



*She's back!*

The sound of the commentator is heard echoing, and the opening scene unveils the iconic blonde haired legend in the industry. The crowd is deafening in the background as she marches her way toward the center of the ring, but the scene then begins to flash throughout clips of some of the memorable matches that Tara has had since returning to the industry in late 2020; her battles, the wars that she has waged with a number of people since that day... from the likes of Virginia Stepanov, Eternity, Rowan, and Shelly Diamond within the confines of IWF; to her battles against one of her dear friends, Emmanuelle, and then Arata Asakura during her time at another company that would see her win another new championship, as well as winning a tournament that marked some of the best the company had to offer; to her battles against MYŌJIN at the first-ever [i]Tara Fenix Charity Event (Cruise)[/i], and her longtime rival, Alex Jones, at the first-ever [i]Denzel Porter Invitational[/i].

While the clips are continuing to play, Tara's voice is heard in the background.

*"It must destroy you knowing that, while you are a champion; no one is lining up to fight you... Because... Everyone is still coming after me."*

Her voice fades, but the clips continue rolling; it didn't matter what each end result ended in, the point was that there were still dozens of people that were constantly looking to fight Tara, and more that had put her on their bucket list of opponents to fight before their retirement. The final shot shows Tara standing inside of the ring with her arm raised as the winner until the scenery fades out for a brief moment.

It remains dark for thirty seconds. When the scene comes back in, Tara is sitting at a booth, by herself; everything appears...different...debris was littered outside of the window. Buildings have collapsed... vehicles destroyed by fires that have long since faded. There is a sports arena in the background where a crowd has amassed; even from this distance, there were announcements that could be heard, although the sound quality was not as great as it was from

years ago. Resources were starting to wane; it was more dangerous to fix these things than to just let it fade to obscurity; however, this arena was to the survivors what [b]The Colosseum[/b] was to the Romans...a means to keep the people in order. It was as if the apocalypse had hit. She sits alone. The wear and tear is well beyond the years of what would be perceived as the present timeline, indicating that this could be an alternate future, or even the future itself. Only time would tell. The remnants of blue dye were still ever-present in her hair, although it was faded and accompanied with the grey hair that shone in such a way that it appeared more silver. There are several pendants hanging around her neck, more of locket, and she scratches the tattoo around her left ring finger. Beside her is a ragged backpack that looks like it has seen better days; some of the fabric has easily been ripped, and restitched, possibly several times over. The walls are covered with ash and dust, and it appears as if the ceiling has collapsed at several points from within the restaurant...Tara reaches to the bag beside her, clutching it close, but turns her head to the side to survey the situation. There were tears welling up in her eyes, but being who she is, she closes her eyes to hold them back. While sitting there, Tara's voice is heard again in the air as opposed to her actually speaking.

*I am a fighter... a gladiator... And I...was...the best. There was something about me that seemed to aggravate everyone who stood across from me back in the day; a certain allure that I had that would drive every title holder— champion— whoever it was, whatever you wanted to call it— an allure that drove them all mad. That title always meant something to anyone who would wear it, and they would always have this mindset that the title is what made them. The title is what would bring them competition. The title is what set them apart from everyone else, and the title is what made them the best, but that is exactly what drove them crazy about me: I never needed a title. I never needed a title for the competition to come for me, and I never needed a title to stake my claim as the GREATEST OF ALL TIME. I never needed it!*

*They were mere decorations for me.*

*They were adornments.*

*While the champions would sit proudly on their throne, the world recognized that it was truly...mine... and that I merely allowed them to keep those titles because it was never about titles for me; it was about the fight.*

*The fight is what I live for, and there is no doubt in my mind that it was what I was born to do! There is no doubt in my mind that when time finally takes me, it will be doing what I was born to do. I just— I did not know it until life had taken its own toll against me... Until life had made me feel less. Until life had taken every scrap of humanity away from me; I did not feel human. But I remember the day that I first stepped into the building that would help me shape my own destiny, and help me carve my own path, and the path ahead of me for many others. I remember...*

She closes her eyes, and the scene fades out simultaneously. When she reopens her eyes, the scene shifts entirely; she is standing inside of the training ring where Tara discovered her love for the sport... Her love for the violence... Her love for the show that she would put on for the adoring fans. Life for her had been less than kind up to this point; life had taken away everything it could from her, but this ring gave her strength. It gave her reason. It gave her...control... It was near this time of discovery that she had learned about the mythological phoenix, and how much the bird meant to her. Standing in the ring, all she could think of was how the phoenix would be reborn from its own ashes... She allowed the thought of the memory to pulsate throughout her body, and let it take control over her body. She spreads her arms out as if they were wings. Despite the empty facility, she could already hear the crowd... she could already hear them chanting her name.

“I am surprised to see you here.”

The voice pulls Tara back through her mind, and we return to the restaurant. Tara blinks her eyes several times, bringing her awareness back to her own surroundings. Without any hesitation, almost by instinct, she reaches for a pocket in the bag whilst raising her eyes to bring attention to the person who shook her from her memory. Standing in front of her is Dean Harper.

“Mother,” he says with a crooked smile.

“Dean,” Tara says in a softer tone, and all of the tension that jolted throughout her body relaxes in the briefest instance. Her own lips curl into a grin of her own, and Dean sits across from her; he places a hand on top of hers in a comforting fashion. “I have not seen you since—”

“Since Father fell...” Dean finishes her sentence, “I did not think that I would be back, but then... word began to spread... that you were heading this way, and so I have no choice but to ask: why?” Dean cocks his head to the side in a puzzling fashion while awaiting an answer.

Tara remains still and silent for several seconds, but her gaze does falter away for several seconds, “This is what I do—”

Dean rolls his eyes, “But Mother—”

“This is what I do, Dean!” Tara repeats, and speaks more ferociously, “This is what I do. This is what I think of when I eat, when I drink, when I dream...this is what I am breathing for. This life...” Tara snickers, “It takes everything. It takes everything that we love! It takes everything that we have, but we are not the type of people who are going to leave so long as we still have

chips to put on the table. We are going to put in everything. I— am going to leave everything I have...”

Dean licks his lips and pulls himself away from Tara. He puts his arm on top of the bench, and shifts himself to look away from her momentarily, “What about Damian? How about Edward? Lilith? Mikaela?” Dean says with a sigh, and leans forward, “We have continued to live, Mother, and that was one little spark that kept us going: that you were out there, but now? Now you’re going to risk it all by coming back? Risk it all by returning to the same ring that took Father? That took Sabin? That took Warren—” Dean growls and pounds the table between them in frustration; his hand is clenched, and his nails dig into his own palm, but he finally sighs before continuing, “A long time ago... I wish that you had not come back. I wish that you and Father did not reconcile... I wished that you could find peace, and ride off into the sunset...” Dean chuckles, and knowing himself and his own thirst for blood, and vengeance for everything that was taken from them, “Why can’t we ride into the sunset?” Dean shakes his head.

“Where are they?” Tara asks, referring to Dean’s siblings, and Dean’s son.

“They heard you were coming...” Dean mutters, “They’ll be at the arena.” Dean feigns a weak smile. The truth was that he did not want any of them to show up at the arena to watch Tara take this fight; he feared what the outcome would be. He feared that this would be Tara’s last breath. “How’s Jennie?” Dean finally asks.

“She is good...” Tara answers, and shrugs her shoulders, “She did not want to come to this fight. She shares some of your concerns,” Tara continues and shoots a glare at Dean with her bright, but cold blue eyes.

“Just answer me... If it were anybody else, would you still return for this fight?” Dean inquires.

Tara contemplates the answer for several seconds... Had it been anyone else, would she show up?

*I have had wars with a great number of people, and there was an even greater number of people that I would have loved to fight with before the world went to shit many times over... It was not like me to have to go looking for competition... It came to me. People would fall at my feet to get a match. People would threaten my life for a match— they would threaten my family for a match— they would do anything, they would do EVERYTHING to get one single match with me, because one single match with me meant that people...for once...were going to give them recognition. People, for once, were going to notice them, all because that was what I brought to the table— recognition. And for that recognition, for that little spotlight in the sun, they would go to whatever lengths they needed to get my attention. They would do whatever it was they needed to*

*do to get me to cave and tell them that I will meet them— I will meet them in the middle of the ring on my stage— on my grounds— on my territory, and I would turn them into a star! But not the star that they thought they would become... No one would be saying how they defeated me; they would be singing the praises of how I made an example out of them. I would have loved to share another grand stage with Emmanuelle, with Shouta, with Arata, with Shelly, with Rowan, with Atara, with Dickie, with Jason Long...I could literally come up with names forever, but the question remains: if it were any of those people, would I show up? Would I be standing here? Would I have made the trek for this?*

*That is where you were different, James. You were different because you had that same allure that I had... People... the competition... they just gravitated to you! I lost count of how many people named you as their dream opponent. How many people thought that if they could just stand in the same ring with you, they would be able to prove themselves to be something that none of them were. There was an aura surrounding you, and an aura that was just...undeniable. Your presence commanded respect. Your presence became captivating, and that was why I had to do something different for you than I did for anyone else.*

*Would I have come here for anyone else?*

*Would I have made the challenge for anyone else?*

*I don't think so.*

*It was not like me to go chasing after an opponent... But I had to make an exception. For you, I threw my own pride out of the window, and I told you that I wanted you... one-on-one... I wanted you in the center of the ring on one of the many grand stages we had. I wanted you at the Denzel Porter Invitational! The match that we would have would be nothing short of legendary. To this day, I remember that crowd: I remember them chanting our names back and forth, I remember us going back and forth and the crowd craving for more.*

*When our bodies were spent, and we thought that there was nothing more that either one of us could give, we found a way. We found a way to persevere. We found a way to bring the best out of each other, and we gave... we gave everything.*

Tara folds her hands on top of the table, “No,” she finally mutters, “If it were anybody else, I would not be sitting here right now.”

Dean nods. He knew the answer without Tara having to actually say it; he knew that Tara viewed this man as her perfect competition. The only one that could truly bring the best out of her, and her being who she is, she could not deny the call for competition. Dean drums his hands against

the table for a moment before sliding out of the booth, “Then I don’t want to keep you any longer,” he pivots on his heels and tucks his hands into his pockets, beginning to make his way for the door, “At least—” Dean stops and turns his head over his shoulder to glance back at Tara, who has gotten out of the booth and is picking up her bag, “—see the kids before you go.”

Tara nods in agreement.

The two walk mostly in silence toward the arena. They have to climb over some of the ruins that are between the restaurant and the arena, and several people try to give a friendly wave as they continue to walk by; some even recognize Tara as well as Dean Harper from back in the day, but they would bite their tongues for the time being so as not to bring unnecessary attention to them.

*I have always prided myself on the idea that I could step into the ring with anyone... anytime... and I could make them look good. I knew how to play the game— I knew how to sell the tickets—that was precisely why every time I was announced for an event, it would sell out within hours. There were not many people that I trusted to give me that same respect, because as I said, most of the people just wanted to be in the ring with me in order to make a name for themselves. Most of them wanted to be in the ring with me just to attempt to shame me; embarrass me; pretend that they were in a league of their own, but it was always up to me to humble them.*

*The last time that I had been at the arena, it never had an audience quite so large... No doubt that they had heard about the star attraction. No doubt that they heard I was coming this way.*

*It brings me back, though... It brings me back to 2023, when we fought each other for the first time in our days as gladiators, and make no mistake about it, that is what we are. The time when both of us were questioning how much longer we had left in our fighting days, and who would have thought that all these years later, we would be running it back? The first time we fought— it was to try to decide once and for all... who is the greatest...*

*It was always funny to me.*

*It was always funny how many people would walk around and call themselves “The GOAT”. Who would call themselves the GREATEST OF ALL TIME. There are a number of them who wanted to stake their claim with such a title, but few of them actually impressed me. Most of them would scream my name to get my attention, and the moment that I gave them that glare to let them know I was honing in on them: retirement. Retirement because they realized that they were barking up the wrong tree. Retirement because they wanted to end their careers on a high note, rather than locked in my grasp and forced to tap out in front of the audience...*

*Because none of them wanted to have that be the final image that the audience would have of them!*

*None of them wanted to have the last memory that people would have of them being them tapping out, because that is what I do... that is how I battle... I always found their end. I always found their breaking point, because I– liked to feel them tap out... I– loved when they had to admit to the world, and admit to themselves, that they were not going to make it out of a fight, and their only chance for survival was going to be to tap out.*

*Sometimes... I got what I wanted.*

*Other times... not so much.*

*But you were not the type of person who would back away from me, just as I would not back away from you. When I told you all those years ago that I wanted this match, you were happy to oblige... You were happy to give me what I wanted. You were happy to give me all of the fight you had! You were not like the rest of them, James, and I think...deep down...you and I were meant to do this. You and I were meant to fight each other, forever. Had we known each other perhaps years earlier, we would have. Everything happens how it should, though, right?*

*We fought each other when we did.*

*And we tore the roof down... right?*

*One more time.*

The walk took them several minutes to get to their destination, and a crowd formed to wait for the doors to open. One person stands atop a pedestal with a megaphone in his hand as he is explaining what the arena is...

“This is a sanctuary! Within the confines of the arena, there will be NO BLOODSHED that does not happen inside of the ring! There will be no fighting! There will be no theft! Anyone guilty of any acts against other spectators will receive a capital punishment in exchange...” the man says, and he does not stop there.

However, Tara and Dean approach a small group of people. Two boys, and two girls; one of the girls is swatting at the shoulders of everyone else, and before they can turn around, she launches herself forward and throws her arms around Tara.

“Mom!” Lilith says.

She hugs her mom as tight as she can, and Tara holds her in exchange, “Lilith—” Tara mutters her name, and holds her close as if she were still a young child...because she would always be her child to her. Tara’s gaze does move forward to the rest of them, “Eddie. MJ. Damian,” she says the names of each of the kids who were no longer children at their age, but rather young adults. They huddle around the maternal figure, the woman who was grandma to two of them, and mother to the other two.

“Ma– Mom–” Lilith shakes her head, “I– we’re just so glad you’re okay! But why are you coming back here? These days are supposed to be done... This fight is supposed to be done...”

“I wish I could, Lilith. I wish I could...” Tara says.

“Dove,” that honey-filled rasp is heard coming from another section of the crowd, and Atara steps forward, “Back from the dead?”

“You know it takes a lot to kill me...” Tara answers.

The whole time, she continues to hold the quadruple that she still sees as her babies beside her, and Atara steps forward.

“It’s a shame that this life took Sabin. I do miss him,” Atara says, “But– why do you have to fight this? You do know that he only did what he had to... For Ismini. It was the rules.” Atara continues.

Tara nods, “I understand. I am not seeking vengeance... Merely competition.” Tara answers.

“Is she safe?” Atara asks.

Tara nods, “She’s with Jennie... I promised I would keep her safe.”

“Good. Keep her far away from here.” Atara lets out a sigh of content, but then her own bright eyes look toward Tara and silently question her, “Tara—” Atara’s voice trails off. The tone suggests how much she wishes that Tara would reconsider the fight that she was going into, but she knew that look as well as anyone else, and knew that Tara was here to fight. She sighs before finally continuing, “It’s good to see you.”

Atara takes a step back when another voice is heard from further back.

“We don’t have to do this,” James Raven says. The crowd disperses as if Moses were parting the sea, and James Raven is now visible at the center of the crowd; Tara’s and James’s eyes lock while he walks forward and then he looks at the rest of the people surrounding Tara. “We’ve already had this dance.” James continues, and then nods to the rest of them in a greeting manner.

“We do, though. One more time, James... I need this,” Tara says, “I need to fight.”

*The phoenix will rise again, from its ashes.*