



Fatefully
I tried to pick my battles til the battle picked me
Misery
Like the war of words I shouted in my sleep
And you passed right by
I was in the alley, surrounded on all sides
The knife cuts both ways
If the shoe fits, walk in it 'til your high heels break

~~Dear Dad,~~
~~Dear Dad #1,~~
~~Dear Richard,~~
Dear Dad,

It's been a while. Maybe not for you, I don't know how time works wherever you are, but for me... it's been a lot. Even though I'm pretty sure you can do the whole looking down on me thing and I'm sure you do, let me run through a few things really quickly.

First off, I'm back in Chicago. I feel like you'd be happy to know that. Mom says you loved Chicago more than any of the places you traveled to on business. Said it wasn't perfect by any means, but it was home. I get that. Secondly, I haven't wrestled in months, buuuut I do have some plans on the horizon. Gonna hit up Monaco in March with Tony and Co., just got named to the main event for that show, but in a few days it's the XWF's First Blood Battle Royale. I know, that doesn't sound like something you'd want me involved in, but tbh I've totally done hardcore before whether it was called a chaos division or ultraviolence, and really, it's first blood with like

a bunch of other competitors, thirty specifically, all starting out together so it's more about being clever than being particularly skilled.

Most don't think of me as clever. Their mistake.

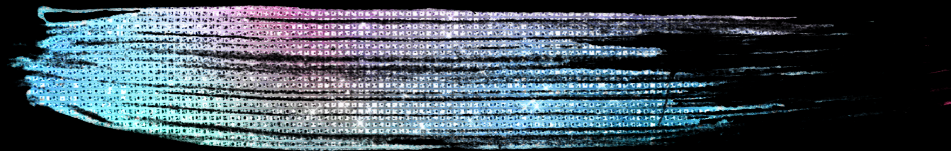
I'm not saying it'll be easy or anything, there's people in the match who know me well, who I either was or am currently close to, who I've faced in matches before.

Bobby Bourbon. Centurion. Knox. All names that have been across from mine before. I know better than to think just because our matches ended a certain way that they'll go that way this time. It's not that kind of match. And I know just how tough all three of them are.

And then there's Seb... not that we haven't been across a ring from each other before, but now...

Did I mention Seb and I broke up and I'm married to Jason?

Long story short, it's been a time.



Chicago

Sloane Taylor stood in front of what was little more than a hole in the world. You know how some places don't seem to exist unless you look right at them, like until you acknowledge their existence and grant them solidity on this plane, they don't exactly exist. Or maybe they do, somewhere between this world and another. It was what ran through Sloane's mind as she stared at the bar her husband had bought for her father.

Her biological father. Not the dead one. Keep up.

If it had been a snake, the bar would have bitten her repeatedly before she noticed it. That was before the sign had gone up, completely transforming the place and seeming to place a beacon on it that said "here I am, world, come see me!" which, I guess, is what signs are meant to do or something.

Smiling, Sloane read the name of the bar, wondering if Jason had mentioned something to her dad about the name.

Frenemies. It was what they had started out as and now look at them. Granted, they hadn't exactly meant to become husband and wife, but they were giving it a try since they found themselves there. What did they have to lose other than a solid friendship they both depended on?

Sloane hesitated a moment before pushing into the bar, surprised to find it brightly lit on the inside with the smell of cleaning products and fresh paint lingering in the air. To say the bar looked different from when she'd seen it last was an understatement, and she felt a wave of guilt suffuse her that she hadn't expected this from him. From Patrick. Her dad.

He was... *trying*.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here, not that I'm complaining," came a voice from the back, and Sloane glanced toward the beaded curtain, yes an actual hanging beaded curtain, that separated her dad's office from the front. She smiled as Patrick passed through, carrying a couple of boxes. She picked the one up off the top and placed it on the counter for him.

"Hey, how's it going? You've been busy," she said, pulling open the top of the box to peer nosily at what was inside.

"Yeah I have, it's going pretty good," Patrick said, gesturing around him at the bar. "Never thought I was much one for hard work, but I got some pride at stake here and well..." he trailed off, looking at her. "I want to do better. Be better."

Sloane gave him a half-smile, not entirely sure what to say, though her thoughts raced a million miles a second. Like... why hadn't her sister been enough for him to want to do better and be better? Why her?

Probably questions Cynara had asked herself so many times.

Oh, look. Guilt.

"How's Cashe? Mama Cashe?" Patrick asked, a touch of unease in his voice, as if he could tell the direction of her thoughts.

Sloane winced, that guilt suffusing her features. She slipped into one of the tall stools at the bar, as if those few seconds would make what she had to say any better.

"He's good, other than wanting to ship his mom off to New Zealand or New Guinea. I don't know how or why he even picked those places, but yeah," she said, refusing to get into the delicate details of their situation with her father.

"I imagine it's irritating considering you two are newly married and need some time to yourselves," he said, opening up the other box to reveal glasses, shining and new and all ready to go behind the counter.

Sloane blushed, thinking about all the *almosts* there had been between them. He wasn't wrong, they did need some time to themselves, but...

She shook her head.

"I'm not about to send his mom somewhere else after what happened to her apartment with Jason's fan," Sloane said, shuddering a little as she thought about what had been occurring since the end of last year when Jason had been stabbed outside a show.

Hugs were dangerous these days.

"I'm not saying you should, I'm just saying I get where he's coming from," Patrick put in, glancing at his daughter as he shelved the glasses carefully. "I guess you'll get some time in Dallas when you're there for that match you got coming up. Make a weekend of it," he suggested.

Sloane raised an eyebrow.

"And leave his mom in the apartment alone all weekend? Not to mention, Jason absolutely HATES Dallas, I can't imagine he'd want to spend more time there. We'll probably fly back right after the show," she said.

Patrick chuckled.

"I have a feeling that Cashe will forget all about his hatred for Dallas with the right motivation."

"Maybe. He may not be speaking to me after the match, so it's a moot point," she said.

"You're going after him aren't you?" her dad asked, not even looking back at her.

"Of course," Sloane grinned with a twinkle in her blue eyes. "We're tied, I have to get the upper hand. It's only right. But I'm not gonna hang a target on him to the point I miss others or get tunnel vision. I'd like to be the one who takes my husband out just for the bragging rights, but I'm not going to risk the entire thing on it. I know what I'm doing," she assured him.

"I had a feeling you might. I uh.... I watched some of your earlier matches. I'm not gonna say I have any background knowledge of wrestling, but it was impressive. You were impressive."

"Were," Sloane muttered.

Patrick rolled his eyes.

"So how did you manage to get away alone?" He asked.

"I left them playing Crash Team Racing. Jason may want to divorce me when I get back," she said with a bright smile that belied her words.

Seeing a spot on one of the glasses, Patrick pulled it back out and began wiping it down with a rag until it gleamed.

"Well as happy as I am to see you, I know you didn't just come here to talk about that. Anything else on your mind?" he asked, giving her a knowing look.

Sloane practically deflated on the stool, her lower lip protruding in a pout.

"I know... wrestling isn't your thing, and I get that, I do, I just... I guess I need to talk to someone who isn't close to it or to me being involved in it. And yeah, I mean, you're my dad but it's different. You haven't been there... and I'm not saying that's any fault of yours," she assured him hurriedly. "You didn't know. We didn't know. Anyway. Yeah. I just need some direction, I guess."

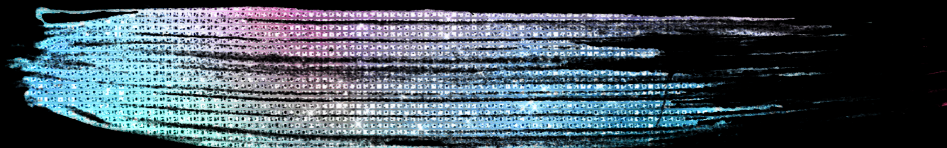
Patrick was silent for a moment before he placed the empty box on the ground and pulled the other one to him.

"Well I figure owning this bar, I'm gonna have to get used to giving people a lot of direction for things I may not be that knowledgeable about. Why not start now? I kind of like the idea of my daughter being the first to get some of this quality advice," he said and then laughed and shook his head. He wasn't even sure he was capable of dispensing 'quality advice'.

But Sloane's smile told him he'd said the right thing.

"Long story short... I don't know if this is what I want to do anymore," she said, the smile slipping from her face as she met his eyes. The words were low, as if she didn't want anyone else to hear her admitting them.

"Okay..."



**Actually
I always felt I must look better in the rear view
Missing me**

**At the golden gates they once held the keys to
When I dropped my sword
I threw it in the bushes and knocked on your door
And we live in peace
But if someone comes at us
This time, I'm ready**

So Seb and I split up and Jason and I are married. I realize that's probably confusing to you, and just in case you've missed a few episodes in the Life of Sloane, I'll explain. See, Seb and I... I don't even know what to say about it. I still love him. I think I always will. We just... things end. It isn't always what we want or what we set out to do, but sometimes it just happens. And maybe it happened when it did so Jason and I could do whatever it is we're doing.

Trying this out. Trying to make it work. Feeling like there's something there between us that wasn't there before.

Try reading that without singing the Beauty and the Beast song. I dare you.

See, Jason has been my best friend for quite a while now. We didn't start out that way, we actually started out as opponents who became frenemies and then friends and then Besties and then... married. Tbf, the marriage thing came about thanks to a friend of ours (Matt Knox) and Cynara. She's my half-sister, and while she's super prickly and usually angry at the world... I can't help but love her and feel protective of her. Even if she did cause my world to be turned upside down and inside out more than once.

Anyway. We woke up married in Vegas. Me and Jason, I mean. Obvs. And we were going to get it annulled but... we felt something. And we wanted to try to see... I mean, can it really get much better than being married to your Bestie? I don't know. And maybe we're making a huge mistake that'll come back to bite us in the butt later, but right now? I'm... happy.

So yeah. That's where we are now. Oh. Other than Jason's mom coming to stay with us because her place got exploded by his Fan. For a little bit, Jason thought she was in it when it happened. It's a whole mess, and honestly, if you can pull some strings up there and get this Fan business taken care of, we'd be super grateful. I'm just saying.

There's one glaring thing I've left out in this letter, and that's talking about Patrick. I don't know why it's so hard to talk about him to you, but it is. It feels like a betrayal. It feels like one every time I call him Dad, but I have to admit... it's nice to have someone to... be a dad. I've missed you. So much. And I've missed so many of the things we would have done and enjoyed together. I know those things are different with Patrick, and he'll never take your place. No one could.

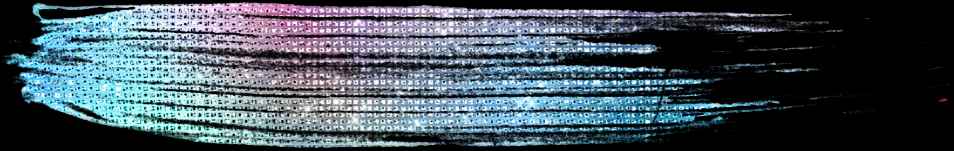
But I think it's fair if he has his own, don't you?

I'm going to assume you would say yes to that, and maybe you wouldn't, maybe I'm just going with that to make my life easier. I don't know.

I know you'll be watching when I step in the ring again. I know you'll be there with me as you always have been, through every win and every loss over the years.

Long story short... I love you, and I miss you. I'll try to do these more often, even though I feel like I'm telling you things you already know.

– Sloane



Sloane paused for a moment, biting her lower lip as she considered her next words.

“I love wrestling. I always have, and for as long as I can remember, it’s what I’ve always wanted to do. What I’ve always wanted to be. I’m not sure I know how to be anything else than what I am, but I haven’t set foot in a ring in months other than for some sparring, not because of an injury or anything like that but just because... I haven’t. And maybe it has something to do with how insane my life has been over the past...” she paused to consider, her eyebrows going up as she thought. “Okay, so maybe my life has always been a little insane, but it’s definitely ratcheted it up over the past year.”

Patrick prodded the inside of his cheek with his tongue as he considered her words, knowing that he was part of the reason for the insanity in her life. He felt a touch of guilt over it, considering she hadn’t asked for the upheaval that had turned her life upside down.

“So what are you gonna do?”

Sloane shrugged and slumped a little.

“I don’t know. I’m hoping that maybe these doubts are coming from me being out of the ring and that when I get back in it, I’ll feel everything I’ve always felt when I step in. The adrenaline, it’s something I know I’ll never be entirely free of. So maybe that’s my answer. I just keep going until I can’t anymore or until someone clips the Sky Queen’s wings,” she said.

"Is there a Sky King?" Patrick asked, trying to lighten her mood some, but Sloane just rolled her eyes.

"Apparently. AND he's in the Free For All match, so maybe I'll have to show him exactly why the queen is the most powerful piece on the chess board."

"You play chess?" her father asked her in surprise.

"Well... not exactly, but I at least know the queen is the queen bee and the king's just a... butthead with a crown!" Sloane said defensively.

"Okay, okay. No Sky Kings," Patrick said, holding his hands up in mock surrender while Sloane looked on, a touch petulant. "Anyone else in the match you're looking forward to facing?"

Sloane shifted in her seat, warming to the topic.

"Well I mean... there's Cypher. Not gonna lie, smacking him around some might actually be therapeutic for me. I might forget it's first blood and just kick his butt for what he did to Frankie Duke," she said emphatically. "And then there's Corey Black. I'd kinda like to drop him on his head, but in a sort of friendly way? I dunno, we have this love/hate thing going on because of Seb."

"Speaking of—" Patrick began, but Sloane cut him off.

"Which reminds me, Spencer Adams is in this match too, so all of Pantheon is there. It would be stupid to think they won't work together. Hmm," she mused.

"Isn't Seb in that?" Patrick asked, squinting as he tried to remember all the little details about his daughter's professional life.

"The match or the group? Actually it doesn't matter. He's in both."

"And... how are you feeling about that?" he asked carefully.

"It's fine. All good. Really. It's not the first time Seb and I have been in a match together and I doubt it'll be the last. That's all it is," Sloane answered.

"Sure about that?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"Alright. So what do you get out of this if you win the damn thing?" Patrick asked. "What happens if you're the last one standing who isn't bleeding?"

"Weeeeell, see XWF has this event called March Madness and whoever wins will face the Universal Champion. Right now that's Isaiah King. He's pretty tough from what I've seen, holds two belts in XWF," Sloane said.

"And... that's good..." Patrick said slowly as if trying to keep it all straight.

Sloane frowned.

"What, the two belts or the match if I win? I mean, both are good, it's kinda why we do what we do, for the shinies. We're all competitive, we all wanna win, and we all wanna do that by making sure the blood on us isn't ours. And really, that's kinda how it goes for every match, not just this one. I never want the blood to be mine," she said with a laugh.

"Well I think I'd rather the blood not be yours also," Patrick said, clearing his throat. "So what's your plan?"

Sloane grinned mischievously.

"Well. It's to win, of course. But to get there... I mean, there's gonna be thirty people slugging it out to see who can bleed the fastest. Honestly, a stray fist can cause a nose bleed or a split lip in seconds. I have to be faster and smarter than the people in that ring and not let the adrenaline get in the way or cause me to make irrational decisions. Sometimes in the most brutal matches, you have to keep your head on your shoulders and not give way to the violence entirely. There's not really any prizes for blunt brutality in this. Barreling in there will only get your head knocked off your shoulders. I plan to hang back and see the lay of the land before I dive in."

"Except when it comes to your husband," Patrick said with a grin.

"Except when it comes to Jason, I'm gonna jack him up as soon as I get the chance," Sloane said gleefully, rubbing her hands together as though she were plotting something, and she was. "Plus there's some mystery entrant. I suspect either Thad Duke or Shawn Warstein. Maybe James Raven..." she mused, pursing her lips as she considered. "Not that it matters. The anonymity doesn't really score them any points in the match, just a little added layer of drama to stir the pot. There's a lot of names from XWF in it, and I'm hoping they have just enough animosity towards each other that they immediately turn on their fellow roster members. But just in case they don't, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve..."

Patrick smirked a little and looked down at the countertop before looking back at her, pride evident in his expression.

"I think you'll be just fine," he said with an assured nod.

Sloane grinned.

"Long story short... I'm gonna win the whole damn thing," she said.

"Attagirl," Patrick said approvingly.

"Thanks, Dad," Sloane said, and just as it did every time she said it, she felt her heart lurch a little and wondered if it was the same for him.

**Past me
I wanna tell you not to get lost in these petty things
Your nemeses
Will defeat themselves before you get the chance to swing
And he's passing by
Rare as the glimmer of a comet in the sky
And he feels like home
If the shoe fits, walk in it everywhere you go**

**** Lyrics by Taylor Swift**