



116

Part One

Miami, Florida

“So, what would you do?”

The strains of the mellifluous background music should have been pleasant. Unfortunately it was at a tone where it was producing a ringing in my head I just couldn't quite shake. I peered up with my hands crossed, staring at the number above the elevator doors as it systematically dropped. I let out a slow drawn out whistle before trying to match the tone of the tune playing for us. Turning over to Sophie she glances up and for a second we're staring eye to eye before she turns her attention to my shoulder. Reaching up with one hand she gently taps just above the tight sleeve of the shirt I had on. I try not to flinch as she casually lifts it up just a tad to see the bruise.

"Oh, nasty one. Guess you're lucky that's all you got to show for it, huh?"

I turn away and roll my eyes. Early on one of our needless marathon runs I had wanted to try doing a bit of parkour. Like old times. Nevermind I am much too big and it's been years since we did that stupid shit. I had ended up tumbling and falling over on top of a dumpster, slamming my shoulder into it. She had gone a good distance before the loud crash of my body meeting steel registered in her brain and she had turned back to check on me.

I had laughed it off and called for an early stop to the activity.

"It's nothing. And that's not answering the question!"

As the elevator stopped on the ground floor level, we stepped out of the lift and were immediately greeted by weary tourists trying to get by us. Glancing around the lobby I spotted a clock informing me it was just a quarter past five. I had arranged for a bit of a celebration tonight. Having rushed here from Pittsburg, it only felt right after the surprising announcement. I considered this entire week my Hall of Fame Celebration Tour. A celebration of the life of one Ace Marshall.

Shaking the hand of that shyster for one of the first times in years, Mr. D had thanked and congratulated me in his normal deadpan professional tone. Just business as usual I suppose.

"I don't know sweetie, what am I supposed to say to something so vague?"

I didn't really expect an answer. Not one that would work for me anyways. I smiled and shrugged.

"I don't know either," I admitted. It was my conundrum.

Glancing around as we made our way through the main lobby, I caught the prying eye of an elderly man who was seemingly perving on the women around him. Sophie herself was wearing an earthly green bikini top and short jean shorts over the bottoms to match. I suppose she expected we were going to the beach or a pool considering the emergency flight in the opposite

direction of Toronto. She gave him a scowl, causing him to turn away before peering back in front of us to watch where we were going.

It was exciting news I suppose. I always imagined I wouldn't view it as being that big of a deal. It was expected; I had a career worth praising.

As we stepped out into the Miami sun, I pulled my shades out from my unbuttoned short sleeve dress shirt and placed them up over my eyes, helping bring down the glare all around us. We looked ready to tackle the sands for sure.

"Ah, good. Our ride is here!"

"You got us a limo?"

"Sure did!" I smirk and turn to raise an arm up presenting it to her.

It was the only vehicle currently not filling what was otherwise a jam packed parking lot. The Driver was standing on the side facing the hotel doors but otherwise had his eyes glued to his smartphone. I beckoned with my outreached arm for us to continue going. Sophie's intrigue only seemed mildly piqued.

I think it has been a few years since I bothered with this. I hadn't bothered checking my balance after making reservations and orders for services for the next however many days. I had a feeling I was spending money on things I wouldn't actually be taking advantage of.

We'd just have to see how it all goes. I also had a ridiculous amount of cash on me for other nefarious purposes.

I wasn't the wealthiest in the world but I wasn't hurting financially. A house I never used had been paid off relatively quickly between two end of the year special battle royal wins and a significant increase in checks over the years. I didn't see them getting much bigger any time at this stage. I guess you could say unless I was carrying the World Championship and getting that endowment check or had a larger surge in merchandise sales I was going to slowly start going over the hill.

Time would ensure that no matter what.

"Hello," I say casually with my hands pressed into my pockets. The driver blinks and looks up. I wasn't sure what to call him. He's what I imagine Kenan Thompson would look like if he was an anorexic twink.

"Good day, sir. Uh, thank you for using Centennial Worldwide for your luxury escort services!"

“Please be more casual,” I responded quickly. Everyone has to follow a script but I wasn’t in the mood. It just wasn’t the right kind of fake.

When he said escort I immediately thought of prostitutes but that wasn’t scheduled for today.

“No problem, I can do that. Come on over!” he responds unbothered. He puts his phone into his pocket and turns to take the few steps needed to get to the rear passenger door. Opening it he gestures to us before turning his attention to Sophie.

“Ladies first!”

For some reason I had to stop myself from responding needlessly caustically. Maybe I was just looking for a fight at this point? Was supposed to be basking in the moment, I had successfully incised my name into history.

I remained silent and smiled cheerfully as Sophie stepped over and turned before bending down to plop down into the overly cushioned leather seat of the limousine. She scooted over and I stepped forward, giving the driver a nod of acknowledgement before getting into the car to join her.

I smirk at Sophie as she runs her hands over the seat. As the driver shuts the door behind me as I continue staring slightly amused.

“Enjoying yourself?” I ask.

“Not really. Some good and terrible memories in these overpriced boxes.”

I try to recall if we’ve ever ridden in one together. I think so, once or twice? I don’t know.

“You’ve probably ridden in more than I have then.”

“Oh for sure. Unless you were making it a habit, I was with a Mason you know.”

I did know but had forgotten.

Victor Mason was Blake’s brother. Sophie was all for the relationship I recall up until he had the audacity to propose to her. He was also a former Tag Team Champion partner of mine, albeit unwillingly on both of our parts.

The brothers were both insufferably dull witted people who had wealth to make up for a lack of a soul or character.

She would have been in her gold digging phase but the thought of pushing for some actual intimate relationship with a sociopathic billionaire I guess was just an irrevocable death nail in their relationship.

“There were also a lot of other men using company funds to try and show off lavish lifestyles with small luxuries. It was definitely the go-to the older they got.”

This was the point where she was getting too specific. I don’t want to picture a twenty-two to twenty-five year old version of my friend fucking middle aged men having a mid-life crisis or grandpas while drugged half catatonic. Just laying in a prone starfish position as the needle dicked pricks tried to remind themselves what it was like to get their rocks off. Yet here we are.

We pulled out of the parking lot and would soon be part of Miami’s nightmarish traffic. I was thankful to not be driving. Would likely have gotten only so far before having a breakdown leading to an encounter with equally bellicose drivers. Considering the percentage of them that would be Cuban I’d probably get stabbed.

“So, what’s bugging you anyway? Having one of your inner existential crises again?”

I blinked and looked over to Sophie who was looking at me with a... Sympathetic half-smile? Uncritical? I don’t know. It’s foreign.

I guess I was giving it away. She knew me too well.

“Oh, nothing new! I’ve finished the lifetime bucket list. So what comes next? The big question. You couldn’t answer it and neither can I.”

She murmurs a bit before gently reaching over with one hand to grasp mine on the seat.

“That’s not really a question. You’ll figure out something, we all do. Maybe it won’t be as exciting as you hope for but, we’re all just trying to spend time in a way that’s personally meaningful. We’re just wasting time waiting to die.”

I glance at her hand before blinking at her.

“Was that supposed to be an uplifting pep talk?”

She smiles.

“I am trying to be comforting, stupid. At least until this phase passes by again. Now appreciate it since if you were anyone else I wouldn’t care!”

She has definitely given more heartfelt speeches in the past. Although considering how ineffective those were I suppose she was saving the rest she had in her.

We continued with lighter chatter from there as we closed in on the airport.

I think the biggest downer I was experiencing was being sober. That was a problem that would need to be addressed quickly. Drinking was supposed to be an occasional event as in time it’s becoming clear it could be a real pain in the ass otherwise.

Today was an occasion.

As we arrived at the airport, the limousine's phone toward the middle console rang. Looking at it awkwardly before realizing what it was for a split second, I reached over and answered it.

"We're at our first stop for the evening, sir."

Thank you for stating the obvious.

"Hey, do you have, like, one of those cards to grab the person's attention as they are making their way out of the airport?"

"Absolutely. What's their name?"

I think about it briefly before smiling.

A minute later the driver is standing outside of the limousine holding up a sign that reads *Daddy's Little Girl* scribbled on I guess with the company sharpie. I had requested *Daddy's Little Anal Whore* but this was dismissed as 'no can do'.

I guess we were a bit early. The driver seemed to begin getting uncomfortable just standing a bit and kept having to stop himself from leaning on the side of his door. It wasn't twenty minutes from when we arrived however when a familiar ginger made her way out from the entrance dragging a small case out from its extended handle. Ravyn had on a casual plain khaki colored sleeveless tank top and pants to match in low heels.

Her eyes scanned around a bit before spotting the driver with his calling card. She rolled her eyes before stepping over toward him. He said something causing her to nod before he stepped over toward the passenger door at the back where we were, before opening it for her.

Ravyn pressed the handle down back into the case before picking it up and setting it down on the floor. She sat down beside Sophie as the driver proceeded to close the door behind her.

"Aren't you going to the beach for the summer a little early?" She asks jokingly. For years these spots were definitely my go to for the break between Rise to Greatness and the following Breakdown.

"We have a week, why not celebrate early?"

"Here of all places? I'd recommend not drinking the water."

I was pretty sure the infrastructure was fine, unless that was just a jab at Florida politics.

"Oh, we're not drinking water, I am sure we'll be fine."

The driver pulled out from beside the curb and slowly began making the journey to the next destination I had listed. Ocean Drive wasn't far at least, it was a hot spot filled with restaurants

and bars. I wasn't sure what Ravyn was expecting out of me if anything at this point. I was disappointing myself, much less her recently with my lack of conviction in my prior words.

That drive I used to have was fully latent. May it return in spades. My own insecurities were unfortunately beginning to manifest in ways I wasn't as easily overcoming the way I used to.

"So why here then? I do hope we're here for more than sand and margaritas."

No reason to act like you've already got sand in your crotch. Let him disappoint us first," Sophie says while smirking at me.

I don't know what she knows or doesn't know. Couldn't read her mind either. For the last several weeks we'd mostly just enjoyed whatever fun was to be had in the cities we were staying over in for the shows. With the time coming up after Rise to Greatness I imagined we'd actually be back in Vegas.

"Sentiment I guess. Spent a lot of time at a beach in celebratory fashion. Why let this be different? We're both officially recognized as all time greats. Isn't that the sort of stuff everyone fetishizes over? Being a 'part of wrestling history'?"

"I suppose. Couldn't you have picked a better spot? Fiji? Bora Bora? Some of the best spots are just southeast of the Bahamas." She glanced up as she was naming spots. I had to stop her most likely before she named every conceivable beach on the planet she likely considered better than Miami which would likely be most.

"No need to pick me apart! No reason to pull out the passports until we're stuck going to the land up North."

Ravyn leaned back into the seat and pressed her arm into the side rest, likely just lulling herself in preparation of whatever came next. I was rather keeping it simple. At least today.

It didn't take long, roughly just over ten minutes to reach Ocean Drive. The phone went off again just as we were stopping for a traffic light.

"Hello Sir, was there any spot in particular you were wanting to go? Doesn't list anything specifically."

"Sure, let's... We'll start with the Clevelander. Let's try there first."

I had been there before. I was hoping it would be jumping now.

I wasn't disappointed. It was just past six as the limousine pulled up to what was a packed establishment outside. The multistory interior would be fine.

The driver came over to the door where Ravyn was seated and proceeded to open the door. He gestured for us politely as we caught curious glances. Exiting from the vehicle I peered around and smiled. It was about as hollow as one could be but I figured I could fake the funk out until it legitimately departed. My phone went off and I glanced down before pulling it out. It was a text from Damian.

Where are you? It read. I imagined him saying it in his usual tone. Right. I had held off on telling him a place to meet based on being unsure myself.

Come to the cleveland bar on ocean drive I sent back. He wanted to talk. Probably one of those overly serious conversations where he shamed me half to death or something. I know he cared. Unfortunately, his perception on what should be was never going to match how everything in reality was.

I imagined he'd give up eventually. No one was saving me from shit. I sold my soul a long time ago.

"More friends?" Ravyn asked. I peered up at her where Sophie and her had stepped further ahead toward the establishment.

"Yeah, he'll be here later."

Wasn't sure how he would perceive them but that was out of my control. It was like Alistaire all over again, granted this was family.

Placing my phone away I followed them up as we made our way up.

"Speaking of friends, let's make more," I say while glancing around.

"You suck at that," Sophie mutters.

"Aren't you a little old for this scene, daddy?" Ravyn jests. I think. It could have been a legitimate statement. While there were people of seemingly most ages, most of them were definitely younger.

It took a minute as a line was in front of us. As we were finally able to step inside, I shrugged the question off before taking a step away from the people in front of us.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! HELLO! MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION?!"

I glanced back to see Ravyn and Sophie staring at me. Ravyn seemed more curious whereas Sophie seemed insecure, afraid of where this was going.

The chatter had quieted a bit as me screaming had at least given me the attention I was demanding.

“It’s a pleasure to be here tonight!” I continued confidently. “Please, enjoy yourselves and order anything and everything you want to your heart's content! Everything is on me! Your tabs are now mine!”

There were cheers followed by murmurs as people talked amongst themselves.

“Ace Marshall! You’re awesome!”

I glanced over to see some kid who looked like he had just been kicked out of college.

“Thank you, random blonde dude!” I pointed a finger at him before turning my hand and giving him a thumbs up.

At least one person knew who I was. I doubted everyone did, wrestling was big but I’d still consider us all minor celebrities at best.

A hostess of sorts immediately came up to me.

“Hello Sir, would you care to accompany me?”

“Sure.”

I wasn’t surprised the immediate response from a staff member was to inquire about a payment method and asking if I was serious. Pulling out my wallet I grabbed the top card I had out for purchases and placed it down for her to take and swipe. As Ravyn and Sophie joined me at the counter I smirked at Sophie.

“Now who is bad at making friends? I whispered.

While everyone else appeared to be living up even more, the looks from two of the employees appeared to be of murderous intent as it appeared apparent people were adding to their orders at the tables or getting up to make one at the bar.

“Thank you, sir. Would you care to sit in on one of our VIP tables?”

“Sure,” I glance back at my present company. “We’re important, right? Right?”

We were shortly following the hottest through the crowd. I don’t remember it being this large inside despite acknowledging it was at least three stories.

I felt a couple hands slap my shoulder cheerfully and some woman walked up and kissed me on the cheek before saying something really loud and extremely incoherent in my ear. Entering a section that appeared slightly away from the main lobby, a male employee came up from behind the hostess.

“What can I get you all?” He asked in a professional tone. No fun, this one.

“Bottle service here? Champagne, several bottles. Whatever you consider your best tequila. A bourbon. I don’t know, surprise me.” I snapped my fingers like a snob and smirked with my back to him. Might as well act like I own the place for the night.

“You’re full of it,” Sophie says as the man leaves us.

“Oh well. Managed to emote the place. Might as well enjoy it, liven up a bit. You know? Only happens once, right?”

“Is there more planned for the festivities?” Ravyn asks, seemingly bored with the current prospect.

“Oh there is. We’ll see where everything goes.”

I was already spending a fortune. Might as well go hard I suppose.

As the man returned with a cart full of bottles, he pulled out several bottles and began placing them down along with glasses to pour whatever our heart desired into. Opening them as he went along, he placed the opener aside before then extending his arms to the cart to pull out one bottle that seemed different from the others in terms of the color of the liquid as well as the label.

“Our manager wanted to give this to you. It’s on the house.”

I have no clue who Elijah Craig is but I guess we were drinking his shit. The man proceeded to pull out a box.

“These as well, please enjoy them.”

Sophie snapped the box out of his outreached hand toward me and looked at it, her desire to take things reaching its limit.

“If there is anything else-”

“We’ll be sure to get you. Sure, thanks.”

He blinked awkwardly before leaning back and hastily making his way back toward the main room as I refrained myself from giving shoo motions for him to fuck off.

“What are those?” I ask, turning back to Sophie.

“Cigars.”

I doubt they were anything particularly special but I wasn’t going to throw away anything that came for free complimentary.

Looking amongst the bottles now lined up on the table I reached for the first one. None of them would survive, I suppose it didn’t matter which was emptied first. The turbid substance of

the Elijah Craig bottle seemed like a start. Sophie spent no time either, going for a bottle of champagne.

Ravyn refrained from the activity, merely gleaming over one of the labels. Come to think of it, I don't think we've ever gotten drunk together. This almost felt like a necessity if you were going to associate with me for any length of time.

Was it a control thing? Was she afraid to lose inhibitions? Outside of our festivities she was as much a control freak as you could be. I suppose it came with the way she was wired. Ah, well.

I wasn't going to let that stop me.

Taking a giant sip off of the top I let the liquid simmer briefly in my throat before just starting to chug it. Sophie had enough self respect to stick with using a glass, pouring the glistening liquid.

I may have been starting off a bit too fast. I broke into a brief uncontrollable coughing fit as I set the bottle aside. I coughed and gagged a bit before finally gathering my composure.

Shaking my head I picked the bottle back up and took another swig.

"You don't have to go that hard, I don't think it's going anywhere," Sophie says before taking a sip of her champagne.

I shrug.

"It's nothing. Now join me if you girls want, I figure I'll go mingle. Kill a little time before tonight."

I think this is technically a sports bar? I don't know. The crowd was diverse and likely had people from all over the country in attendance. Stepping back into the lobby a few guys cheered my arrival while most remained focused on their own conversations and company.

I glanced around, spotting silverware on a table beside me where one woman was with her partner/sibling/whatever and I guess had just finished eating what looked to be a salad on one plate and chicken tenders on the other. Reaching over I snatch a butter knife from the edge of the table.

"Hey!" the woman protested awkwardly.

Ignoring her I use the knife and begin tapping it hard against the bottle in my hand like it was a cowbell. It made a noise but it was definitely not loud enough to be heard over the mass of people talking in the background.

“HEY EVERYONE! IF I COULD HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, JUST ONE MORE TIME! EVERYONE!”

I didn't feel like screaming again but sometimes that is just what it takes to pull in the herd. I was at least getting the crowd's attention easier.

“Thank you, I apologize for distracting you from your festivities but I at least wanted to say I hope you're all having a great time. This weekend is a special one for me, I am a wrestler for Supreme Championship Wrestling, if you didn't know and we're having our biggest show of the year! I am also celebrating my induction into our sport's Hall of Fame! Now, it's happening in Toronto but that's in Canada and if I am going to have a party, I'd much rather it be where the women are the hottest and the weather is always nice. There is nowhere I'd rather be tonight than right here in Miami!”

This got a positive response as people popped. The random blonde dude from earlier screamed something that I guess could have been ‘I love you’. I didn't ask for that.

I think for a split second before nodding and glancing back up and around the people around me. I have to smile with glee.

“On top of that,” I continue. “My brother Damian is coming here tonight and he just got his first huge deal as a director for a new Warner Brothers movie that he will be casting for next year! If it's not too much, please, by all means make the man feel welcome when he gets here! That's all, by all means, enjoy the drinks, enjoy the food, enjoy yourselves and if you want to join the party anyone and everyone is more than welcome to come back here to the VIP section!”

More cheers. Great, that was easy. People are easy. Setting the butter knife back down on the table the woman just stares at it awkwardly briefly before turning away. Overhead I could hear the change in music as some shitty club remix of a song I have never heard begins playing. I make my way toward the back to rejoin my present company. Ravyn and Sophie were having a conversation and I had no clue where they were in it.

Ignoring my taste in music I try to act in the festive mode while going back to chug mode on the bottle I had been half finger banging the whole time I was shouting at a room full of people.

Rolling with the track I bend down as low as I can go at the knees, squatting down to being just a foot above the ground. Moving my body in a wave I raise one arm up with my hand making a fist while mouthing off pretending to know the words.

“Are you having a seizure?” Sophie asks.

“It resembles a neanderthal mating ritual carved into caves in Eastern Europe,” Ravyn says. Ignoring their petty jokes I stick with the rhythm waiting to see what comes next. The alcohol was beginning to hit me like a brick as everything loosened up mentally and physically.

Before I knew it a crowd had joined us. Ravyn shifted as two men sat down at the table across from the two women and I felt someone lightly grabbing one of my arms. A female voice began slurring an attempt at congratulating me. Another was asking if my brother was really casting for his movie.

“Yes. He absolutely is.”

I counted eleven people. There needed to be more liquor bottles. Probably. I had practically finished one in fifteen minutes. I wanted the sweet release of death.

I felt somebody gently grinding up against me before pulling back. I glanced over to make sure it was a woman. She laughed before casually grabbing my sore arm and saying something I couldn't hear for shit.

I didn't need to, I could pretend. It wasn't going to be anything significant or meaningful.

Turning around I saw a few more stragglers approaching our table. I'd have to keep track. I don't know how many could fit into a limousine later or how many would want to.

All the words being muttered blurred together and I considered where to take things next when a voice came in from behind me. It took a moment for it to register.

“Austin!”

Blinking, I turn around. A single bead of sweat had formed along the side of my head. I hadn't even noticed the dramatic rise in temperature or the fact some titty monster was grinding on my hip. That's a hell of a blanking out moment.

Damian stood there with his hands in his pocket and he appeared miffed.

“Damian!” I responded cheerfully.

“Is that Damian? Oh- Ask him- Ask-”

“HEY DAMIAN. CONGRATULATIONS!” The men at the table shouted in unison.

“WE LOVE YOU, DAMIAN,” shouted one drunken woman. Another one, more intoxicated than most apparently rushed over and practically threw herself at him.

“Are you still casting for your movie?” She says while pressing her chest into his arm.

He glanced at her before peering at me now flustered.

“Austin... Can we talk?” He asks.

“Hell yeah we can talk, brother!”

He pressed his bottom lip into his mouth while turning his head briefly before focusing fully on me.

“Alone?”

Well that was no fun.

“Absolutely!” I respond, trying not to bring the mood down.

I start to pull myself up from where I had been halfway squatted over. I wasn’t sure what alone would constitute considering the size and number of people here. Gently patting the girl now standing beside me on the arm I wink at Ravyn and Sophie. Ravyn was leaning back with her arms crossed as one guy was trying to talk about something. I could only imagine how riveting the conversation was. Sophie for her part was holding up a cigar and twirling it in her hand and clinging to another glass filled with champagne on the table.

Damian leaned back, his eyes telling the woman trying to push her tits into a fictional movie role to get lost. Glancing around I motioned for him to follow me. We stepped into the bathroom. Damian peered around it before sighing.

“What? You said alone, where else was that going to be?”

“Did you really have us come all the way down here to take part in a spring break-esque misadventure?”

I blink, unsure initially how to respond. I mean that wasn’t how I viewed it but that was a fine way of putting things.

“No?” I responded lacking conviction.

He shakes his head, glancing up as if deep in thought.

“Austin, do me a favor. I am not asking for a lot. Just be honest with me. Be honest with yourself.”

I hate that name. It was our father’s name.

“I am honest.” I shrug. “Mostly.”

This was going to kill my mood, I just know it.

“I’ve been watching you week in and week out come out on the air playing the biggest buffoon imaginable trying to grasp where you could possibly be coming from. With no shame or reason you do what you want to do with no regard to anyone else around you.”

The dream.

“What happened to you?” he continues. I hate having to look at him now. He seemed pained. If it bothered him now there were years of reference material he could go through. This wasn’t an isolated point in my career. I was the lone ranger of debauchery and douchebaggery.

Sighing, I debate just burning another bridge. What is the point? I want him to be happy but if he thinks he’s going to ‘save’ me, changing me to be his idealized brother, he’s out of his fucking mind. I hated that too but at some point it was going to come to a head. All he wanted to do was have these awkward conversations.

“I don’t know little brother. What happens to anyone?”

“I know we didn’t have it easy growing up, everyone has their demons. We definitely had ours, but are you really the person you wanted to be?”

I am so conflicted with this line. I was literally about to be given the highest honor you can be given in wrestling, the profession we grew up romanticizing about being a large part of. I was one of the most recognized stars in it. I made great money, kept what I deemed great company and as he stated, did whatever I pleased. How is that supposed to be a bad thing from my perspective?

It was a moral question. He was ignoring what I’ve accomplished, instead wanting me to critically judge my own character. From his standpoint on ethics.

Not like it mattered.

I was a clinically depressed sociopath. Knowing this does nothing in itself.

I’ve spent the majority of my life hating myself more than anyone else ever could. No matter how joyous the occasion I’ve torn myself apart for every second of it needlessly. Simply because I am fucked in the head. It’s a tick I cannot rid myself of, it’ll likely never truly go away.

A terrible miswiring.

I did everything for the memories, at least that’s what I’d tell myself. Never truly feeling much in those moments. But with memories, my mind could trick itself into believing everything was better than what I initially felt.

It was a game. Often requiring a lot of self-one upmanship.

“It’s been almost twenty years, little brother.” I smile.

Between self medicating at the best and worst of times, beyond the mindless self indulgence of an addict, an adrenaline junkie, a shameless hedonist, there was no way I could ever meet his

or anyone else's standard. If there was a switch I could flip and change that, I'd probably just blow my brains out had I the nerve to flip it. It wouldn't do good for anyone.

If it was anyone else asking me any of this, I'd mock them. I'd laugh in their face. And lie. Because only God can at the end of the day judge me and expect me to care. I don't believe in the cloud man so even that is just a throwaway line.

"I am not a kid anymore," I continued, considering my words carefully. "I can't even remember the kid you knew, much less be him."

And I am drunk. It's really hitting me. Did I not take the bottle with me? Did I seriously put it down back out in the lounge? I really want more. More is great. Less of this. More of that.

"I know it's been a long time. Believe me, I know. I admit, it hurt when you admitted you never once even bothered looking for me."

I wanted to get snippy but it wouldn't have helped anything. It's a two way street, I mean I have been on national television for the last fourteen years.

Being honest, I am glad that didn't happen before now. If he thinks I disgust him presently I'd have probably had Sophie and I rolling his home and selling everything he owned for dope when my connection with Winters was cut after he retired. I can barely remember anything from 2009 to 2012. It's just one over-extended blackout. An era simply titled Greaternity.

There was a bus. I remember the bus. We all partied every night taking advantage of the fact a movie star turned wrestler didn't believe in going it alone and feared sobriety more than death. Ethan, Memphis, Adam and Alex. Alex was never the same since. Was happy to see him a few weeks back. I seriously thought he died.

Post 2012 it only got dark. I was no longer employed with SCW. Shawn's money stopped being a group commodity. I was pretty much a drug-addled petty criminal. If this wrestling thing hadn't worked out after a rehab stint in 2015 I can only speculate on how much worse it'd be now. Would he really want to know what the last twenty years has consisted of?

I am recalling squatting out of a house like something out of Fight Club and picking up anything and everything willing in between pawning anything not nailed down to score more drugs.

"Can you just tell me what you're expecting at this point?" I say wearily. There were scantily clothed women, a lot of mind altering substances and loud music to get back to. I don't

need my brother slowly coming to a realization that he probably hates me and hopes I fucking die. That would probably be the only thing we agree on.

“I want my brother back. My family. Do you care about these things anymore?” He asks.

“I-” I had to stop briefly. That pause didn’t help the solemn expression he wore on his face. “Our family had given up on me a long time ago. I don’t even blame them. Gramps, mom, Sean, Joel. I didn’t share their vision and I was a very unruly child. Later on, they wanted nothing to do with me and after a while I wanted nothing to do with them. So honestly? No.”

“What about dad?”

“Pffft. *Daaad?*” I had to refrain from laughing for real. “Haven’t seen him in thirty years! He’s probably dead. If he isn’t, he’s about as dead to me as one can be.”

“You don’t mean that. Growing up that was the one figure we wanted more than anyone. Did you ever look for him?” The expression on his face felt somehow so hopeful. Do I ever wear that expression?

I was flabbergasted at this point.

“What? Don’t be absurd! It’s not like the man didn’t know where we were. Lived in the same house we were born into. He left us, it wasn’t our job at that point to play Where’s Waldo! He never had a social media account, that was as far as I ever went.”

Was he seriously talking about our father? I wanted that man in my life more than anything. A long time ago. A lifetime later I couldn’t care less.

“He had his reasons,” Damian said sternly. Was he serious? “Austin, look. I found dad. To be more precise, he found me.” The smile he bore said it all. His prayers had been answered and he had a grand vision.

It took a moment to register that. This was a ghost from my childhood, I hadn’t seen the man since I was six.

I am too old for this.

This suddenly felt like a little too much. I was beginning to feel resentments I had happily forgotten over the years.

Why does he want to do this? Why do I have to be some bad guy he wishes to reform like he is some kind of missionary? Why couldn’t he just be my brother? Where is my God damn bottle of Elijah?

Did I finish it?

“Austin, we can see him. Talk to him. Really try to work this out, you’re not alone anymore.”

Rubbing my palms into my eyes, I lean down briefly before dropping my arms and glaring back up into his eyes. He just looks so innocent and determined. He’s thirty-two years old and still the same child is tucked away in there. What kind of life have you lived, little brother? Why do you have these sentiments still, how sheltered have you been? How is this the driving force behind your existence?

That child in me died a long time ago. I was the one that killed him.

“I am sorry, little brother. I don’t know what I was thinking. I was joyous to have you back, one of the few people I ever cared about in my youth. I hated Sean. I hated Joel. Mom was just trying to do her best. A rather cold woman unfortunately and our bond was severed a long time ago.”

“I know.”

“In my head, I pictured us spending time together, you know? Doing all the things we wanted to as children. Not playing with action figures out in a field or just riding our bikes talking about it.”

I remember those years better than my twenties. It’s a wonder I can remember anything at all I suppose.

“I don’t think... I don’t-” Speak clearly you stupid drunk. “- I’m sorry. I’ll always be your brother. Maybe I am childish. I am certainly not the person you wanted me to be. I wanted to believe we could just pick things up and regardless of... Differences just sort of- I don’t know. We’re not compatible.”

“Are you *serious*?!”

Maybe I was blinded with hope myself in between trying to kick every hornets nest in proximity for kicks and giggles with my partners in crime. I wasn’t being honest with myself or him. He had these hopes and I was just dragging them out.

I wanted to believe we could just hash things out. That he could love me as the older brother he did back then.

“I wanted to believe we could just be the siblings we used to be. But I have changed. We’re entirely different people now. I am sorry I don’t meet your standard but there are people in my life now who I don’t have to apologize to for it. I need to get back to them. Later this week I will

be celebrated for being the piece of shit you view me as. What I built a life on. Maybe it isn't good. Maybe I am the bad guy. But it's good enough for me."

We were interrupted at that moment by a man barging into the bathroom and rushing to a urinal. Surprised he was somehow the first dude in need of relieving himself in the time we've been here. There must have been multiple bathrooms.

"Love you, little brother. Take care of yourself." I start to step toward the exit. I looked away from him, I don't think it would have hurt him as much if I had just decked him in the face. His vision or dream of what this was supposed to be, the only complication was me. He wasn't going to be able to save me. I didn't want to be. The last thing I wanted was a face to face with my father.

I'd be more inclined to hit him immediately.

"Don't go out that door! Get back here, we aren't finished!"

The man at the urinal turned around awkwardly. He looked between Damian and I.

"Wait, aren't you the director? Could I do an audition?"

Damian looked at him briefly confused and angrily before turning away, opting to ignore his very existence.

I reach the door before he suddenly reaches over and twists my shoulder around forcing me to face him.

"Are you really giving up?"

Giving up on what? A childhood pipe dream? It died when the child did.

"Say hi to dad for me I guess. I don't have the stomach to do it myself." I try not to frown.

Pulling away from his grasp I leave. He doesn't push it further at least.

Hello sadness, my old friend. I try to push that entire encounter out of my mind but the feeling remains the same. I guess I am depressed again.

I wondered if he would follow me back to the VIP section. He didn't. As I approached the small group of people that had decided to join us based on the open invitation to do so I forced myself to smile.

"Did you all miss me?"

Pulling out my phone I checked the time. It wasn't quite eight o'clock yet, so there was time to spend here. The bottle of Elijah was sitting empty on the table. There were more bottles that

had joined the array of what I guess could be considered the initial starter pack. Sophie glanced up and made a face while puffing at a lit cigar.

“Who does this remind you of?”

“A cartoonish Sophie James?”

Here I was hoping I’d get him to chill out for the evening. Oh well.

“Wasn’t that your brother?” Ravyn suddenly piped in. I turn to her while rushing toward a bottle that wasn’t completely empty. I didn’t see an empty glass so the bottle was going to have to suffice instead.

“Oh yes, we were just catching up. Glad to hear he’s doing great. Unfortunately, he doesn’t do well with crowds like this. Was never much of an outgoing partier.” I smile while raising the bottle up and tipping it back.

“Hey, you’re getting another one right?!” Sophie practically demanded. I fall back a step unintentionally before catching myself. Didn’t realize I had grabbed the last champagne bottle. What are labels?

“Sure.”

I am momentarily distracted by someone hooking my arm. I peer down at an unfamiliar face.

“Welcome back!”

Did I meet her before? I don’t know.

Five foot nothing, I felt like I could practically pick her up and launch her across the room like a dart and hit a bullseye.

“And what’s your name?” I ask reflexively. I am not remembering it. I don’t even know why I bother to ask anymore, I am terrible with names. Intentionally and not.

“I am Rylee.”

Yeah, I’ve already forgotten it.

We're oh so close to the big event. A spectacle that comes once a year where we all just want to be the best little versions of ourselves that we can be!

And what a treat the world is in for! For the first time in years there is an actual main attraction involving the Tag Team Championships. It took a special duo to really spark the division back to life again. Oh my! It wasn't the House of Thot. Gosh, what's their name again? I believe it was a dumb name, dealing with movie ratings. Something X. Something, something, something.

X-Force?

X-Factor?

X-Files?

I believe this team was in fact rated X for mature audiences only. If only I could remember their damn name.

Ah well.

What's in a name? Truly?

Some people believe there is power in a name. The words we use to refer to ourselves. The sentimental meaning in them. I find it fascinating. How simple One must be!

I suppose I never personally looked into my own powers. What power does the name Ace Marshall wield, I wonder?

I think this is something that comes from generations of people now fully grown being idealistic nerds getting too wound up in comic books and words from authors. Like Batman!

I am the Night! I will strike fear into the hearts of all criminals!

Makes for a suspenseful comic book arc, I guess? I never cared for them myself. They are like soap operas for children. Another form of entertainment. I kind of lost interest as a teenager right around the time I lost my virginity.

I suppose some names hold more sway than others in reality, but that sentimental punch they are supposed to carry, really is for the individual. Where they mean everything to you, they mean absolutely nothing to me.

For example, I don't care in the slightest if Kirsten Scott goes by the name on her birth certificate or if she goes by some random number. This symbolism may be the key behind her entire identity. I just see a very confused individual who wants to be viewed as a bigger badass than she has been able to prove herself in being.

You were an enforcer? Like part of the mob? Are you going to go ice killer on me? Smoke my fine ass and throw my carcass into a lake while there is some type of anvil tied to my legs? I am just a comedy act, right? Never accomplished anything by myself? I am nothing to you?

Good. When you're defeated by nothing, what is your excuse then I wonder? What will you call yourself then? Will you feel any sort of vindication?

What would Emma think? Is she still alive? Dead? I don't know your stupid story, you're trying way too hard to be this mystical being and it's all just an insufferable act. Like mine!

These bread crumbs you give for this story may be the most fascinating thing in the world to you. I can only imagine how you dwell on this self-inflicted drama in your free time. I really wish I didn't know these things. Your little sit down interview was just filler between two matches likely very few people cared for!

I cared however. Just enough to see where it would go.

For as much as Selena thinks she was saving the tag division, she was inspiring people for greatness, I too had this desire! Her methods unfortunately weren't very effective, were they? It took a running gag and... What was it? A coattail hanging wife to bring life, yes. It took those two forces combined to rile your feathers and get out of you a desire to really start shooting for the stars!

You're welcome.

Kirsten. One.

Can I call you Kid or Kitt like your family used to? Did you murder them too as a special enforcer to the Yakuza? My God, I should be terrified, huh?

How silly of me not to know my place. Oh whatever will you do to me? Promise to make it hurt? I do have a bit of a masochist in me. It's just one of many kinks! I got a rise out of you, it's only right you get the rise out of me!

I do wonder where you'd be now had Ravyn and I not taken the time to reconnect with Nicole during your little spat with The Playgirls. Had we not taken them on first, would it now be you and Nicole fighting it out on the pre-show with Lexy's furies and whatever that other team is?

I really do hope you're thankful!

Ravyn and I already have a bit of a history with Nicole, we're very happy to include her new special friend to the fold. See, despite how little you think of us, I do see you as a wonderful addition to this spectacle! Prove yourself worthy! Be the best little you that you can be!

Now I do hope you understand that while you're dead set on calling Nicole Pro, that's just a voice in her head. Names have power, so we should use the correct ones, right Kitt? While you

get to randomly change yours, Nicole has no control over herself. Whoever she was meant to be, whatever her dreams may have been, they have been hijacked and taken by random personalities you decided to befriend.

By all rights, your 'friend' has committed the most disgusting acts imaginable in robbing a woman of her free will, in both mind and body. I've been an asshole from time to time, but I've never done anything that heinous!

Another reason I should be scared I suppose. You're not just an enforcer for the Mexican Cartels, you're besties with a soul hacking imaginary friend. It's the epic tale of Dr. Jackal and Ms. Hyde!

The fans cheer for her and lap it up happily, never acknowledging her state for what it is. Nicole is a captive casualty. A horrific tragedy.

Will the voice in her head controlling her be able to control herself and actually wrestle a match?

We'll find out! It's the finer details like this that make normal matches pure spectacles.

Ravyn is a bit more rational than I am. We both want to have fun, but she does like having other goals and motives to achieve wherever she's being told to spend her time by booking.

Me? I am a bit easier to please.

I want to be the highlight of the show. I want the match people cannot refute as being the absolute most must watch imaginable. An attention whore with a need to validate myself through entertainment. Some could say, my own entertainment and they wouldn't be wrong.

It's selfish of me, I know. I guess we're all monsters in some way, huh? As much fun as it was taking these wonderful belts away from Deanna and Selena Frost, it's fun to imagine just how far everyone will go here. No one is clean or perfect in this match. The very moral dilemma you

*paint yourself to be followed by the absolute hypocrisy laying in the other corner with 'Statera',
I do think this will be the highlight of Rise to Greatness by a mile.*

Don't you?

We're just in disagreement over what the result is going to be.

*While we may be two people 'unable' to do anything by ourselves in your mind, I guess it's to
our advantage then that this is in fact a tag team match where we only have each other to rely
on, huh?*

*Between your need to validate yourself more than anyone in this contest followed by the absolute
nut you're paired with, the fantastic ease at which we agitate everyone and their mother and our
skills- or I guess lack of skills according to you- I cannot wait to once again give the world what
they tune in for.*

*See? I am not an entirely selfish person. We're very giving, very hospitable people. We've
instigated and inspired you to be the very best that you can be.*

So what if it's just to shut you down and rub it in your face?

We're still pulling the very best version of yourself out and giving you a goal. Hope. Desire.

*All that good stuff you're hoping to use as sentimental garbage when you tell us more about your
stupid names. If names are to hold power, I suppose then it's time I empower mine and make you
remember it.*

Come time for the show? You'll never forget it. I am Ace Marshall and we are Greatness!

You aren't rising to shit.