



## BEHIND THE CURTAIN

by Morghan, accompanying art by Emily

A nervous energy buzzed inside Elliott as he waited behind a curtain; just steps away from a stage in front of thousands of Apex fans- a stage that was also being broadcasted to thousands more at home. Nights like this were such a detour from the action he was used to.

This event tonight was more or less like any other sponsored event- this time celebrating another successful year of the Apex Games. It was routine: a glitzy photo op in front of the venue, men in suits ushering him and the rest of the Legends to a cozy greenroom, the screaming public kept at arm's length as they walked by- everyone excited for their favorite Legend to take the stage. Elliott had soaked in the thrilling elation on the way inside, holding the cheers and screams close in his rapidly beating heart. Sure, he's done events with a flashy speech plenty of times, but it never made him any less nervous about it. Crazy how he was more familiar with arsenal combat in the past years than public speaking.

Still, he loved speaking and he loved the public... way more than he could say for some of the other Legends here. (Renee and Anita's speeches combined were usually shorter than his morning toothbrush routine).

It was always nice to share a few words. Events like this somehow felt more intimate than the rushed after-match interviews; where a camera and mic were shoved in your face while the lingering white noise of gunfire was still actively ringing in your ear. Events like this were a chance to get close to everyone watching the matches- heck, sometimes Elliott was jealous that his fans had this to anticipate: Personal words from your favorite Legends, words for the fans, for the supporters, for- in Elliott's case, the ones that actually purchased his sold-out, limited-edition, signed "Mirage" posters and didn't resell them under the table...y'know- the true, true fans!

Tonight, Elliott pulled from the same well he used when he needed to fight in the Games: the desire to perform, to maneuver with pizzazz and make the viewers double-take and smile; an instinct deep within him. And just like in a match, he always made a point to remind himself just how many people were watching him- tonight was no different! From experience, he knew that you didn't have to be the best at words to do this- you just had to love using them.

-And tonight, through the nerves, Elliott wanted to use his words to thank every single fan for their support.

It was almost time for Elliott to take the stage and he patiently waited in the curtained wing, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was suited in his best attire and every conditioned curl was perfectly misplaced- he knew regardless of what he said tonight, he at least was going to look amazing.

"So amazing," A decoy said. It had appeared behind him and was smoothing out some wrinkles on the back of Elliott's blazer. Elliott, of course, had dawned his iconic holotech discs over his suit, making sure the ensemble looked as stylish and coordinated as he could. His iconic tech was just something the audience expected on him at this point- and he couldn't say he blamed them! The decoy continued to straighten Elliott's blazer from behind and dusted it off a bit. "Really!" it said, smiling warmly, "This look is perfect- so glad we picked this and not that polkadot number."

Elliott blinked in confusion and then suddenly remembered the sparkly, polkadot suit he had modeled for his decoys at home. "Okay, yes," Elliott said, "but come on, that wasn't a bad look."

(cont...)



Instantly a second decoy appeared in front of him and began to straighten his tie. "A bad look?" it said and shook its head, "No no, it was great - just y'know, the wrong vibe for this crowd." The decoy hummed proudly once Elliott's tie was pristine and neatly nestled in the perfect place, "I mean, look at this...what look can't we pull off?"

"Looking bad." The first decoy answered and they high fived each other over Elliott's shoulder.

Elliott rolled his eyes and gave a quiet laugh, "Okay, guys...guys, I'm on in like, five."

In a flash of blue light, a third decoy appeared and reached out to adjust some of the curls framing Elliott's face. The hologram thoughtfully rearranged Elliott's hair and then tilted its head- gazing at Elliott like an artist appreciating his work. "Okaaay... and now we're ready. Look, five minutes is practically eons!" The decoy reached out one last time to tuck a strand behind Elliott's ear, "You're gonna rock it, Boss- naturally. D'you know what you're gonna say?"

Elliott's heart skipped a beat at that question. He did this a lot and usually had something planned, some cue cards, a flashy practiced bit, but this time..."Yeah!...Uh y-yeah?" He cleared his throat, "For this one I'm, uh. I'm gonna...I'm just going from the ol'...heart."

The three decoys smiled and chuckled at each other.

"Ooh ho, so the fans are getting raw, unedited Mirage? Fresh off the dome? Lucky Ducks." One decoy said.

"Do you wanna practice?" another decoy leaned in and tilted its head.

Elliott looked to the stage entrance; the faint sound of Octavio plugging all his social media accounts meant he still had a little time to spare. "Guys... I got like...4 minutes?"

"So make it count!" the third decoy said and moved closer to massage away the stress building up in Elliott's shoulders, "Here, from the heart, super quick- just pretend we're your fans. What would you say?"

"Y-Yeah?" Elliott relaxed a bit into the soothing contact and cleared his throat again, "Yeah... Okay well, then I'd just say...thank you for sticking with me, through every season of this... crazy, shooty...Competition. Oh! And thank you for...for being excited! Because...when I'm contemping- contemplant- when I'm sitting there thinking and focusing on that dropship, getting ready to show up and show out- it's your excitement that I bring out there with me. All of you! Yeah... because I really do like knowing you all have fun watching me compete- it makes me want to have fun out there too and... fight harder. You're all like...my family! My... extended....really really large family whose names I cannot be expected to remember, but- the point is: I love you guys...I have the best fans and I really, really appreciate everyone out there rooting for me. It makes me proud to be a Legend! I wanna keep doing this for as long as I can and have you all keep cheering me on!"

The decoy in front of Elliott wiped a non-existent tear from the corner of its eye. "Okay what are you even worried about?! No notes!"

"I'm touched!" the decoy behind Elliott agreed, squeezing his shoulders excitedly.

"You're gonna knock 'em dead!" the last decoy echoed. "Like...right now! Yeah, they're totally calling your name on stage right now."

Panicked, Elliott's feet froze up and his decoys began to encouragingly push him towards the stage, patting him on the shoulders and assuring him this was going to be a speech to remember.

