

Backstage
February 18th
Off Camera



Where frantic staff had stood only minutes before, the hallways were now mostly bare. Breakdown was over, and Datura had only one thing on her mind. "Where is he?" Datura's voice booms through the halls as she storms through them, accosting every member of staff she can find. With each oblivious answer, her scowl grows more intense.

"Where is he?" she shouts to no one in particular, frantically opening and slamming doors. Her eyes dart back and forth in a flurry. From behind her, a voice calls out.

"Liz!" Datura immediately freezes. Her hands, resting at her sides, curl into tight fists. She spins on her heels and storms over to David, who only smirks at her frustration. "I heard you were looking for me?"

"What the fuck, David?"

David cocks his head, faux-confused by her question. "What's the problem?"

"The scaffold match."

"What about it?"

"Why?"

David leans back against the concrete wall and smiles. "I thought you'd like a chance at throwing Ace off something tall."

"David." Her glare grows deeper.

"Fine. Fine. I'm joking." David raises his hands defensively and pushes off the wall "Let's chat." He simply turns from Datura and walks down the hallway before opening the door to his locker room and beckoning her inside. Datura, who normally would have hesitated and mocked David, storms right in. After checking the hallway, David closes the door and straddles the bench in front of his locker.

"Look. I know we have had our... differences, to put it mildly. But this is the truth: at Rise to Greatness, 2010, I was not the most successful guy in Supreme Championship Wrestling. It's hard to believe, I know, but before you stepped in the door to Majestic and we fought, I was here trying to make a name for myself." Elizabeth rolls her wrist with an open hand, as if telling him to get on with it. David sighs.

"The point is: you have been, undoubtedly, a great rival. You are a great fighter. You just haven't had the same opportunities as I have, and the few that you have gotten, the universe got in your way. Remember the tournament match with Scarlett?"

"How could I forget?" She taps her knee.

"You won that match with torn ligaments! There is no doubt in my mind had you been healthy, you and Bree would've had a classic for that title. You may have even won! I am simply trying to give you what this company gave me."

Elizabeth lowers her gaze to the floor and scratches her head. After a few moments of silence, David continues, "In 2010 I won

the Scaffold Scramble. That was my moment. Eleven years later, it could be you."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I just." Elizabeth shakes her head. "I don't understand."

"I do. Regan does, as much as she may not admit it. Everyone in this locker room gets it. No one, not even Chris, can get through a match with you without pulling out everything or getting lucky and catching you off guard. You've taken Regan to the limit twice. You're even on the scoreboard. How many folks can say that? Give me a number."

"I don't know."

"Exactly. If it was easy, you'd have names rolling off your tongue. Your inconsistency is the only thing keeping you from sitting at the top of this company."

"I--"

"Listen, Black Dress." David says, lowering his head and glaring at her. Elizabeth gasps at the nickname. "Regardless of what you might say, you deserve this chance. You deserve to be here."

"Thanks." Datura stands up from the bench and stares at David for a moment. Without warning, she embraces him. Confused, David raises his hands.

"I did not consent to this." Elizabeth lets go and chuckles.

"There are no cameras David."

"I'm not taking my chances." The two share a laugh before Datura goes to leave. She swings the door open but pauses in the doorway, turning her head slightly.

"By the way, I'm going to throw Ace off the scaffold."

"Oh, I know. I was only half joking."

—

Tampa, Florida

February 19

Off Camera

Elizabeth, with her bag slung over her shoulder, fumbles with her keys at the doorway. She huffs in frustration before shoving the key into the door and swinging it open. She swings her bag forward and allows it to fly, smashing into the nearby cabinets. In the living room, Dawn sits calmly on the couch, her nose in a book.

"How was David?" Dawn asks.

"Hm?" Liz raises her eyebrow

"You confronted him after the show. How was Mister Helms?" Dawn takes a sip from her mug, but doesn't look up from the book she's reading. Elizabeth's face contorts into a look of disgust.

"You're sick."

Dawn chuckles, slurping from her mug. She places it down on the coffee table in front of her. "And you're utterly predictable. You didn't answer the question."

"Reasonable as ever. So fucking annoying." She walks over to the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water. "When I saw him in the hallway, I wanted to punch him. By the time he was done, he convinced me he was a decent fucking person." Elizabeth shook her head and removed her windbreaker before flopping on the couch. "I hate him."

"You two are so cute." Dawn sticks out her tongue.

"Get out of my house." Liz rests her head back on the couch and sighs, closing her eyes.

Dawn's eyes scan some more lines in her book. Finally, she peers up from the pages. "Now that it's official, what're you going to do?"

"I don't know." She raises her hand and rubs her temple. Just at the mention of it, she could feel a migraine coming on. "Truth is, I haven't thought about it. After losing to Chris, I assumed I was going to be out of the World Title picture. But people have a way of dragging me into their bullshit."

"The World Title is bullshit?"

Elizabeth rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean."

"No. I don't. Explain." Dawn crosses her arms and raises her eyebrows.

"We've been over this. I don't care what you say. What David says. What anyone says. If it weren't for these stupid Trios contracts I would not be competing for World Titles or Number One Contenders spots."

"But the..." Dawn clears her throat, "stupid trios contracts do exist. And you've been named. So regardless of how stupid or lucky it is, you're in it."

"I don't belong here."

"Not with that attitude you don't."

"I eliminated exactly zero people."

"Cannon ended up winning the match. There's a reason he did."

Elizabeth takes a moment to pop all of the fingers on her hand. "I got caught."

"Then it sounds like you need to focus on not getting caught. And I have just the way."

"Oh, and what is that?"

Dawn, without hesitating, reaches to her side and produces an envelope. She tosses it to Elizabeth without saying a word. Elizabeth squints at Dawn who places her book on the coffee table before her and stares. Elizabeth opens it and produces a single ticket. Elizabeth's eyes widen.

"You saw that Tweet."

"I did."

"Then you saw I told her I wasn't coming."

"You are now. And you'd better tell her you've changed your mind. Your flight is tonight. I'll see you in two weeks"

Elizabeth leaps from the couch and flies into her bedroom. Dawn sighs at the introduction of banging and thumping, no doubt a feeble attempt to locate belongings. Dawn leans forward and retrieves her book before thumbing to the correct page. Despite the loud slamming in the nearby room, she begins reading once again, growing more and more amused with Elizabeth's frenzy.

—

Vladivostok, Russia
February 21st
Off Camera

It is a cold, dreary morning in Vladivostok, Russia. Despite the chill in the air, there is a hustle about the city, but that chill always makes waking up to take on the day a bit more of a challenge. In the outskirts of the city is an almost nondescript warehouse building. There are two reasons Datura knows she is in the right place: The large TundraMMA sign on the front of the building, and Gaia Galanos standing bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in front of her. Knowing the history of Gaia, there is little doubt it is about training. The fact that she was going to take time out of her fight week preparations against Jessica House was nothing to her.

"It's not much to look at from the outside, but check out the inside," Gaia says as she produces a key and unlocks the front

door of the large warehouse building. Beyond the entrance lay a wonderland of workout equipment. Free weights, workout machines, battling ropes, medicine balls. Pretty much anything an athlete could ever need. In the center of everything stands a full-size octagon. Elizabeth inhales deeply. It sounds jagged, stuttering. She shakes her head and sighs, wrapping her arms around her torso for warmth.

"I appreciate you taking the time." Her tone is flat and hesitant. Gaia seems to sense it, but ignores it and presses on with a friendly smile before leading them inside.

As they enter, a car pulls up in the darkness of the early morning. While it might have been startling at first, Gaia turns back and reassures her friend, "That's just Aleks. He's going to open part of the gym that's open to the public." As the former GCC Featherweight Champion guides her long-time acquaintance points out, "We'll have a lot more at our disposal."

As they reach the back of the gym, Gaia shoves open the back door, giving way to a whole outdoor zone of workout equipment, obstacles, and—of course—the elements themselves. "I highly recommend you dress warm on outside days." Gaia chuckles a bit to herself before her icy blue eyes turn to meet Elizabeth who stares blankly around the facility.

"Where should we start?" Elizabeth asks Gaia.

"Let's see where you're starting at with grappling." Gaia grins and makes her way back toward the octagon. Elizabeth follows slowly, rolling out the tension in her neck. They meet at the center and Gaia nods. "Take me down." Elizabeth groans, but ultimately attempts to obey. The two tie up in the clinch, but as Elizabeth drops down to shoot, Gaia easily shoots her legs back into a sprawl. Gaia shifts her weight downward, laying Elizabeth flat on the mat.

"Again." She pats Liz on the back and springs up to her feet. Elizabeth pushes herself up and bounces on her feet. The two tie up again, but as Elizabeth drops, so does Gaia. Elizabeth finds herself again flat on her face.

"Again"

"You're enjoying this too much," Elizabeth sneers

"Don't let me." Elizabeth growls and ties up, but her form is sloppy. Rather than shooting properly, she attempts to force Gaia downward, but Gaia switches her stance wider, grounds herself, and twists. Her arms easily pass Elizabeth's and wrap around her neck. In the headlock, she twists again, easily throwing Elizabeth off her feet. As Elizabeth hits the ground, the air is driven out of her lungs.

"Fuck," Elizabeth yells, slapping the mat with an open hand. Her voice echoes through the complex.

"You're hesitating."

"Excuse me?" Liz snarls as she returns to her feet.

"You are hesitating. Clinch up." Elizabeth sighs and follows her direction. "Shoot." Elizabeth thinks about the move, but as soon as she does, Gaia tightens her grip. "Right there."

"Right there what?" Elizabeth asks.

"You tensed. You thought about it and tensed, but you didn't act. You thought too long. Now I know you're coming."

"UGH." Elizabeth breaks the clinch and turns away from Gaia, walking toward the cage. She slides her finger through the holes in the chain-link. She squeezes as tightly as she can until there are red divets in her skin. Upon letting go, she circles the mat several times, eyes locked on the floor. Finally, she stops. Gaia gets into her stance, and Elizabeth approaches. But Elizabeth's eyes are glazed over, somewhere else. She feigns a takedown, and Gaia lowers her center. Rather than shoot in, she lunges forward to grab her in a clinch. After some back and forth maneuvering, Elizabeth uses her palms to pop up Gaia's elbows and grabs her around the torso. She torques her hips and almost gets Gaia off the mat, but she fails to notice Gaia's leg

wrapped around her own and falls onto her own back. Elizabeth grunts as she hits the mat and Gaia laughs.

"Better, but you still weren't paying well enough attention to detail. Let's take a break." Elizabeth nods and sits up. Gaia strolls out of the octagon before returning with two bottles of water. She offers one to Elizabeth. "You get so frustrated you can't see the world around you. Then you attack without thinking, in a fury, and it hurts you. You only have two modes: Hesitate or Frenzy. Back in Girl Power you were thoughtful, strategic, but you also went for the kill when appropriate. You didn't have reason to doubt yourself or get frustrated."

Elizabeth nods lightly and presses her fingers against her temple. She could feel her heartbeat in her forehead.

"You must calm down and think. Plan ahead. Adapt on the fly."

"Yeah." There was a dejected tone in Elizabeth's agreement. Gaia allows her time to prepare before perking up, as if nothing has changed since Elizabeth had arrived.

"Again?"

"Again."

It went on like this for hours. Elizabeth willed on every ounce of energy that she had, but Gaia had an answer to every twist, every change, every deviation. The day wore on like a terrible dream, one where Elizabeth found herself again and again face down or back first on the mat. She had no answer. She had no response. She had no spark.

It was gone.

Vladivostok, Russia
February 22nd
Off-Camera

The days in Russia imitate one another. Spring months bring light rain and a damp cold. Just like the previous day, Elizabeth reaches the gym before the morning light and is greeted again by Gaia. She turns and unlocks the door as Elizabeth approaches.

"What're we in the mood for?" Gaia asks.

"I'm going to work the bags."

"Sounds good. Yell if you need anything."

Elizabeth enters the gym and makes her way to the heavy bags. After removing her windbreaker and taking a sip of water, she squares up. She begins with weak jabs with her right hand and transitions into combinations. Just as he did the day before, Aleks joins them and opens the public space with little fanfare. Elizabeth ignores his arrival and begins to work in kicks and knees.

As morning carries on into afternoon, Elizabeth becomes more and more preoccupied with the concept laid out before her. On the last Breakdown, the gauntlet match was chaotic enough. Random enough. But it was always one competitor against one other competitor. The Scaffold Scramble would be nothing of the sort. Eight fantastic competitors, who had eight significantly separate styles, would all converge toward a single briefcase. There would be no pin falls. No submissions. The match wouldn't end until someone had literally grasped a chance at Chris Cannon. Elizabeth throws a kick.

THWAP.

Chris. Cannon. The name had soured in her head and haunted her since February 18th. After spilling her heart into a camera, it was him who stopped her from achieving the one goal that she was so desperate to achieve. Like his arm, the title was in her grasp. But as so many had of late, Chris Cannon caught her off guard. Had she only stayed in the corner, had she only been less staggered. Had she only been paying attention. Chris Cannon did not stop her. Datura stopped herself.

THWAP.

And then, the patronizing. The oh so common refrain from her opponents. Despite beating you, you were a hell of a fighter. You took me to my limit. You made me better.

THWAP.

Such a shame she could not make herself better.

THWAP.

"You are going to break an ankle this way you kick."

Always, always the one making others better. Always the one making others dig to places they couldn't previously. Always the one who was second best.

THWAP.

Fuck them. And their backhanded compliments.

THWAP.

"DATURA!" Elizabeth jumps at Aleks' voice and stops throwing her kicks. She places her hands on her hips, breathing heavily from her diaphragm.

"Yes?"

Aleks bows his head. "My apologies. Startling you was not my intention. However, if you keep throwing kicks like this way you do, you will not be able to walk come Retribution." Elizabeth raises her gaze to the ceiling, attempting to catch her breath.

"Noted." Elizabeth clumsily strolls to a folding chair and sits down. "What time is it?"

"Eleven. You've been going at the bag for several hours."

Elizabeth gasps. "Thanks." Elizabeth lowers her head, continuing to suck wind.

Just then, Gaia approaches, taking note of Elizabeth's exhaustion. "Let's close on a spar, shall we? Aleks?"

Aleks reaches out a fist, which Elizabeth taps. She stands up and follows the two to the octagon. Gaia steps to the center of the ring to officiate while Aleks and Elizabeth retreat to opposite sides of the mat.

"Today, we're only striking. No grappling. No submissions. Ready?" the two nod, and Gaia extends her arms.

"Ready." They say in unison.

"As our guest, what percent shall we go, Elizabeth?" Gaia asks.

"One hundred," Elizabeth says.

"Are you sure?"

"One. Hundred. Percent."

"You heard her, Aleks." Gaia lowers her arm as a sign to begin.

Elizabeth approaches cautiously, her hand extended in front of her face. Aleks ignores the lure and closes the distance before throwing several quick jabs. Elizabeth struggles, but blocks all of them and throws a leg kick. Aleks takes the strike, but throws a few more jabs in quick succession, striking Elizabeth squarely under the chin. She recoils and retreats, getting her hands up. This leaves Aleks an opening. He chases, checking another leg kick. He feints a left jab, then throws a hook into her right side.

"Watch your midsection!" Gaia shouts. Elizabeth ignores her and throws a push kick to add distance. Aleks steps to the side and throws a few more punches toward her head, with no intention of making contact. It only takes him minutes to recognize her plan and her weakness. Elizabeth gets her hands up, and Aleks takes

advantage again, landing several blows to the right side of her stomach. A grimace takes over Elizabeth's face, and she switches her stance, attempting to force him to target the other side. He does not.

Aleks feigns a left body kick, and Elizabeth attempts to block, but Aleks swings a roundhouse to her rib cage on the right. The moment his foot hits, a thunderous thud is emitted. Following it, Elizabeth crumples in a heap, clutching her side. Aleks winces and kneels down beside her. Gaia joins him.

"That's going to leave a mark," Gaia notes.

"I did not think I was swinging that hard," Aleks says.

"You softened the spot up. You've targeted it the entire time. Somebody wasn't listening to her body," Gaia responds.

"Oh, fuck off." Elizabeth groans, sitting up.

"I think that's enough for today." Gaia says, ruffling Datura's hair. "Maybe next time you'll focus."

Vladivostok, Russia
March 8th
Off Camera

Two weeks had passed as if two seconds. Datura's final day in Russia had come before she had an opportunity to get comfortable, and the idea of leaving sat uneasy. She stands patiently in front of Tundra MMA with her hands pressed firmly into her pockets in a futile attempt to keep warm. In the distance, she makes out headlights, which approached and announced the arrival of her host. Gaia parks, and leaves the car, oblivious to Elizabeth's presence. As she turns to the door, she freezes in place.

"You're early," Gaia exclaims.

"I thought I'd make an impression before I go." Elizabeth chuckles and steps aside, allowing Gaia to open the door. As they enter, Gaia turns on the lights which illuminate the empty gym. A pang of sadness roots in Elizabeth's chest.

"Shall we?" Gaia asks, extending her arm out toward the octagon.

"We shall." Elizabeth, like so many days before, takes off her windbreaker and slings it onto the chain link. Elizabeth bounces from foot to foot for a bit, loosening up her legs. As she stretches, Gaia rubs her hands together.

"How do you want to end your trip?" she asks.

"Full contact." Liz responds.

Gaia laughs. "Well, it'd be impolite to deny your final wish."

"It would." Elizabeth puts up her hands and cuts her way across the mat. It is a light gait. Gaia simply waits for Elizabeth. As Elizabeth gets close, Gaia fakes shooting in. Elizabeth drops, and Gaia throws a straight punch, which grazes the side of Elizabeth's head. Elizabeth backs off and shakes her head. But unlike her first day, she does not get frustrated. She does not rage at Gaia. She settles, places her hands up, and watches.

Gaia, impressed by Elizabeth's newfound patience, approaches this time. She reaches out toward Elizabeth's face, but Elizabeth hops to the side, sending a swift kick to Gaia's calf. The slap sends a wave of satisfaction through Elizabeth, and Gaia smiles. As Elizabeth winds up to follow up, Gaia shoots in, wraps her arms around Elizabeth's legs, and easily takes her down. Rather than panic, Elizabeth gets her legs underneath Gaia and pushes her off before scrambling to her feet.

"Good! Good!" Gaia yells, smacking her gloves together in emphatic applause. Excited by Elizabeth's progress, Gaia shoots in again, but Elizabeth gets underneath her and applies an underhook. Not wanting to get taken back to the mat, Elizabeth lets go and separates. Her eyes watch Gaia's movements closely. Her attention moves from limb to limb, focusing on each muscle

twitch and tighten. She then attacks, throwing several jabs and a push kick. Gaia parries and steps through with a hook. Elizabeth ducks the swing and shoots.

Gaia sprawls and attempts to take Elizabeth down face first, but Elizabeth pushes through, keeping on her feet. Gaia tries to reposition her arms underneath, but gets fought off. After several moments of jockeying, Gaia breaks. She throws a heavy leg kick, which Elizabeth blocks. She then presses the issue, closing in on Gaia with several hands. Gaia blocks several, but the pressure backs her up into the cage.

Rather than rush in, Elizabeth loosens her body and steps backwards, seemingly dropping her guard. Gaia takes this opportunity to push outward. After stepping through onto her left, she throws a heavy right roundhouse toward Elizabeth's head. Datura strikes.

Elizabeth drops down, allowing the kick to sail overhead. As Gaia spins to catch her stance, there is no hesitation. There is no blind fury. There is no rage. There is only calm as Elizabeth pounces into a double-leg.

Time stops.

There is no Breakdown on February 18th. There is no Chris Cannon. There is no Retribution or Scaffold Scramble. There is only Gaia Galanos, whose back hits the mat with an emphatic thump.

CLAP

CLAP

CLAP

The two friends turn their heads to see Aleks, standing against the fence, clapping emphatically. They turn to meet each others' eyes before breaking into wide grins. Elizabeth bounds to her feet and reaches down to pull Gaia up. As she does, Gaia throws her arms around Elizabeth and lifts her from her feet, spinning recklessly. Aleks joins them at the center of the mat and throws his arms around the pair, spinning along with them.

When she finally sets Elizabeth down, Gaia places her hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "I think you've made your impression." Elizabeth nods, stunned to silence. All three leave the octagon. "You leave tonight?"

"I do. Gives me a few days to rest up and get prepared. To study in solitude. Well, partial solitude."

"Oh, you have someone at home?" Gaia gives off a sly smirk.

"She's an excellent friend. She's the reason I had to go back on my word."

"Mmm. I like her." Gaia lets out a hearty laugh. "Good. You deserve rest. You've worked exceptionally hard. Go home, rest, and win yourself a World Title shot."

With no ability to fight it, Elizabeth's eyes swell up with tears. She throws her arms around Gaia this time. "I wouldn't make it without friends like you."

"You have more than you think," Gaia responds, before pressing her forehead against Elizabeth's. "And you come back here any time. I mean that. You are always welcome here at Tundra." Elizabeth squeezes Gaia for several moments longer before letting go. Aleks extends his hand, which Elizabeth accepts and shakes.

"I'll be back. I promise."

"You promised you wouldn't come." Gaia scoffs.

"This time, I mean it."

"I'll hold you to it. Next time, we'll work on your submissions, if you keep your word."

"Me, miss the opportunity to learn from the most popular fighter in Global Combat Championships and future Featherweight Champion? I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Gaia nods her head in a final show of respect before extending a fist. "See you next time."

Elizabeth fist bumps Gaia before turning to the fence and grabbing her windbreaker. She throws it on and exhales heavily. "Next time."

Tampa, Florida
March 14th
On Camera



"You can only scream and shout for so many years before your voice gives out. I can feel it scratching at the back of my throat. It wants to rest. It needs to rest. I need to rest." Elizabeth closes her eyes as if imitating sleep.

"But I can't have that, can I? I'm too unreasonable. Too hungry. Too desperate." She raises her fingers, and her eyes fly open. "Desperate. That's the right word."

"On February 18th, Chris Cannon beat me, and he beat everyone else after me, but I still cannot help but be brutally disappointed. No matter how many Tweets Chris writes about how I make him a better competitor, it isn't enough. It never is. Never has been. Even Glory Braddock got to hold that title. A

few minutes is better than nothing." She sneers. "I have never been closer to the Supreme Championship Wrestling World Title, but I wasn't close at all."

She rolls her head back and stares up at the ceiling. "There's an old saying; once you hit the bottom there's nowhere to go but up. But that's a lie. I have been here at the bottom for years. Stagnant. There's nowhere to go at all." She shrugs.

"So instead of making Breakdown on March 4th, I took a little trip. To another gym. To another country. Trying to piece together something so that I don't have to perpetually end my nights on my back." She shakes her head. "Vladivostok. Fucking Russia."

"Desperate is the perfect word. While Mister Blackbourne is busy trying to give Owen pep-talks, While Jordan is off galavanting in the tag-team division, while Ace is off self-medicating somewhere, and while Ricky James is doing... whatever it is Ricky James does, I went to Russia and froze my ass off, painting my body with bruises." Elizabeth lifts her shirt, revealing the remaining wide, black-and-blue reminder of Aleks' kick.

"I'm not saying they're not trying. Everyone in this match puts in effort on every Breakdown. Every day in training. Every moment they stand in front of a camera. What I'm saying is I seem to be the only one in this match with a singular focus. Because the fact is: this is my last chance. Everyone in this match wants to win it. I have to." A smile appears on her face.

"Oh, Ace Marshall. What am I going to do with you?" Elizabeth sighs and runs her hands through her hair. "I've been thinking, hard, since we last addressed one another. I've heard rumors you couldn't keep my name out of my mouth this week, which is fine. I won't watch it. I don't need to. I'm sure it's nothing more than the sad bluster of faux-confidence. What I want to talk about is pity." She takes a deep breath through her nostrils.

"Yes. I said pity. I've been confusing my feelings. It's probably best I do seek anger management. I thought I hated Ace Marshall for abandoning me, but that's just a smaller piece of a

much larger feeling. Last time I spoke to you all, I said I hated Ace Marshall like I hated Regan Street, but after some reflection, I realize I hate him much more than that. I hate Ace Marshall like I hate myself." Elizabeth presses her tongue against her front teeth and sucks.

"Ghosting people and cutting off all connections? Mocking people for their internal suffering without an ounce of empathy? Casually taking people's anger and weaponizing it into clever Twitter clapbacks? Disregarding everyone's concerns? Incoherently babbling? Self-medicating? Who does that sound like to you? Hm?" She cocks her head.

"If Ace Marshall were any more like me, he would have a secret cabin in the woods where he goes to think and a strange on and off friendship with our former World Champion. I would say that if he were more like me, he'd hate himself. But it appears he's already there. When I look at Ace Marshall, I look at my younger self. And that's where my pity comes from. I wish I could go back in time and help myself, but the truth is simple. Even if I could time travel and go back in time, I wouldn't have listened to my future self. I wouldn't listen to anyone. I wouldn't even listen to the beeping machines in the hospital or doctors or loved ones. No one could help me because I wouldn't let them. Ace Marshall is no different." Her lips tighten, and she adjusts her beanie.

"Ace Marshall is an insecure little boy with unending access to every avenue that leads to his own self destruction. Every time he lashes out is an attempt to hide how scared he is. He exists in a perpetual state of confusion. A haze. And he wanders aimlessly, wondering what's he's done and what he's going to do. I've been there. It was my entire existence for years." A long sigh escapes her.

"I do not like to bring personal matters to these things, but you insist on doing so. Such a sad attempt at deflection. Such a silly attempt to hide your inadequacies..." she pauses, mulling over the thought.

"But that is a more broad critique of all my opponents. All that bravado. For what? It's just a pointless exercise in breaking promises. They are cowards, too feeble to be vulnerable. Too terrified to be honest." She shakes her head in disappointment.

"Take Blake, for example. Last month, Mister Mason did the *forbidden move!*" Elizabeth emphasizes these words and widens her eyes in a hyperbolic display. She then rolls her eyes.

"Poor Cain. Mister Mason was so obsessed with Giovanni that he dropped a man on the top of his head backstage. The horror." Elizabeth sucks her teeth. "But, rather than doing it on camera, rather than fessing up taking his time as I did for the world to see, he lied. We all know he lied. And he had his loyal lackey lie for him as well. Funny enough, his thirty days would have come and gone had he simply fessed up to his *unforgivable crime*, but he refused to take responsibility. Instead, he and Jaxson showed the world that Blake Mason is not prepared to take responsibility for himself. A month later and he still won't admit it. Another child who is too scared to take his punishment. Too bad he got a taste of it on the fourth. A taste of his own antics, if you will. Tsk. Tsk." She extends her arms outward in a cartoonish shrug.

"I created an entire division so that I could use the piledriver. To think, all I had to do was hire some goober to lie for me. The things I do." Elizabeth lets out a petty sigh and shakes her head.

"And it comes to this. Blake finally gets to take out his frustrations on Giovanni come Retribution. If I were a betting woman, and I am, I say Blake will get himself suspended regardless, and I cannot say I would blame him. This is his best opportunity, albeit a crowded one. I personally hope they just go ahead and kill each other." She rotates her wrist. It pops several times.

"But, in all this doom and gloom, there are two people in this match who I do have respect for— Konrad and Aaron. Konrad and I almost met in Union Battleground, and it would have been a hell of a match. I have always adored fighting competitors larger

than me, which is most. It always creates an interesting dynamic." She nods her head as she talks. "I have watched Konrad grow in his time here in Supreme Champion Wrestling, and it has been an absolute joy doing so. I remember watching fondly as he fought valiantly against Regan. So intimidating and yet so innocent. How's your cheek, Konrad?" She lets out a giggle.

"David really tagged you on Breakdown, and I hope it motivates you. I genuinely look forward to finally meeting you in the ring. I hope you're just as vicious as your little girlfriend is. Let her rub off on you a little. Take the initiative! Use that six feet and four inches to throw some folks around once in a while. You'll feel better for it." She winks.

"As for Aaron, he is someone who I've had the opportunity to compete with. And like I said in April of last year when we met, Aaron Blackbourne is a future World Champion, and I mean that all of these months later. And while I am utterly disappointed that Mister Blackbourne lost to Ace Marshall on our most recent Breakdown, I do not think that taints his legacy or future in any significant way. As strong as my feelings are toward Ace, the fact remains that he is a hell of a competitor, and he has every reason to be confident, even if he does have to cheat every once in a while." She clears her throat and widens her eyes.

"Because if it wasn't for Lexy, Aaron wouldn't have gotten his eyes gouged, and if it weren't for a couple handfuls of fabric, we may be having an entirely different conversation. But there was Lexy, and there were handfuls of fabric, and I have absolutely no doubts that these types of underhanded tactics will be heavily utilized come Retribution, but in a match like that, it's to be expected. I certainly hope that Aaron's mind is on rectifying the situation..." Elizabeth inhales deeply through her nostrils.

"Because whether it be in tag-team competition or in singles, Aaron is exactly as he claims to be: an artist. A Scaffold Scramble match is the perfect opportunity to unleash some creativity, and frankly, I look forward to experiencing it up close. I couldn't be happier that David gave you this

opportunity, Aaron. You deserve it. You'll have to wait a bit longer to reach my goal for you, but it will come in time." Elizabeth covers her mouth with her hands and rests her chin onto her thumbs. She lowers her fingers so that only her pointers stay up.

"Last month, Ace Marshall put quite a few of us through the chaos of a gauntlet match, and David Helms has answered with a match that will be even more absurd in content. And though it is not specifically for the World Championship and though whoever wins must go through an additional hurdle, I have no doubt in my mind that no less effort will be on display. Perhaps there will be even more. Because tonight, at Retribution, we do not find ourselves in simple competition. It is not a test of technical prowess or a feat of athleticism. We are not simply looking for pinfalls or submissions. That would be enough. No, tonight, we must concern ourselves with a much more existential circumstance." She tilts her head, furrowing her brow.

"All eight of us must ask ourselves how many years we are willing to sacrifice in order to meet Chris Cannon in the ring. We must stare into our own mortality and ask ourselves if we will choose victory or survival. Only one of us will achieve both. I plan on being that person." Datura crinkles her nose and inhales.

"Because this Pay-Per-View is perfectly named. Tonight is my opportunity at Retribution: for all of those nights I was scound best in a contest of two, for all of those times I was forced to pass out in the middle of the ring, for all of these years since my last World Title run, for all of the times I came up short." She nods furiously.

"Most importantly, tonight, I take Retribution for myself. For seven of us, the Scaffold Scramble is an opportunity to be Number One Contender, for a chance to face Chris Cannon, for a chance to beat Chris Cannon. But for me, and me alone, it is a necessity."

"I MUST win the Scaffold Scramble.
I MUST become Number One Contender."

I MUST redeem myself."

"No one in this match has failed more spectacularly or more consistently than I have. And I will admit that. I have stood before you all and spilled every proof of my deficiencies. I have no qualms with truth. No one, and I mean no one has wasted more time or potential. I cannot--" She scowls, "no, I will not continue to waste anyone else's time." Her face tenses and her breath becomes rigid. "I have no doubt in my mind that everyone in this match will have future opportunities at gold, and they will certainly earn them. But, tonight, I am drawing a line in the sand. If I cannot win this match, I will never compete for a World Title ever again. If I cannot atone for all of my failures, I will not deserve to. I must win this match. This is it." Datura closes her eyes as she attempts to catch her breath. Her chest heaves, pulling in and pushing out air. As her eyes open, she leans forward.

"That is what this means to me."

Elizabeth stands from her chair and stares silently into the camera. Her breath finally becomes normalized. She licks her lips and bites her bottom lip.

"What does it mean to you?"