



"Fate leads the willing and drags along the reluctant." -
Seneca

April 14, 2022
Des Moines, Iowa

Get out. Get out. Get out.

I drop down and roll out of the ring, turning my back on Amelia Stone and Gloria Braddock. It was not an act of disrespect so much as an act of cowardice.

Get to the locker room. Get your things. Get out.

I pick up my pace. The Wells Fargo Arena is a concrete labyrinth I can hardly maneuver through. The entire time, I keep my eyes glued down to the floor. The idea of running into Holly Adams, Cid Turner, or Cookie, or anyone feels like a disaster simply waiting to happen. Just thinking of them causes my face to flush. Jordan. Poor Jordan.

I shove the door open to the locker room and head straight for my bag. Without even changing, I snatch it over my shoulder

and head the direction I had come in. As I walk through the hallway, I hear a faint voice in the distance.

"Datura?" I have no idea who says it. Or why. I ignore it and make my way into the parking lot.

Not tonight. Not tonight. Not tonight. I can't face them tonight.

April 15, 2022
Tampa, Florida

The afternoon sun glares behind the blinds, sending streaks of light throughout the bedroom. Usually, this would serve as my alarm clock, but sleep had chosen to become a stranger.

"God damnit," I hiss, pressing my pointer and middle fingers into my shoulder.

The little things have a way of weighing you down. They grow like a stack of toys that outgrows the box they are held inside. I stare up at the ceiling from underneath the covers, watching the spot where the shadow on the ceiling meets the fan blades.

I should have shaken her hand.

The truth is, my second victory was a fluke. A beautiful instance of right-place-right-time. Of luck. Amelia Stone did not wrestle a bad match. Quite the contrary, she wrestled a well-rounded one. As any strategist would do, she tried to take advantage of her situation. Her only mistake was thinking I had not noticed her accidentally rip off the turnbuckle pad. If I had not, she probably would have won that match. Luck. That's all it was. This time, I had a souvenir from the match. I press down on my shoulder and try to roll it. It pops.

I should have shaken her hand.

I slowly grasp the edge of the comforter and throw it off my torso. It falls in a heap to the floor, but I do not pick it up. Instead, I sit up slowly. The world tilts like a top, and I let it spin. Luckily, there is little on the agenda. I lean over in bed and snatch several orange bottles.

Zofran. Check.
Viibryd. Check.
Clonazepam. Check.

The world seems to regain its balance. Regardless, I flop back down, making sure to lay on the arm Amelia had not focused on. I do not bother to grab the comforter.

In my dream, I see headlights bending through the woods in front of the cabin. I wander out to the front yard, and Bree Lancaster pulls up into the driveway. We laugh and carry on, strategizing for the Trios Tournament, but soon I realize there are only two of us. For some reason I cannot find Jordan. I spend the rest of the dream searching for her. I never find her.

April 22nd
Tampa, Florida

I immediately regret the decision to visit the coffee shop as soon as I arrive. Spring has decided upon being summer, and I can see the heat rising off of the busy road. I exit the car and make my way toward the tables outside. Sitting there, with a newspaper over his face, is Cameron. Without getting my coffee, I sit across from him and bask in the silence between us, nothing but the passing of cars to signal that the earth is moving.

"I saw Breakdown," he says, without pulling the paper away from his face.

"Oh?" I ask. I shuffle uncomfortably in my chair.

"Indeed." I consider leaving. My foot taps against the concrete underneath, and in that instant I feel like a child about to be chided by their father. We sit there for what feels like half an hour before he neatly folds his paper. Behind it is an iced coffee he slides in my direction. "I'm proud of you."

I cock my head before graciously accepting the beverage. I take a long sip. "You're proud of me?"

"I am," he echos. He takes a sip of his tea and clicks his tongue. "I was wondering when you would decide to join the fight."

"I didn't want to."

"I know. I know." He offers a solemn nod. "But sometimes, it isn't up to us."

"What are you going on about?"

He chuckles. "We are all victims of circumstance. That's all."

"Did you ask me to come to give me fortune cookie wisdom?" I raise my eyebrows and smile, taking another sip of coffee. It is probably the first time I have smiled in weeks.

"No. No. Forgive an old man his vices." He chuckles. "I simply wanted to see with my own eyes how you are holding up." He pauses and lowers his gaze.

"I'm fine,"

"Elizabeth." He does not raise his gaze. My eyes shift toward the pavement.

"I am taking it one day at a time," I admit, refusing to look back up. "I wake up, brush my teeth, take a shower, and go from there."

"Have you been having a hard time doing that?"

"You're not my doctor," I snap.

Without hesitation he responds, "No. I'm your friend."

I close my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are, Elizabeth." He lets out a heavy sigh and taps his finger on the paper cup in front of him.

"Is it that obvious?" I open my eyes and look at him. His face is obscured by the water welling up in my ducts.

He shakes his head. "No. No. I just know you better than most. You have been abstaining?"

"I have." It was one of the few things I could be proud of in the present.

"Good. Good. Sometimes, all you can do is make it through the day. And you're doing that just fine."

I offer him a forced smile and drink from my glass. I can tell he wants to spew into a lecture about seeking out help, of being honest with doctors, but he refrains, and I am thankful for it. For the next half hour, we do not speak a word. We simply sit, ingesting the world as it is in the moment, and for that brief amount of time, together, we are both okay.

April 30th
On Camera

"All of this could have been avoided. All of this could have been avoided." The words tumble off my tongue, padded with exasperation. The very need to say them causes a pang of annoyance to run up my spine. I roll my neck to try and keep it from tensing up.

"The truth is, I cannot believe that I am sitting here, in front of you all, preparing to enter an eight person Tactical Warfare match alongside Ashley Hayes, Autumn Valentine, and Christy Matthews. If you had told me weeks ago that this match would take place, I would have scoffed and chalked it up to Holly Adam's particular brand of paranoia. I would have shaken my head and told you there is no way I would put myself in such a dangerous situation. But I would have been wrong. Fate has a funny way of bringing the things you want least back into orbit." I shake my head and roll my eyes.

"When I came back to Supreme Championship Wrestling on April first, I made myself crystal clear: I wanted nothing to do with Holly Adams. I did not want to face her in a match, attack her in the back. I did not even want to speak to her or of her. I was very adamant about this fact. I did not make a grand entrance. I did not reignite an old blood feud like I did with David and Regan. All I wanted to do was compete, to leave the past in the past where it belongs."

"But what happened the moment I made Crystal Zdunich tap out? What was the first thing that we saw? Holly Adams, in her infinite wisdom, sending Cid Turner and Cookie Dreams to evaluate my situation. Holly had the opportunity to do nothing, to simply let me enjoy my victory, bask in the adulation of the crowd; all she had to do was do nothing, and I would not be sitting here with Tactical Warfare on my mind." At this point, I am speaking through my teeth.

"But she did do something foolish, as she is one to do. Rather, Cid and Cookie did something foolish. After I poured my heart out for all of you to see; after I apologized for letting Cid Turner, a man I respected as a competitor more than almost

anyone, down; after I made peace with my own demons... Cookie looked into my eyes, and she lied to me." I click my tongue.

"Normally, this type of thing would not wound me so. But this was not just a lie. It was a lie about my friend, about Jordan, and it was Cid Turner who let it happen. The same Cid Turner who bested me in my only World Championship match, the same Cid Turner who climbed to the pinnacle of this company, the same Cid Turner who looked into a camera and spoke of me as if we were equals." I shake my head again.

"It took me almost two weeks to realize I had been lied to. To be precise, it was April thirteenth. I still remember it..." I let out a brief laugh.

"One day before my match with Amelia Stone, and I have The Brand in the back of my mind. You can imagine that I was furious. But unlike some people, I made sure that I was telling the truth. On April fourteenth, I did exactly what I said I was going to do. I walked into Des Moines, Iowa, and I competed in an incredible match with a woman who will no doubt bloom into the future of our business. It would have been just as easy to fly off in a rage, to search the arena high and low for Cid Turner, to maul each member of The Brand with my bare hands one by one, but that is not what I came back to do. So after my match, I got in my car, and I went home."

"That night... that night Holly Adams made a terrible mistake. In her attempt to get the upper hand on Asher, she added a fourth man to her team. She thought she was safe, she thought that it would be impossible for him to find a fourth team member. I didn't know that person would be me at the time. I thought there were surely enough people on the roster who dislike the Brand and what they stand for. But Breakdown came, and when Holly Adams survived Konrad Raab thanks to Kimberly Williams, no one had volunteered yet."

"I saw Cid galavanting out there, I could no longer contain myself. I figured: if no one else keeps their word, why should I?"

"Holly will tell you it's because I want revenge. You all saw her on Breakdown in absolute hysterics. And I have to level with you: I do. But it is not revenge on Holly Adams. No, Holly simply moved the pieces on the board to get us where we are." I wag my finger. "I want my retribution against Cid Turner, and there is no better way to do it than in Tactical Warfare."

"You are going to hear a lot of conjecture over the passing days. There will be a lot of talk about the violent things people are going to do to one another. Various threats of shortening careers and the like. I am sure that over the next few minutes I will fall into the same trap, but one thing is absolutely certain: May first will come, and it very well could be the last time you see any one of us in a Supreme Championship Wrestling ring, or any ring for that matter." I allow the statement to linger.

"It is not lost on me that I have put myself in a precarious position. I know, more than anyone else in this match, I am the one who is most likely to get hurt." I look down at my knee. "But I have made my peace with that. One tumble. One awkward landing. One trip into the steel, and this return will have been for naught. And the truth is, that's okay. I come into Holly-Wood of the South fully aware of the possible repercussions. That is what getting back at Cid Turner means to me." I offer a smile.

"So, Cid. I want you to consider something. On April first, all you had to do was tell me the truth. You could have spoken up, said your piece, and saved us all the trouble. But you didn't. I want you to remember that tomorrow when we come face to face inside of that steel cage. One small error on your part brought this about. And because of that one decision, that one choice you made, you now get to see the very thing you two were afraid of. Everything that I do inside of that steel cage is on you."