

You know Chad...

...wait....

Colin?

No, Carter.

...Chris! That's it.

Ahem.

You know, Chris...

There's something about you that just doesn't seem right.

Aside from the obvious I mean. None of us are right from Enigma, whatever that is, to whichever belt holding Frost you care to pick we all have something inherently wrong with us. You have to get into this industry, to submit to being a slab of meat that if you're lucky some may lust over between the rest of them trying to tear chunks from you until there's nothing left.

You though...

If we were meat, Chris?

You'd be an Impossible Burger.

Fake...but trying so desperately to convince the rest of us you're real.

“No, I didn't know he'd be here....” the words rolled from his mouth into the phone's receiver as he stared at his reflection, and the black eye forming from Joe's initial 'hello' “Huh? No, I wasn't making fun of his arm. I was trying to ask if it was ok—”

A pause, his face dropped and an irritated sigh rolled from deep within his chest as he turned away, setting the phone down and not bothering to put it on speaker as he pulled an old Black Sabbath t-shirt on over his head, rolling his shoulder once before picking the phone up and politely 'uh-huhing' to the person on the other end.

“Look, I get that but I can't exactly control how things come off. Not really interested either...I could have told Joseph he looked like a million bucks and he'd hear me say he was paper thin or

some shit...” another pause “Yeah, I know that wasn’t clever but I did just fight a small mob of people. Cut me some slack.”

He stepped out into the hallway, mostly empty now. First one in, last one out. He’d always made a habit of it as the silence before and after the battle was the closest thing to peace he knew. Honed for the kill and about to strike, or beaten to a state of rest. Unwell, like the rest of them.

“Huh? Yeah, Of course I w–

Yeah, Alright...Look i’ll call you when I get back into town. Maybe I let you buy me th–”

click

He pulled the phone from his ear, a small smirk playing on his face at the ‘Call Ended’ beneath the number he didn’t bother saving more so because he had it memorized than anything. Hell, it was the only one that answered when he dialed it anymore.

Letting out a quiet sigh he slid the phone into his back pocket and adjusted the old adidas bag upon his shoulder, carrying on the down the hallway and reflecting silently on how the night had gone. It was an interesting experience, not recognizing any of the faces that crossed his path. Until he did.

His stomach churned, and his limbs dropped a few degrees as he relived the moment once more. JC, with a familiar intent in his eye. Joe, he should call him but....No. That wasn’t his friend out there. It hadn’t been for a while.

‘Not that you deserve his friendship’ the thought was biting, grim, and true. Although he couldn’t fathom what Joe’s issue was outside of his hand in their tag run going awry, but to bemoan Matthew Knox’s chaotic nature while teaming with him was akin to lighting one’s self on fire and proceeding to complain about the heat. It didn’t make sense.

The cool night air shocked the train of thought from its tracks. He took in a deep lungful, producing a pack of Camel non-filters as he exhaled to begin the process of offsetting the gross amount of oxygen he’d gorged himself on since arriving at the arena. A small glint as an old polished silver zippo appeared from seemingly nowhere, sparking the cigarette he plucked from the pack to life.

An inhale, and soon the noxious fumes began their ascent to heaven. An ascent neither he, or the fumes would ever complete.

No, it didn't make sense the way Joseph had flown off the handle. And if he was honest? He had an inkling of who was influencing his friend's erratic behavior. But some battles weren't his to fight. At least not yet.

No, his battle was here and obvious. Unmarked territory, far off the map with a whole different Raab and everything. He took another puff, steadying his nerves on the exhale and letting a chuckle escape him. Chaotic as all this was? At least it made sense. At least he didn't need to second guess anything, or make apologies for the way he was. He thought of Camden for a moment, the poor bastard just trying to come home only to get jumped by his father in law.

He still hadn't called Hope to clear that up. Part of him suspected it wasn't necessary, but still...

A scoff, at the shame he felt.

Then a small bit of warmth in that cool night.
At least he could still feel Shame.

He flicked the remains of the cigarette to scatter across the pavement as he headed toward the talent parking area then, only noticing the gathering of event staff and security as he drew closer, the flashing orange lights of a tow truck blinding him with every revolution. As he neared, and squinted through the intrusion of light he felt his stomach drop once more.

"Oh, *fuck me...*" he muttered.

The rental, an unassuming Ford Escape, had met its end at the hands of a Winnebago that had seemingly been rammed full speed into the side of it. In his mind's eye, he went back to a company that had died, been buried and revived to be desecrated. To their first ever one on one confrontation, and the violence therein.

He remembered the night he found out that JC?

JC Kills.

From the blonde hair blue eyed every day american all state varsity quarterback looks to the dime-store straight to DVD sentiment behind all the cunt words you spat out before falling face first in that big old fuck off ordeal we were both apart of.

Everything about you is so uninspired and thereby uninspiring. You're like if someone asked an AI generator to create a protagonist for what a tasteless, imbecilic basement dweller thinks is a male power fantasy. You talk like idiots think geniuses speak and you fight like a sponge.

All that to say, Mister Lawler? I'm looking past you.

Not just because I can and believe me, I very easily can because while you would struggle to name what you ate for breakfast we could poll a room and spend a day hearing of my accomplishments and about who the fuck Matthew Knox is.

But like I said, that's not the only reason why.

I'm looking past you, Chris, because there's simply nothing to look at. You're nothing, nobody, and when I've moved past you the struggle to remember who you were will be greater than the struggle you present me in that ring. Because whereas you might be what a machine would spit out if someone asked it to generate that enigmatic, dangerous man you play at being?

I am that motherfucker.

I am Him.

You?

You're just next, Chris.

Don't be too disheartened though my friend, because through all this trauma i'm about to leave you with? You will serve a purpose.

You get to be the one to show them.

You get to be the one to **Show Them**.

At least it wasn't the wintertime.

The thought kept him company as he strode down the sidewalk back toward the hotel, the big red MARRIOTT sign a glimmering beacon that guided his footsteps. The streets were empty mostly, a mercy to be sure. He puffed silently on another cigarette as he strode, his eyes darting to inspect the darker corners, half convinced that something would spring out at any moment.

It all felt like Cambodia still.

Hell, maybe it always would.

The sound of twisting metal and the wet, visceral sound of what it does to flesh that dare get caught in the maelstrom snapped his eyes shut, pausing his gait as he let out a slow and uneasy breath. His fingers on splayed at his side as if casting the memories out then curled into tight, protective fists as he tried to steady his breathing.

Just get to the room, you old fool.

He wet his lips, suddenly cracked and dry, and began to walk at a quicker pace now. The red sign suddenly a deeper, more desperate hue of red and the peaceful easy night suddenly far too quiet. So quiet it deafened him and added a razor's edge to the blood running in his veins. He flicked the cigarette away, the cherry causing a bright cascade of orange to dance across the matte black surface of the street.

His footsteps thundered down the sidewalk in his ear, the crash symbols to the steady thumping bass of his heart as his eyes alternated between darting to every dark corner, to the sign to measure distance, and then snapped shut to try and stop imaging what was lurking... Then back open so he wouldn't visualize what he kept hearing.

He spun on his heel, stopping his progress and exhaling "Come on, come on..." he muttered to himself, encouraging his nerves off the ledge they'd been so quick to rush to lately. He froze then, his eyes falling upon that which served to undo all of his efforts.

How long had that car been sitting at that stop sign?

He stared for a half second too long before turning back around and beginning to walk again. "Be cool, be cool..." he pleaded with his thundering heart, suddenly regretful of the thirty years of chain smoking. After a half dozen steps he cautioned a half look over his shoulder which served to only increase the frantic pace of his existence.

The car was following him.

Nope. **Fuck** this. Not Again.

He bolted then, the wind burning his lungs and his limbs protesting the effort after the night's events. He tried desperately to keep the hotel's neon beacon as a true north but before long instinct - blind, desperate instinct - drove him to dive into an alley as he heard the motor of the four wheeled harbinger of doom creep upon him.

He swung downward to kneel behind a dumpster, one hand going to his ankle to rip a boot knife from where it rested. He watched the car's headlights as they approached, watched as they slowed and held his breath as they stopped. When the first door open he tensed. The second caused his grip to tighten.

....Then, the voices.

"I had fun tonight."

"Yeah, me too...maybe call me tomorrow? We can do it again?"

"If you play your cards right..."

He slumped away from the intimate scene, pressing his back to the wall of what he now deduced to be an apartment building and quietly tried to steady his breathing, doing his best to mute the quite sustained grunts as he tried to stay off the sobs. He was sure, he was sure it was them. Or someone like them.

God, what if he'd chosen fight over flight?

"The fuck is wrong with me..." he muttered, grip loosening to drop the blade, and his mind miles away. Much too far to hear the clang of the metal on the pavement.

You get to show them that their eyes weren't deceiving them, Chris.

You get to show them that everything they heard about me wasn't just true, it was a goddamn understatement. You get to show them that everything here is about to change.

And you get to show them what the fuck happens to whoever tries to stop it.

I'm sorry that you were cursed with such a lowly existence, Chris. Had I a hand in your making and in the carving of the path of your fate I assure you I would have kept you dwelling in the comfortable mundanity you belong in. I would have stopped you from ever thinking that you were ever more than what you are.

What's that?

Not Much.

What aren't you? Who aren't you?

Not me.

You're not a 9 time World Champion. You're not the guy whose beaten every Bogeyman and retired The Bogeyman twice. You're not the guy who came in the top 7 of the Keeper of the flame.

You're just not The Guy.

As much as you really, really Fake trying to be.

Now, Genuinely, Me?

I am Raze.

I am Ruin.

I am The Raven.

Root, and Stem....all empires fall. All stars burn out.
Everything Changes.

By Mine Hand.

Root.

And.

Stem.

The lobby of the Marriott was dull at this hour. So dull in fact, the security guard by he door had long since gone to sleep and failed to notice the bike that brought him to work had taken a vagrant off to his next hit, or to the bike's final fate of full disassembly in the name of removing all the CIA microphones the FBI had planted on behalf of the ATF.

The young man behind the counter remained half awake though, crossing one leg over the other to hide the effects of binging Bridgerton on his shift. The automatic doors sliding open brought

his attention and caused him to pop an ear bud free, briefly spiking his anxiety over the pitch of a moan within them.

“Sir i’m sorry but ch—Oh. Mister Knox! Bit late, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...car trouble..” Matthew responded, face stoic save for the half smirk “Apologies for the inconvenience.”

“None at all. Hope your night went well.”

He paused by the elevator door, staring at the distorted reflection within before responding to it as much as to the stranger behind him.

“It was Perfect.”

“Good to hear. Have a good one, Mike!”

“Motherfu-”