.**