

Though darkness had overtaken the valley, she would not be deterred.



Time, as they say, was running out and Lucy Wylde found herself at an impasse. She had let hope guide her this far, but hope.. It wasn't enough. If she and Aurora were going to make this pairing work, the time had come for them to have the conversation that had been haunting them for weeks... months... even years now.

She had to know, once and for all, if all of this was for nothing.

Would their path continue, together? Would it fall apart exactly as it had in years past? Would they pose the challenge she knew they could, or would they fall flat on their faces, unable to reconcile their differences?

Only Aurora could answer that question.

And Lucy, she *had* to be the one to ask it.

As she made it to Arizona Bay, the sun was beginning to set beyond the horizon - turning the landscape an eerie shade of crimson. Before she realized it, a dark, thick fog had all but consumed her and everything around her - shrouding her vision until all she could see was a faint shape in front of her, growing bigger with every footfall. One step turned into ten, turned into twenty and when she could finally make out what she was seeing, the wind picked up, sending a chill

down
her
spine.



Something was wrong here...



A6S 006 - In the Depths of Our Night

It shouldn't... couldn't be possible.

Beyond the sign was a small town, teeming with life. 'Main Street' bifurcated the sprawling village with several side avenues lined with homes. Street lights carved a path through the dense swirling fog. The chilled air was rife with distant chatter and the occasional laughter of small children.

As she approached deeper, indeed, it was children that she had heard; several scores of them scouring the neighborhood in packs as they raced from door to door. She knew it couldn't be real. It defied rationalization.

"Hey Miss!" A voice startled her, nearly driving her backward. "Trick or treat!"

Within the blink of an eye, several of these miniature creatures appeared before her, each of them holding out pails already stuffed with candy. They all were dressed as wrestlers you may have heard of. Thunder Knuckles. Matthias Syn. Mark Flynn. Bobby Bourbon.

Each of these children were carried along by strings, attached to each individual limb. Upon second glance, these children weren't exactly children at all; they were marionettes, pulled along and controlled by these strings.

"I'm sorry," Lucy gulped as she turned toward each of them individually. "I'm afraid I don't have any sweets for you."

"Awww!" The puppets sneered and hissed. "You're no fun!"

And like that, they were gone. Pulled away by their strings. All except two of them. They eyed Lucy up with their wooden gaze; their expressionless, painted faces.

"Who are you supposed to be?" One of them asked, their voice dripping with condescension.

Lucy pursed her lips, unsure how to answer. She knelt down in front of them, wanting a closer look at their costumes. "What about you two? It looks like—"

The first stepped forward without hesitation, cutting Lucy off as they showed off their black and white attire with the words 'White' and 'Widow' on the boots. "I'm the White Widow, of course.. And he's—"

"I'm the Lionheart!" The second one exclaimed. "He's my hero!"

Lucy could feel the color drain from her face. Her breath caught in her throat. *That's not a coincidence, is it?* She shook her head, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Oh, well.. That's great. I'm just.. I'm gonna go and—"

"You never told us what you were!"

"That's because she's **nothing!**" The little widow snarked in Lucy's direction. She could almost swear she saw her painted eyes narrowing before she averted her gaze.

Little Lionheart shook his wooden head. "No, that can't be it! She looks like—"

"L-Lucy Wylde."

"OooOOOoooh." Lionheart replied while his companion scoffed.

"Yeah well, you don't have strings!" She spat back, stomping her foot for good measure. "You shouldn't be able to move!"

Lucy again demonstrated that she, in fact, could move on her own.

"Wow.." Lionheart said, amazed at what he was seeing.

The Widow, however, was less than impressed. "Stop it! Come on, we gotta go!" Her strings tightened and she grabbed his arm in a bid to run away.

But Lionheart stayed where he was.

Suddenly all Lucy felt was dread.

"*This isn't real.*" Lucy muttered to herself.

"COME ON!" Widow shouted as both their strings tightened and they both ran off into the night.

Lionheart turned his head and stared at her one last time as they faded into the fog.

Lucy was alone, again.



The longer Lucy spent within this fog, the harder she found it to shake these negative feelings she was feeling. Her mind was reeling from that short, impactful interaction she had with Tha-No. **No.** It wasn't him.

It wasn't *them*.

She had to keep telling herself that, even if the growing pit in her stomach was telling her the loneliness she feared was looming.

It's not real.

But who she'd been looking for was real and she was no closer to finding her. So she kept walking in the direction of where she thought the tattoo parlor/Jimmy's shitty camper was and eventually she did find at least one of the things she was looking for. Jimmy's 'headquarters' was nowhere to be found, but to her relief, she found herself right down the block from Paper Street. Unlike everything else in *this* Arizona Bay, the building looked exactly as she remembered it looking; the facade anyway.

'Children' were still running around her, but she was doing her best to avoid them. She was scared of what she'd see if she looked at them. Now and again, one or two would approach the door of the tattoo parlor and Lucy would watch, hoping to catch a glimpse of Aurora, but instead a dark haired woman would answer, and turn the children away.

There was something both different and familiar about this dark haired woman.

“Amber?”

The woman looked up, startled, from the doorway - her eyes widening. “Lucy?!”

At first, Lucy was eager to see a familiar face that wasn't some kind of puppet, but as she approached, she stopped herself in her tracks, wondering why Amber would be here instead of Aurora.. Was the fog messing with her?

Meanwhile, Amber Caldwell had been there, shooing away children for what felt like hours and whether she liked it or not, Lucy Wylde was the first chance she had at a *real* interaction since she'd come here. She wasn't sure why Lucy had stopped, but Amber motioned for Lucy to come closer anyway.

“What're you doing?”

Lucy didn't know. “It's just.. Are you..”

“Am I.. what?”

“Are you one of them?” Lucy took a hesitant step closer, looking Amber over only to find that she too didn't have strings. A welcome, albeit brief feeling of relief washed over Lucy. “You don't have strings?”

“No! Why the fuck would I have strings?!”

Lucy finally felt like she was getting somewhere. Now maybe she would be able to find Aurora amid all this. She joined Amber in the doorway of the parlor as they watched the puppets making their way around town. “Do you know where Mag-I mean Aurora is? I need to talk to her.”

Instead of answering, Amber's eyes widened again. “What are you talking about? Maggie's been gone for.. Going on *three years now*.”

Lucy shook her head in disbelief. “No, no that can't be. I just..”

Amber looked away, shrugging her shoulders.

“Yeah, I-I don’t really know what happened. I mean, I’d always worried that she’d end up...”
She shook her head. “Anyway, she left the place to me, and here I am.”

“Listen, you might think that she’s gone, but—”

Lucy wasn’t able to finish her sentence as another marionette ran up in between them holding a big bag of candy and shouted. “Trick or Treat!”

Both Lucy and Amber gasped at the same time when they glanced down at the little girl with long, silver locks of hair and a costume reminiscent of—

“Maggie...” They both said together.

“Who’s Maggie?” The puppet said, the strings bringing her arms up into a shrug. “I’m Aurora! I have a mysterious past!”

She giggled and Amber’s face went pale, as if she’d seen a ghost.

“Well, we don’t have any candy for you.. so—”

“No! I have something for you Miss Amber!”

Lucy was alarmed. “How did you know her name?”

“I dunno, I just do!” The little girl reached into her bag, beneath all the candy and pulled out a blood-stained ring bell, holding it out to Amber innocently. “Here! This is for you!”

“Oh, no..” Amber’s eyes rested on that ring bell and she began to back away, her voice trembling as she shook her head. “No.. I can’t do this. Get that thing away from me...”

Lucy recognized the bell as the instrument with which Myra Lynwood (at the time) nearly ended Maggie’s life. She was there that night, cradling Maggie’s head in her lap while Amber called 911 - She was there, helpless as Amber begged whatever higher power there was to not take Maggie away.

To say Lucy understood the fear in Amber's voice and the terror in her face would be an understatement - and before she could say anything else, the door to the tattoo shop was closed and the curtains drawn.

"Hey.. She didn't take my gift!"

Lucy shook her head. "It's probably best that you.. Keep it."

The little girl shrugged and buried the ring bell back into her bag. She began moving away, her strings pulling her along. Lucy realized she *still* didn't know where to find Aurora. But she knew there was one *other* person in town who might know where she is.

"Hey, kid!"

Little Aurora turned around, tilting her wooden head up at Lucy.

"You wouldn't happen to know... Jimmy, would you?"

"Jimmy?" She gasped. "Are you talking about *Wheelchair Jimmy*?"

Lucy nodded.

"We don't go to where *Wheelchair Jimmy* is - He's grumpy!"

"Where is he? Please, I need to talk to him."

She pointed her little wooden finger towards the opposite side of town. "*He's that way, on the outskirts.*"



As the night rolled on, it seemed as though the fog thickened. Even the outskirts were covered with such density that finding a true direction was difficult.

“My name’s not *fucking* Wheelchair Jimmy!”

Lucy heard him before she could see him. But as she continued walking down the gravel path that led to.. what she’d assumed was his trailer, something large loomed ahead. She could only make out the outline, but it looked far bigger than a shitty little camper trailer.

“Jimmy?”

“Who’s there?! You better come out before I–”

Lucy could see someone moving in the distance, and as she emerged from the dense fog, Jimmy rushed at her on a hoveround, waving something in the air.

“Get out! You damn–”

“Will you put that damn thing down for fucks sake..”

It was a stick. Lucy couldn’t fathom what he was going to do with a stick had she been a real threat.

Either way, once Jimmy saw her, his eyes widened and he dropped the stick. “Holy shit, it’s *you.*”

Lucy shrugged. “Yeah, yeah, it’s me. Listen, I’m trying to find Aurora. Where is she?”

Apparently the name struck a nerve with Jimmy and he immediately turned away from Lucy and began driving back towards a large building. His camper trailer was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is your camper?”

“Don’t need it.”

“What? *Why?*”

He sighed. "Things change, baby-doll. Now get off my property!"

Lucy was completely flabbergasted. She watched for a few seconds as Jimmy turned his hoveround away and began motoring back towards the building.

"Jimmy, you just wait a Goddamn minute!"

The hum of his hoveround was the only answer Lucy got as she followed him towards the building. It was an impressive building, but it looked old. It didn't look familiar to anything she'd seen when she visited Arizona Bay, but she did notice something peculiar. Something she hadn't noticed anywhere else..

Strings. Lots and lots of strings leading into the building.

"Jimmy!" Lucy shouted, picking up speed and blocking Jimmy's path towards the doors.

Jimmy threw his hands up into the air. "Move!"

"Not until you tell me why you're acting so weird." Lucy pointed at him. "You don't have strings either but--"

Jimmy scoffed. "Of course I don't have strings. Do I look wooden to you, sweetheart? Now, I've got important things to do, get out of here and go back to whatever ditch you crawled out of."

Before Jimmy could do anything, Lucy simply turned around and reached for the large double doors.

"No, don't!"

"Why not, Jimmy? Are you hiding something?" Lucy didn't bother waiting for an answer as she pulled the doors open as Jimmy screamed bloody murder. "What the..."

Lucy gasped. It was Aurora.

She was laid out on a table in the middle of the room, surrounded by logs and sticks, almost as if she were going to be—

“I told you to get **OUT!** You have no business here!”

But Lucy wasn't listening to Jimmy anymore, instead she ran over and knocked some of the wood out of her way and began undoing one of the restraints that held Aurora's hand down to the table.

As she went, Aurora glanced up at her, eyes blinking as if she had woken up.

“What's going on?” she muttered.

“I'm getting you out of here—”

“Please, stop—”

“No. I'm not letting this happen—”

“It needs to happen.”

“He's going to kill you, Maggie!”

“I'm killing me...”



“Listen, I don't know who in the *hell* you think you are, *sweetheart*. But this is your *final* warning!”

Lucy ignored Jimmy as she forcibly took control of the Hoveround, wheeling him out into the dark of night.

“You have no idea what you’re doing! None!”

Lucy pulled the key from the Hoveround’s main control panel.

“On second thought... How’s about joining our little group instead? How does 5.9... 999 percent sound? The lowest I can *possibly* go! Plus... We have a brand new Headquarters... Full gym with sauna. Hot tub. Real human sacrifices once a month. *Three whole microwaves!* THREE!”

She tossed the key out into the fog.

“You’re a *bitch*.”

“You were trying to sacrifice Maggie, weren’t you?”

“Of course not! A real human sacrifice? Are you *insane*?”

Lucy took his walking cane, and tossed that for good measure.

“Now stay put, *Wheelchair Jimmy*.”

“That’s **not** my...”

SLAM.

“What in the hell are you doing letting Jimmy try and sacrifice you?”

Aurora pulled herself up from the altar, she appeared disgusted.

“Jimmy’s *fucking useless* sometimes.” She sulked along the floor and kicked strings out of her path as she went. “I asked for one *little* thing.”

"What are you talking about?"

"Why do you think I joined up with Jimmy in the first place? This whole thing was meant to be a sacrifice, Luce. It's *kill or be killed*... and I KNEW that the XWF was too **big** to kill-"

"So you were hoping it would kill you, is that it?"

"I've had a LOT of time to think. Three years ago you took back your legacy and you said: 'Good girl Maggie, now go find yourself.' And you know what?" Aurora scoffed. "I **didn't**. One week after that I lost the biggest match of my career. *Two weeks later* I got fired and locked up."

Lucy threw her hands into the air. "That isn't my fault."

"No, But when I came back, you were the *last* person I thought I wanted to see."

"You made that pretty obviou-"

"I was wrong, don't you get it?" Aurora interrupted.

Lucy slammed her hand down on the table. "No! I **don't**! I've been trying to get you to tell me for weeks now so please, **tell me!**"

"Since I've been back, NOTHING has gone the way I thought it would... but you know what? I've enjoyed *every second* of it. I don't want to die. Hell, I don't even want to lose you as a tag partner. But if we lose again this week, and it's my fault, then what use do you really have for me? You've got everything anyone wants in this business, plus a *real* partner in SEB and a *real* friend in Thad." Aurora looked away. "My biggest fear is that I really did miss this... but I won't be missed."

Frustration turned to understanding in an instant as Lucy stood there looking at Aurora.

"Oh Mags," She sighed, stepping forward and grabbing Aurora into a hug.

The fog, and everything it brought with it began to fade away. The building. The altar. The strings. The Hoveround.

As the fog lifted it was just Lucy and Aurora standing there, in the desert, in front of a real shitty camper across from the real Paper Street Tattoo.

And all was well...

...except in the distance, a thunderous cry:

"Nooooo! Not My THREE microwaves! Damn that bitch! DAMNNNN HERRRR-!"



Ned Kaye: "...we are defined as much by what we keep as by what we leave behind..."

Ten months ago can feel like yesterday. But ten months can also feel like ten years. You don't even hear the names Cram and Havok anymore. Heather Halliwell and Pip Collins long since retired from commentary. Theodore Pryce is as gone now as the 'Weekend' is from 'Warfare'.

The day was December 23rd, 2023. The place was the Frost Bank Center in San Antonio, Texas.

Universal Champ Isaiah King and his partner Notorious Ned Kaye would take on then Tag Team Champions: Mark Flynn and Bobby Bourbon.

Friends and fighters who stepped into the ring opposed.

The former on the rise, ready to put the old guard out to pasture.

Isaiah King: "...WE'RE actually doing something. Actually moving ahead. Building a kingdom. Inspiring relevance."

The names may have changed. But ten months later, the XWF Tag Team division lies no less hollow than how the two of them found it. Funny how that works, isn't it?

NK: "...the greatest traps are the ones we set for ourselves..."

The law of the land is to 'kill or be killed'. If that's true, then resilience will always make you a murderer.

I didn't want this.

I didn't want to care.

Standing softly and yet tall on the shoulders of giants, really taking in the view from the stage that they built.

It's hard not to want it.

It's hard not to care..

IK: "...from Universal Champion to holding championships to an empty division..."

But it's clear to me now that the XWF needs a team willing to set their egos aside long enough to make a meaningful choice. The XWF is alive, but the XWF isn't as healthy as it could be. Old spokes inevitably rattle and fall from the wheel. Fresh faces like Vilaro, García, and Borden take their place and keep the machine moving. This is an honor, and a privilege; but it's also a responsibility.

NK: 'Per Cogitabat, Per Facis'

As told by the Master of the Ego Crusher, poisoned by his own hubris.

IK: "Every man with power comes crashing down, desperate to hold their spot."

The Kingslayer now trapped in his own glass prison, bemoaning the ceiling above.

By thinking, by doing. These are the reigning tag team champions and the positions that they've put themselves in today.

This isn't how we wanted to meet.

A modicum of respect is due, but Lucy and I have much more important things to concern ourselves with than hurt feelings and bruised egos.

What we care about are the XWF Tag Team Championships. A fucking footnote of a title in 2024, supposedly held by two of the federations best. Two Universal Champions, The Crucible, the unbeatable team.

We look at history. We see that every third or fourth tag team title reign seems to outlast the others. Every once in a blue moon a new team will come in and attempt to breathe life back into this dying division. The last team to do that was Crucible, yet the landscape looks exactly as it did ten months ago when The Good Guys were:

IK: "Haunting. What you two are doing to this business... This company. You loom over it disgustingly, like an irremovable shadow."

Crucible wouldn't stand for it.

Now we won't stand for it.

The XWF Tag Team championships deserve better. This division would benefit from having champions who gave a damn about it... again. Ones who would proudly defend their titles as a true team and not a couple of individuals using those belts as relevance insurance.

It deserves champions like Ned Kaye and Isaiah King, circa December 2023. A team that despite their individual successes found purpose together. A team that found strength in the bond; that synergized and became more than the sum of its parts.

No wonder Adeyemi admires Kaye, even though Kaye has taken his singles titles for his own not once, but twice. Together, they were the perfect combination of natural talent, ambition and work-ethic. Kaye keeps the Kingslayer, Future King, guy who also happens to have the last name King, grounded while Adeyemi moves one square at a time, shouting at pawns who dare attempt to cross the board.

But the Prince King never could understand the lengths that an addict will go for their next fix. Kaye battled through his own addictions if only to reach the peak of XWF's highest mountain. The Indy Darling focused his obsession into the willingness to put in that work, and has the accolades to prove it.

Kaye put in all of that work after losing to SEB to earn a 24/7 briefcase, take the Universal Title back for a second time just to lose it again. But the real shame of it isn't that he lost. It's that he hasn't been heard from since.

Or maybe those bouts of vertigo cropped back up. Adeyemi is just as guilty as Kaye is.

I guess a man of royalty would believe he deserves to have things handed to him. Born to the throne, even if it does need to be cleansed from time to time. I guess he *would* think his shortcomings are someone else's fault, or the fault of the system at play. He must not be used to the concept of responsibility. It's not something that gets passed down in a bloodline.

Maybe he has a point, though. At least brass had the decency to ironically replace him with Mark Flynn during *his* hiatus. Having to drag Ned Kaye's corpse to the ring isn't exactly fair play.

Flynn should have been invited to this match. He's like an honorary third partner at this point.

That motherfucker bit me on the nose.

Come again?

Fuck Flynn.

Regardless. When Crucible came together to fix the tag division ten months ago, they called it an exorcism.

But now, it needs a full on resurrection.

So at Spooky Savage, we're going to end this. This ten-month experiment where two Universal-Champion-caliber talents spent their time with the tag straps as their backup plan.

