

Success

By

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FADE IN

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

AJ, aged 36, half-dressed in wrinkled clothes, clutches his knees, rocking back and forth on his bed in a dark bedroom, suffocated with clutter. His vacant eyes stare past the empty coffee mugs and pills in front of him.

AJ

I know this is going to work. It's  
going to work this time.

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - DAY - 6 MONTHS EARLIER

The sun is streaming onto the bed where Sylvie, 35, with long, silky hair and soft eyes, lounges in shorts and a T-shirt alongside AJ, wearing a blue bathrobe, as he looks over a notebook.

AJ

Why the hurry? How about we do some  
roleplaying warmups?

AJ glances back hopefully. Sylvie levels her gaze at him.

SYLVIE

I thought Graydor the Brave does  
not forsake his companions. Let's  
go already.

AJ lifts a pencil and makes a correction. Sylvie's fingers play with AJ's hair.

SYLVIE

Your hair is still wet.

AJ

You're making Graydor angry.

Sylvie smirks with an eye roll and crosses her arms.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

A hand rolls a 20-sided die, stopping on a 2.

Chelsea, 35, with her wild, short hair, peeks over the edge of a tri-folded cardboard barrier.

Maxwell, 40, with dark-framed, boxy glasses, abruptly breaks his gaze from the lowly number, waiting, slack-jawed, for Chelsea to explain.

CHELSEA  
Graydor the Brave slips and falls  
on Jeznal's familiar... and it  
died.

MAXWELL  
(turning toward AJ)  
Nooo!!!

Sylvie rolls backward, guffawing.

AJ  
Sorry about your turtle.

MAXWELL  
(fuming)  
It was a tortoise! Sylvie, you said  
that symbol you painted on its  
shell would protect it!

SYLVIE  
Ask Chelsea why it didn't work.  
She's the DM.

Chelsea starts cleaning up her papers and books, then grabs  
the 20-sider.

CHELSEA  
That spell is only for deflecting  
arrows and small knives. A half-orc  
in full armor fell on him. He  
rolled a 2 on a bull rush in the  
mud. The die don't lie, Max!

MAXWELL  
(weakly)  
But he wasn't just my familiar. He  
was my friend.

AJ seems lost in thought. Fingers snap at him.

SYLVIE  
AJ, are you still with us?

AJ  
Oh, sorry. I've just been thinking  
about my latest project.

CHELSEA  
You making another film?

MAXWELL

Just put the camera down and keep your day job, dude. Your last film about Sylvie's cat was painful.

CHELSEA

It was better than his used car lot commercial. That's for sure.

Maxwell and Chelsea start to giggle.

AJ

Enough about the commercial already.

SYLVIE

It's just a bad economy.

CHELSEA

Oh, and that travel vlog?

MAXWELL

But he left Sylvie all alone!

Sylvie scoffs at Maxwell's feigned sympathy.

Chelsea returns to her beer, struggling to recompose herself.

AJ

Okay, okay, I get it, but this is different. I will finally write a success story of my own. You know that documentary series "Humans of New York?"

Maxwell nods.

SYLVIE

I love Humans of New York!

AJ

Every video he posts has millions, MILLIONS of views and thousands of comments! I want to make a documentary where, instead, I interview successful people, and ask them how they got to where they are.

Chelsea looks thoughtful.

MAXWELL

Okay.

AJ

Who wouldn't want to see a documentary that lays out recipes for success, from real people?

(turns to Sylvie)

Hey, remember when I told you about that actor I met when I was vlogging? Guess who I filmed yesterday?

SYLVIE

No way! Seriously?

AJ nods.

MAXWELL

Which actor?

AJ

This could be my big break. I can feel it.

AJ lights up with manic energy, and Sylvie raises her beer to him.

SYLVIE

To AJ's big break!

Maxwell and Chelsea glance at each other, before clinking glasses.

INT. LARGE OFFICE - DAY

AJ sits across from DANNY, aged 32, in a neutral-colored office space, engaged in conversation, with a camera recording.

DANNY

A food cart. Yeah, it all started with a food cart, but... I was determined to make the best damn food cart ever. I had all sorts of French cuisine in that cart. It was all so good! But they just called me "the crepe cart".

Danny and AJ share a chuckle.

AJ

But how'd you go from that food  
cart to such an incredible  
restaurant?

DANNY

I got rid of all distractions and  
got to business. I worked on my  
food, and, I drove everywhere:  
softball games, beaches, my  
brother's wedding... I miss those  
days, but hell, my second Michelin  
star sure makes up for it!

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Allison, 60, carefully sprinkles salsa over the meats of a  
carefully arranged assortment of tacos. The door opens  
behind her and she rushes to clean her hands.

ALLISON

Alex!

Allison lights up and rushes to kiss her son on the cheek,  
taking flowers from him. Allison stares affectionately into  
her son's eyes, but he looks away.

AJ

They're from Sylvie.

AJ's eyes drift further and he laughs.

AJ

Tacos!

ALLISON

Lamb tacos! New recipe!

Allison holds a plate bearing a single taco and holds the  
taco up. AJ obliges.

AJ

This is so good. Lamb tacos! I had  
no idea!

Allison brushes AJ's mouth with a napkin as he gets his food  
down. An older man in a business suit, with peppered hair  
and a stoic face walks out.

AJ

Hi Dad.

DAVID  
Good to see you, Alex.

AJ  
I'm working on a film. A  
documentary!

DAVID  
Filmmaking? Hey, that's great. Good  
luck with it.  
(checks his watch)  
Sorry, I have a meeting.

David kisses Allison on the cheek, then gives a token nod to  
AJ and turns to leave.

AJ  
It's about successful people--

A door shuts.

AJ  
Like you.

Allison remembers the plate in her hands and heads to the  
sink to wash it.

ALLISON  
So Sylvie's busy?

AJ  
Sushi night with the girls or  
something.

ALLISON  
When ya gonna finally propose to  
her? I want grandkids!

AJ rolls his eyes as his mother rejoins him.

AJ  
Mom! I'm still trying to become a  
success first. I just finished the  
first interview of my documentary.  
This guy gave up so much for his  
restaurant, but he made it. I wish  
I could be that dedicated.

ALLISON  
Nonsense. Hey, we can start our own  
taco restaurant!

Allison and AJ share a laugh.

AJ

You think I have it in me? I want this documentary to succeed so much. Even Dad will be impressed.

ALLISON

Your don't need to prove anything to your father, honey. Hey, I still have a lot of phone calls to make for my 60th birthday party.

AJ

You really want to do something that big?

ALLISON

You know me and birthday parties. I've been telling all my friends about how talented and smart you are! They can't wait to meet you! Hey, guess what I'll be serving?

AJ glances over at the tacos and then back incredulously at his squealing mother.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

Sylvie and Maxwell sit silently, nursing their beers, looking sympathetically at the stack of gaming materials in front of Chelsea. Chelsea glances at the door behind her.

MAXWELL

Where is he?

SYLVIE

Something must have come up...

MAXWELL

Maybe we can play without him?

CHELSEA

I really need the whole gang for this.

Chelsea starts collecting empty glasses.

MAXWELL

Come on AJ! It's the third time already!

CHELSEA

I guess I'll just rewrite the quest for two players.



(beat)  
Umm, who wants another round?

Sylvie glances again at the door, biting her lip, then back toward Chelsea with sincerity.

INT. LARGE OFFICE - EVENING

AJ converses at a table with MELANIE, aged 35, again with a camera recording. Melanie's attention drifts, then, her eyes jerk back to wide-eyed attention. AJ reaches for a coffee carafe.

AJ  
Would you like more...

Melanie shoves her coffee mug at AJ. He glances side-eyed, but then relents and pours.

MELANIE  
Ever since I believed in my  
writing, and took that leap of  
faith... I quit my job. It was all  
or nothing. No going back!

Melanie leans in and whispers.

MELANIE  
Do or die.

Melanie starts sipping her coffee.

AJ  
Getting rid of the safety net did  
the trick?

MELANIE  
It was scary, sure, but it  
simplified my life. If I did  
anything but write, I'd be out on  
the street. I sold my TV. The only  
friend I stayed in touch with was  
Mr. Coffee over there.

AJ  
Do you think this would work for  
anyone?

AJ is startled as Melanie grabs the pot again.

MELANIE  
Well, you need talent, but, you  
won't know until you try, right? I

MELANIE  
still can't believe it. The New  
York Times Best Seller List! It was  
all worth it!

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT

AJ sits at his computer desk in his orderly apartment,  
taking another sip from a large mug of coffee. He takes  
notes while reviewing the recording of his interview with  
Melanie.

MELANIE'S VOICE  
I quit my job. It was all or  
nothing. No going back! ... Do or  
die.

INT. FRONT OFFICE

Chairs and tables with brochures lean against the walls of a  
reception area. Sylvie peeks over a receptionist busy on his  
phone, at a clock.

She hears fast-approaching footsteps and looks up to see AJ,  
a box in hand, with a man in his 50's dressed for business,  
chasing after, wearing a look of exasperation.

BOSS  
You have to give me some notice.  
Come on!

AJ  
I'm sorry! I just need to focus on  
my project.

The boss's phone starts ringing and he speaks over it.

BOSS  
What project? I have to take this.  
Just call me tomorrow. We can work  
something out.

The boss answers his phone, rushing away. AJ shakes his head  
then notices Sylvie and does a double-take.

AJ  
Oh, hey! Umm... Dinner! Right!

SYLVIE  
(shocked)  
Did you just quit your job?

AJ motions with his head toward the door and continues  
walking

AJ

Yep. I've just been trying to streamline my life more. I need to be able to just wake up, have coffee, and get to work on my film.

SYLVIE

Is that why you stopped showing up to the gaming nights? Chelsea's really upset.

AJ

I know...  
(rakes his hair)  
I'll call her. But this project has become an obsession of mine. I should have time for pizza?

SYLVIE

I'm worried about you.

AJ

(upping his pace)  
Don't be. It's do or die now!

INT. LARGE OFFICE - DAY

AJ leans back in his chair, in front of his camera and tripod, watching Jason tucks his phone away and looks back up.

JASON

Right, so where was I?

AJ

I asked about your preparation for the bar exam.

JASON

Oh, yeah. I was worried. I heard about this one guy -- on the second day of the exam, he felt sick. He went up to the proctor to ask for a break, and freaking puked all over him! That wasn't gonna be me. I cut myself off from the world, and worked until I couldn't, every single day, and then kept pushing, and pushing.

AJ

(chuckling)  
I take it you had coffee in your IV or something?

JASON  
Not just coffee.

AJ  
Something stronger, huh?

JASON  
(glancing at the camera)  
And you want to record me saying  
what, exactly? Let's just say I  
wasn't screwin' around. I did what  
I had to. But look at me now.  
(spreads arms)  
I'm the youngest partner in the  
history of the firm.

AJ  
It sounds like you made their  
choice easy, with all that hard  
work and sacrifice.

JASON  
Exactly. There's a reason why  
makin' it big is so difficult. Most  
people? They lack commitment.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Empty coffee cups and some pills are strewn over the night  
stand in a motel room. A smartphone rings. AJ is trying to  
get a tie right, but gives up and answers the phone.

ALLISON  
How are you, AJ?

AJ  
Hey Mom, what's up?

A pause. AJ starts to privately motion for her to "get on  
with it" with his hand.

INTERCUT WITH ALLISON'S KITCHEN:

ALLISON  
Hey, can you pick up some tomatoes  
and come a little early? I used  
them all up in the salsa and it'd  
be great to have more for the  
tacos.

AJ's eyes close as he claws his hair and mouths the word  
"Fuck".

AJ  
Mom, I'm in Ohio.

ALLISON  
But my birthday...

David stands at the kitchen doorway.

FATHER  
He's busy with that film, isn't he?  
Good for him.

END INTERCUT

AJ  
I know Mom, I'm sorry. I'm  
preparing for another interview. A  
good one.

Another long pause.

ALLISON  
(weakly)  
Okay, AJ.

AJ  
I'm really sorry, Mom. I've just  
been so focused and it slipped my  
mind. Trust me, you and... even Dad  
are going to be so proud of me.

ALLISON  
We are proud of you, AJ.

AJ  
I'll talk to you later, okay? Bye  
Mom.

AJ hangs up and gets back to his tie.

INT. DARK ROOM - EVENING

AJ listens intently to ALYSSA in a quiet, dark space  
streaked with light from a single window.

ALYSSA  
And I just knew... Journalism was  
too important to me. Just a little  
bit more to make all the sacrifices  
worth it. I just had to take a  
break. We were together for so  
long...  
(beat)

ALYSSA

I loved him. But I was so damn close to success. You can't be a successful journalist if you feel tied down. And now, I'm busier than ever, traveling the world, covering the top stories. They're even talking about giving me my own time slot now. I'm on cloud nine.

AJ

You sound really happy. All those sacrifices obviously paid off.

INT. AJ'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sylvie approaches a door of an apartment and knocks. No answer. She tries the doorbell. Eventually she tries the knob, and it opens. She enters cautiously.

SYLVIE

Hello? AJ?

Sylvie hears movement and follows it.

Sylvie approaches a partially open door leading to a dark room, where the noise of key clattering is coming from. She peeks in.

In his bedroom, AJ sits in front of his computer, in his pajamas, with headphones on, watching one of his interviews. The room is littered with coffee cups, fast food packaging, and clothes.

Sylvie walks in a bit and speaks louder.

SYLVIE

AJ?

No response. AJ takes out a bottle of pills from a drawer and washes one down with coffee. He catches sight of Sylvie in his peripheral vision and freaks.

AJ

Ahhh!!!

The coffee goes flying, splashing on his keyboard.

AJ

Shit!

AJ looks up, agitated. Sylvie backs away.

AJ  
Don't sneak up on me like that.

SYLVIE  
I didn't mean to. I was worried.  
You're not answering your phone at  
all.

AJ  
I can't have any distractions.

AJ looks around, then shakes his head and grabs a t-shirt to  
start mopping up his keyboard.

SYLVIE  
What are those pills you're taking?

AJ  
(irritated)  
Sylvie, look, it's none of your  
business.

SYLVIE  
You don't look well.

AJ  
I think we need to take a break.

Sylvie's eyes widen, her mouth agape. AJ's eyes connect.

AJ  
Sylvie... I can't be distracted  
right now...

SYLVIE  
I'm just a distraction? AJ, I love  
you.

AJ  
It'll be just for a little while.  
Just until I get this done.

SYLVIE  
Wrong answer. I'm done.

Sylvie stares AJ down, fresh tears streaming down her face.

SYLVIE  
(voice cracking, but with  
resolve)  
We're done.

Sylvie storms out the door. AJ chases but stops at the door.

AJ  
Sylvie! Wait! Shit!

AJ's shoulders slump, but his eyes go cold with resolve.

AJ  
This will all be worth it.

INT. LOUNGE/RESTAURANT - EVENING

AJ, sweaty and unshaven, sits at the bar at the usual restaurant, finishing a burger. A bill is placed in front of him by a waiter.

The waiter ducks away discreetly. AJ flips through his wallet, only finding twenties. He shakes his head, then slaps one on the counter and turns to leap off his stool. Chelsea and Maxwell loom right over him.

MAXWELL  
Hey, look who climbed out of the sewer. Dude, you're kinda rank.

Chelsea glares at Maxwell.

CHELSEA  
You really hurt Sylvie. You've been together for how long? To end it all over some movie?

AJ  
You don't understand. I don't have a choice. The film is coming together so well, but I need to stay committed.

MAXWELL  
Don't be such an ass, man. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

AJ stands up, his eyes wild, staring Maxwell and Chelsea down angrily.

AJ  
YES IT DOES! You don't get it! I can't be on top if I do anything less!

Chelsea and Maxwell back away.

CHELSEA  
Hey, calm down!



AJ  
Just leave me alone!

AJ storms out, leaving exasperated friends in his wake.

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - EARLY EVENING

A catastrophic mess of equipment, clothes, papers, trash, and more coffee cups and pill bottles have successfully besieged AJ's bedroom.

Beep.

CHELSEA'S VOICE  
Hey AJ, how are you? Maxwell told me he had also tried calling you before, but no luck. You looked in bad shape last time we saw you. Call me, please?

Beep.

ALLISON'S VOICE  
Alex, are you okay? You haven't called me for months. I don't know what is going on with you. I know you don't have time for your mother, but I'm so worried about you. Can we talk?

AJ, in wrinkled clothes on his bed, holds his knees, rocking, midst a sprawl of coffee cups and pill bottles. His eyes are void of emotion.

VOICES  
I got rid of all distractions and got to business.  
(louder)  
It was all or nothing. No going back!  
(louder)  
Most people? They lack commitment.  
(louder)  
Just a little bit more to make all the sacrifices worth it.

Silence.

AJ  
(under his breath)  
I know this is going to work. It's going to work this time. I just want it all to be perfect. I will

AJ  
not give up this time. I need this  
to work. It's almost there, it has  
to be almost there. It will be a  
huge success. Nothing else matters.  
Sacrifices have to be made.

INT. THEATER LOBBY - AFTERNOON

A young, perky festival volunteer smiles at an approaching  
AJ from behind a table, in front of a sign advertising the  
Solar Flare Film Festival.

VOLUNTEER  
Welcome to the Solar Flare Film  
Festival! Our admission costs are  
suggested donations...

AJ  
I'm one of the filmmakers.

AJ spots his name on a clipboard on the table.

AJ  
That's me.

VOLUNTEER  
Oh, congratulations!

The volunteer opens a box and pulls out a badge.

VOLUNTEER  
And how many have you brought with  
you?

AJ  
Umm, just me, thanks.

AJ wears his badge as he walks past.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - EVENING

AJ is on stage with two film festival committee members as  
one presents him with a certificate for "Best Picture".  
Black clothes do little to mask AJ's gaunt figure, with  
shadows pooling in the pockets of his tired, emotionless  
face.

HOST  
Congratulations, AJ, your highly  
critically-acclaimed documentary,  
Success, is quite a success!

The festival host chuckles.

AJ  
Success...

HOST  
Your own rise to success was very rapid. Naturally, we all are very interested in hearing your thoughts about this. To what do YOU owe your success, AJ?

AJ's lips move as he stoically mouths silent answers. The words of AJ's interviewees echo louder and louder. One question manages to be heard.

TREASURER  
I'm sure it's all worth it in the end, isn't it? Is there anyone in the audience who you would like to acknowledge? I'm sure your loved ones are very proud of you!

AJ grimaces and wordlessly replies as his gaze drifts over the audience:

MONTAGE

- Chelsea shakes her head, pointing at him, then Maxwell glances over and shrugs in response. They vanish, leaving behind empty chairs.
- AJ continuing his answer.
- Sylvie leans against the wall, her eyes full of earnest pain. She slumps to the floor and disappears.
- Allison howls mournfully in the front row then fades away.

END MONTAGE

AJ's eye sheds a tear as he silently finishes.

HOST  
AJ, you are such an inspiration. Please, everyone, give AJ a huge round of applause.

The host cheerfully shakes hands with AJ and congratulates him again, contrasting sharply with AJ's somber disposition.

A man, sitting alone in the shadows of the back rows, picks up his coat and makes his way out.

AJ passively allows a festival volunteer to guide him away.

HOST  
And now, let's move on to Best  
Comedy...

INT. THEATER LOBBY - EVENING

AJ walks out of the theater and squints his eyes.

AJ  
Dad?

David retracts his hand from the door and turns around,  
pauses for a moment, then smiles widely and backtracks  
toward AJ.

DAVID  
AJ! Congratulations!

AJ  
I didn't know you were here!

DAVID  
I... wasn't sure I could make it. I  
just wanted to see the ceremony.

AJ brightens.

AJ  
I worked so hard for this, Dad.

An excited committee member pops up beside David and puts  
his hand on his shoulder.

TREASURER  
Thank you so much, Sir, for your  
... generous donation.

David's eyes glance nervously at AJ.

DAVID  
Yes, well, it was a small offering.

TREASURER  
(laughing, incredulous)  
That's what you call small?

The committee member turns toward AJ, who looks confused.

TREASURER  
I hope you enjoy that win! I think  
it'll be great for you!

AJ glances back and forth between the committee member and  
his father, with pain flooding his eyes.

20.

FADE OUT