

Chapter 1: Hear Me Roar

I stared mesmerized at the image of a lioness feeding on its prey. Slam after slam battered both wrestlers, almost signaling the TV antenna to come off balance and muddy the signal. A swift bash of my fist to the TV later and the final moments burned themselves into my brain. Chyna had captured the Intercontinental Championship, a feat never done before in the WWE. At that moment, my budding adolescence changed forever.

As soon as the bell rang on the TV, the signal went dead again and never returned. I was staring at static.

"I'm gonna be the champ when I grow up." I whispered to myself, not knowing the consequences of the red pill I had just taken.

When my 14th birthday came and went, I was a bit disappointed that I wasn't afforded any wrestling related gifts. Eureka, California was a pretty close-knit place; it seemed like everyone and their mother knew each other. Perpetually waiting for other kids to show up to my birthday parties became a pointless endeavor after the first two times since my 13th birthday. My father rarely pulled me away from the TV when he knew I was studying a fine art. He would even show me the photographs he had saved from classic moments like Bruno Sammartino winning his first championship, and Hulk Hogan body slamming Andre the Giant. On the other hand, my mother shut herself off from everything I said and thought about wrestling. She questioned me and my father about what this could mean if I wanted to actually be a wrestler.

No matter how many times I reassured her, my mother wouldn't listen to any of it, perfectly contempt with sticking to her home cooking.

My father used to work for a growing tech firm, researching these new, magical tools called computers. His pay was very handsome for his work and he usually came home with lots of electrical components. One could imagine how my mother would have felt with a bunch of computer parts strewn across the dining table an hour before dinner. Pretty soon, my father came home with an actual computer. He stepped through the front door and turned his head to me. The second I turned away from watching a wrestling match, my father knelt down and placed it in front of me.

"She's yours, Sylvia."

My hands shook in excitement and confusion, probing the computer, searching for any obvious way to use it. Luckily, my father let me have my moment and then took me to my room where he taught me the ropes. He showed me a giant, toxic green motherboard, the processor and the RAM sticks to make the computer run properly. It was a dream come true for me, knowing that the Internet had only recently hit the market.

As soon as we got the internet working (and not at a horrific latency), I did all I could to learn the ins and outs of this wondrous spectacle called wrestling. I studied how they trained, what they ate, joined my high school's amateur wrestling team and learned basic techniques. The training regimen they used was brutal, like something you would find at an Icelandic strongman contest: vigorous drills to tone and strengthen every muscle and every tendon to surpass human capacity. Dumbbells weighing in at ten, twenty-five, fifty pounds littered my room, eventually replacing the plethora of board games and N64 cartridges. Suffice to say, my

father wasn't particularly fond of his money being used this haphazardly or enthusiastically, but my determination seemed to keep him at bay for that short time.

Then, my focus shifted to nutrition. I found myself dropping the usual suspects: sodas, cookies, cake, and any sugar-heavy foods. My diet forced in the presence of whole grain pasta, skim milk and copious amounts of the rare electrolyte-infused water. Turkey and chicken were the select main courses for most of my days, with healthy sides of broccoli and/or spinach. It took me a while to warm up to the new and alien-like meals; the taste was so radically different with every meal (thanks mom) that it was a grab bag what quality of a dinner I would get. Mornings started off with a cookie cutter diet of either a single banana or other fruit, or a cup of greek yogurt. Whenever I could absorb those precious antioxidants and proteins, I had it on me in bulk. Almost every day, I would pester my parents about how many exact calories there were in each and every food item they served up. In essence, I became the primary nutrition expert.

A half year of that painstaking work, and I was ready to pick up the art of actual wrestling. My high school had an amateur wrestling team, ranked third in the state championships last year. Because their team was mainly guys, though, I found myself wrestling the guys more often than the girls. I struggled just trying to grab ahold of any of their weak points; they'd respond with brute force. Grappling wasn't an option, so I had to resort to strikes. Our coach didn't take too kindly to it, but he saw the merit and suggested that I go to the local gym and work out there. Then and only then would I get the right training to perfect my strikes and maybe improve my muscle strength.

I ended up following through with his advice which regrettably meant I had to drop out of our wrestling team. My gym membership lasted a whole year for about \$30 a month, a pretty sweet deal considering how little allowance I was afforded. The day job as a barista did little to help add onto my pay. As soon as I got my first week of training started, my phobia about how

gyms looked, felt and smelled all went out the window when I arrived. It had cleanly arranged, state-of-the-art equipment, with wide open spaces and almost too proper air conditioning. Other people who were there working out were all various forms of fit and unfit; one guy was even laying down on a resting bench, drenched in sweat. At least some of the machines were open, and plenty dumbbells were available, so I started with those. Each one weighed a ton from my first time lifting one up.

I lifted each one with great fervor, thinking it was a WWE championship belt that had suddenly been outfitted with 50 ton barbells on each side. Within hours, I could feel my tendons burning from within my arms, screaming out in confident pain with each pull. The regimen continued on with a half hour of leg exercises, ranging from everything between squats to the horizontal seated leg press. Tag on a little core exercises and hour long cardio runs, and my first week could be described as a day spent jogging through hell with an elephant on my back. My body slowly learned to accept the pain and endure it, and by the end of the first couple of years, I felt unstoppable and indestructible.

I came home each day giving updates on my progress, too. My father, who would be sitting in his chair watching TV, would always be there to see how I was doing. He'd have a smile on his face every time I said I gained "X" amounts of muscle, or jogged an additional half mile. Everything I was doing was of interest to him. He even gave me some tips along the way, for the days where I felt like I wanted the Earth to open up and eat me. Surprisingly, he knew a lot more about exercise than I thought each time I went home. At one point, he said that making a custom, homemade wrestling ring would be the best way to get actual beginner practice to professional wrestling as no promotion would willingly give up their ring for nobody wannabes.

When he told me that, I nodded with enthusiasm and spent some time researching what would go into that.

In Eureka, there's plenty of materials just lying around for miscellaneous use. No one would miss a random plank of wood, right? I wasn't liked or disliked by anyone, though, so no one would even care if it was me. When my parents slept, I went out to the local recycling center and hauled back tons of metal, wood and other assorted pieces that looked like they could make a ring. My father eventually found out about it, but wouldn't do anything to prevent it. I knew the dangers in setting up a wrestling ring solo, but it didn't matter. Wrestling was going to be my life, including pains and tribulations.

Actually setting it up, though was hard in its own right. For one, the damn thing took up so much of my time. I wanted good grades in school, but I barely passed with D's and C's. Even classes I liked and had a side passion for like Computer Science and Digital Art saw my grades plummet from sheer truancy. My friends would question what I was doing that whole time and when I answered "I'm going into professional wrestling", they laughed. Maybe they believed it or maybe they didn't but either way, it wasn't stopping me.

The second difficulty of setting up the ring was how the hell any professional wrestling promotion started off building those things in the beginning. Doing something solo is tough, for sure, but you'd think all the dedication in the world and a worse version of a wrestling ring wouldn't take that long. I'm no construction worker, but some of the makeshift blueprints I saw online had me doing flips and tricks just trying to get things like the ropes tied up. Turnbuckles, the canvas, the drapes on the sides, and even the three foot tall stairs on all four sides took at least double the amount of time I was expecting to devote.

Halfway done with construction, I noticed some kids who skid their bikes down in front of my house.

“Heh, what is THAT?” One of them exclaimed with a popsicle looking like it was trying to escape his mouth. *“Is that a wrestling ring?”* He called out to me as I was building.

“Yeah, I’m gonna be wrestling in this thing.” My naive but straightforward answer didn’t seem to change their opinion.

“But isn’t wrestling a guy sport? They’re supposed to be strong!”

“Yeah, and? Are YOU strong, uh... who are you?”

“Pfft... Carlos. Yeah, I’m strong. I’m a wrestler!”

“Then wrestle me.” I said with a straight face to him, halfway out of the ring’s ropes. He hesitated, still with that stupid smile on his face, but finally got off his bike.

“Alright, but I’m not wrestling in that thing!” He joked, pointing a cocky finger to my excuse for a wrestling ring. *“Tell you what: I’ll wrestle you when that thing is done!”*

“Deal.” I smirked and stared him straight in the eyes as he rode off. I’ll never forget the look on his face as he entered the ring: so full of confidence and determination. I think it might have fueled me even more.

Something about that kid struck me as odd at the time, though. His face was recognizable, like he was a wrestler legitimately but grown up and wrestling for a super professional wrestling company. However I thought about it, I couldn’t seem to pinpoint where I had recognized his face from.

A little bit more work on the ring was needed, plus a handful of time trying to make sure the ring was secure enough to withstand the moves of two rowdy teens. My father occasionally came outside to help too, thinking it would be used by me and me only, with the exception of maybe a punching bag. Nothing I said or wanted to say gave away that I would be having a legit and impromptu wrestling match with some random kid who came across my shamble of a wrestling ring. Hundreds of little pieces and edits later, and the ring was finally ready.

Early in the morning, I was doing morning stretches in the ring. Then, I could hear the sputtering of a car's engine rolling down the street. Carlos came back, this time in the backseat of a silver car with goldish rims; the thing looked like something you'd find in a Beverly Hills parking lot. The passenger door swung open and Carlos hopped out, in a white and green singlet and amateur wrestling helmet. Out of the driver seat came a man with a familiar lucha mask, also in white and green but with a hint of orange in the shape of a flame on his cheek. A curious look for whom I could only assume was his father.

"We're here!" Carlos called out, whipping out his white mouthpiece case.

"Yeah, you and... your dad?" I pointed to the man coming around and leaning against the car's hood.

"Alejandro Medina." The man answered in a gruff voice, folding his arms to show off his blocky arms and chest. *"El Fenix. Four time champion."*

I gulped at the sound of his record.

"Carlos tells me you challenged him to a fight, eh? That right?"

"Yeah..."

Carlos chortled into the sky. *"Hahaha! Oh, that's rich! A chica like you wants to wrestle MY son? Heh, we'll see. Show 'er, Carlos."*

Carlos nodded and rolled into my ring, shoving his mouthpiece in and hopping up and down in place. He stared a hole through my head, looking like he was ready to charge at me and tear me in two.

“He’s already won two tournaments so far. You sure you wanna wrestle him?”

I hesitated to answer him, staring back at Carlos, analyzing his style and posture.

“Yup.” I blurted out without another thought.

“Haha! This’ll be fun, then. Let the match begin!”

Carlos rushed at me without warning yelling “ding, ding, ding!”. There wasn’t even a ref in the ring and Carlos hadn’t agreed to that. Instinct kicked in and I pushed him back halfway across the mat before he got me in the corner. He clambered back up and into a full sprint, but I quickly dodged it and sent him flying into the turnbuckle shoulder-first. His shoulder cracked hard under the pressure and he was hurt bad. He stumbled backward into my reach letting me wrap my arms around his body and lifting him up for a suplex. I exploded my body upward as hard as I could, firing him far over my head. His body felt like a feather to me, and the back of his neck crashed to the canvas like a brick. I shot up and spun around to see him struggling to get back to his feet.

I rushed at him again, keeping him pinned with a stiff knee to the gut. Quickly, I pulled his head and the rest of his body up and got him up onto my shoulders. His fists swung at me while he was up there, albeit kind of weak after the punishment I gave him, and he squirmed like an octopus. Then, I swung him around counter-clockwise and slammed him with a vicious F-5, inspired by Brock Lesnar. He crumpled over to its side as he came down, his mouthpiece tumbling around on the mat. Stumbling back into the corner turnbuckle, I breathed heavy as

Carlos got into the ring and clamored to get his son back to his feet. There were little words exchanged between me and them as they both left the ring and got into the car.

"I guess I AM strong." I growled with confidence and a smile as they fled the ring. Carlos laid Carlos sort of on his side in the passenger seat and sped off with a sharp skidding of his tires. Something fell out of Carlos's singlet as he got into the car, however. I went out and picked it up, wiping off the dirt and skid marks. It was a flyer advertising an independent wrestling tournament just outside of Eureka. Big names in the wrestling industry were going to be there: Sabu, Rob Van Dam, Jake "The Snake" Roberts. Those names alone screamed to me that I needed to attend. No, I needed to participate - and win.

Within minutes, I rushed back into the house, ignoring the breakfast that was laid out on the dining table. I scurried back into my room and onto my computer, almost tipping it as I sat down, and looked up local wrestling tournaments. Sure enough, it was listed: ten miles away in Calville at 1 PM.

"Sylvia?" My father was in my room without a knock. *"What's going on?"*

I turned to him to answer, but I was too out of breath.

"Is something wrong? Why're you tired?"

"Long jog... hah..." I answered in a raspy voice. *"Wrestling tournament... Calville..."*

I pointed to the computer screen to which my father investigated. After a minute, he gave a nod and a pat to my shoulder.

"I can drive you there if you want."

“YEEEESSS!” A long winded reply came out of my throat. He rubbed my back and walked out of the room.

“But first lemme get you a glass of water, at least.”

Chapter 2: A Wolf among Wolves

The tournament was the definition of a backyard wrestling get-together. Crowds of hundreds were encircling a single wrestling ring on an open grass field. Some had lawn chairs they brought from home and coolers with stocks and stocks of beer. I was the only one from my family to be there, of course, aside from my father dropping me off an hour before the tournament started.

I found the event organizer sitting at a makeshift table with the sign “Registration” hung over on a piece of lined paper. As soon as I approached him in my low-rent Shield gear (it was really just a kevlar harness over my usual amateur wrestling gear), he looked up at me with a tweaked eyebrow.

“You here to wrestle, kid?”

I shot him the same kind of doubtful look he was giving me.

“...yeah? You gonna sign me up or what?”

He spun his pen and hovered over the paper, but paused.

“Ya know there’s at least ten other guys wrestling in this tournament, right? Yur at a pretty big disadvantage here.”

It was a miracle I didn't just sock him in the face. I took a glance at the ring, where two of the competitors were already duking it out.

"Nah, they are. Sign me up."

The event organizer scoffed as he slumped in his chair.

"What's yur name, kid?"

"Sylvia."

"Sylvia..."

"Arzt. A-R-Z-T." I didn't wait for him to finish writing it down. I had a tournament to win.

The air was dry during the whole tournament; why they couldn't have it indoors puzzled me but it didn't stop me. Tents were set up all around the ring, just beyond the audience's seats. I was informed by several event organizers that we had only those tents to prepare and set up for our matches and that brackets would be available for viewing in each one. Assigned to me was tent #8, one of the closer tents to the ring, with a clear straight path towards it. Each one was set up like that to allow for wrestlers to make their own personalized entrances right from the get-go.

As I approached my own tent and looked around, I caught a glimpse of Sabu talking to one of the organizers with a clipboard. I half walked and crept over to them, peering over their shoulders at what looked like just another bracket. Sabu, being the hardcore freak of nature he is, snapped to me as I leaned over. I flinched, making all three of us flinch. A deer in the headlights, I froze up and tried my best to not stare at Sabu for too long, knowing how famous he was in extreme wrestling matches.

"Can I help you?" Sabu grunted in a sort of "matter-of-fact" voice. He was scanning me up and down as I pretended to collect myself as fast as he did.

"Is that the... bracket you're looking at?" I went forward and looked over their shoulder again.

"Yeah, what's your name, girl?"

"Sylvia. Arzt." I replied immediately, like a soldier at attention.

"Mmm... there you are." The event organizer mumbled. *"You're after these guys in the ring now... against, uh... Leo Dandy."*

I scoffed at the name, thinking he was going to be some flashy amateur who didn't know a thing about wrestling.

"That's a silly name."

"Yeah, well it's a silly sport." Sabu responded, again with his grainy and serious tone.

"Why'd you sign up in the first place, then?"

I pursed my lips. *"To... be the best wrestler in the world? Like anyone else?"*

Sabu stared blankly at me, then smirked.

"Hey, kid." He sighed and gave me a light tap on the shoulder. *"You know about ringnames, right?"*

I shook my head.

"Alright, listen. Every wrestler's got a ringname - except John Cena. Helps protect your identity. You don't have one though, right?"

"Nope."

"Hmm... Alright, what are you like in the ring?"

"I dunno, energetic?"

"Mmm..."

"I'm good at tossing the guys around."

"Wait." He put up a finger. "Touch on that again, you wrestle with the guys?"

"Yeah. I kick asses."

"Got it. Anything unique you do with the guys?"

I shrugged and gave a cocky smile. *"I like to talk trash to them and then outwrestle 'em."*

He said with a snap of his fingers. *"Siren."*

"Siren? That's it?"

"Yeah. You're tough, you wrestle the guys, you talk trash to 'em. Siren."

I gave it some thought, running it through my head multiple times. *"...Okay, I like it."*

"Nope." Sabu said as he turned away. "You gotta love it."

Immediately, my mind ran through ideas of what it would be like to be in the WWE with that kind of name. Siren. Big, giant, green letters on a black background. Electricity. A crazy-looking smile from ear to ear. It was perfect. I imagined myself lifting the Intercontinental Championship high above my head, with my music blaring in excitement and celebration. My heart fluttered in the thought of it as I returned to my tent.

I stepped out of my tent just as my name was being called. Everyone's eyes were on me, waiting for my grand performance. Energetic. The shock of having so many eyes on me made my hands shake. My gaze fell to the ground, initially in nervousness, but then I threw my fists up and out, and bellowed as loud as I could. Feet stomping, heartbeat racing, breathing intensifying. At full speed, I rushed toward the ring and slid along the apron, stopping just short of the turnbuckle. With a vice grip, I hopped over the ropes and gave the crazy intense eyes to a

random spot in the audience, who cheered. The ropes needed to be tested so I gave them a firm tug. Nice and tight.

I spun around and locked eyes with my opponent: Leo Dandy. He was dressed in plain yellow trunks and a singlet. He was pretty big, maybe about 190 pounds or so. His hair was unusually yellow, in strips and then in face paint down the sides of his nose. From the looks of him, he seemed like the kind of burly yet fast cruiserweight, capable of high flying moves and working at a fast pace. Still, I hopped back and forth in place, psyching myself up for the fight.

All of a sudden, ding ding ding! The game is on. I rush at Leo, entrapping his legs and taking him down pretty easily. I keep his head in place as I rain down punches. He pushes me off and stumbles into the corner. I run full steam into the opposite corner and ram into his gut with my shoulder, taking the wind out of him. The crowd was already on their feet. Chants of "holy shit" and "this is awesome" erupted from the audience as I continued the one-way beatdown. Every move Leo made, every swipe he took was countered so smoothly and with such grace. I felt like a ten ton feather in the ring. In no time at all, Leo was almost out of it. I had to finish him off with some kind of finishing move. My mind was strangely acting simple at that moment, so I left Leo stunned and upright in the middle of the ring. I charged at the ropes behind him and leapt back, hooking my legs over his neck and under his waist and tilt-slammed him face first into the mat. It got a good reaction from the crowd. One. Two. Three.

The heat of the moment was too good to savor for just that moment; the ref raised my shaking fist into the air and I yelled at the top of my lungs. It felt like there was a ten-ton brick on my back as I crawled out from under the bottom rope. I stumbled all the way back to my tent,

blood pulsing in my eyes and my whole body. It was a miracle I didn't collapse from the internal pressure as soon as I went inside.

I had won my first wrestling match.

To this day, I still don't know what the next hour comprised of. It was more than a blur; a whirlpool of ecstasy and physical agony, happiness and nervousness. Joy and pain consumed my body, my heart seemed like it would burst out of my chest and to the rings of Saturn. I put a hand on my forehead and it heated up within seconds. My phone was buzzing with a call from my father, but I couldn't find the strength to reach over and pick it up.

Before long, however, there were people flooding my tent. Many of them buzzed on about my victory, asking how hard it was and whether or not I thought I would win. I shooed them all away and straightened up on the bench. Finally, I reached over to my phone and checked the missed calls: three, in 30 second intervals. My father seemed pretty ecstatic about the victory, but never got a chance to tell his daughter how he felt about it. With the rare window of time I found to myself, I collected my thoughts and got up in front of the punching bag.

My next match was soon.

Within hours, the tournament went from being just another exhibition of local talent to a county-wide spectacle. Apparently, no one had ever seen someone like me take on so many competitors at a time and defeat them. I made passing glances outside of my tent to see that the audience seemed to grow in size from little over an hour or so of the tournament. Word was going around fast and I hadn't realized it at the time. None of it made me think any differently, though and I returned to practicing.

Then, my name was called again to the ring. I made my usual entrance, now seemingly natural to me, and I made my way to the ring. Awaiting me was a much more built wrestler, in black shorts and a leather vest. His hair was slicked back like he was straight out of the Grease movie. The referee announced him as "Slick Johnson", a playful reference to something I wasn't aware of at the time. He was announced at 240 pounds, definitely someone I didn't expect to see at a local wrestling tournament. Still, it didn't phase me.

The bell rang and the match was on. Slick opted for a test of strength in the middle of the ring, reaching an open hand out and inviting me to grab hold. I chuckled at the sight and obliged. With a tight grip on his hand, I twisted it with my entire force, which leveled him; he lowered himself to one knee in shock of the strength I had and he got around me pretty easily, getting ready for a suplex. As he lifted me over his head, I reoriented myself to give him a leg drop as I came down, right across his clavicle. He bounced and I got him up again, getting ready to lift him onto my shoulders. A scream left my mouth as I pushed upward with all my might, my cheeks puffing up as I went. Cheers erupted in the crowd and everyone got to their feet, amazed at the show of strength I possessed. In one fell swoop, I slammed him down on the back of his neck, just enough to not have him shatter his entire spine.

One. Two. Three.

The match ended even quicker than the one with Leo Dandy. I shot my arms around in short, powerful air punches, celebrating my victory and flawless streak in the tournament so far. Audience members were applauding me as I went back to my tent, hand over my neck to relieve the pain of lifting a 250-some pound wrestler. It was hard to believe that within a few hours, I was single handedly and decisively defeating local wrestlers in no time at all.

Victory after victory, I wrestled my way to the final match: a fatal four way. Me versus three other guys in a free for all brawl for the championship. One of them, however, looked awfully familiar. He was wearing a white and green lucha mask, with a blue flame on the cheek. I eyed him just as much as he eyed me; we knew the stakes and what we were going after. The championship belt wasn't even that impressive of a belt, really; only held up by duct tape in a few spots and spray painted to look vaguely golden. The ref held it high for the audience, now maybe tripled or even quadrupled in size, and left the ring. Soon, it was just the wrestlers and the bell to give the imminent chaos the green light.

Within seconds, the masked luchadore came right after me in the corner. I slid my legs under the bottom rope and shot my way around the ring to the opposite side. He gave chase while the other stayed in the ring and fought the fourth guy. Whether or not I knew it was a "no disqualification" match, I flipped the ring apron up and reached under the ring. Any weapon I could grab was going to be a good weapon against my attacker. The first thing out was a kendo stick, tightly bundled together bamboo sticks that sting like hell against the skin. Perfect. Without warning, I sliced downward with the kendo stick onto the luchadore as he came at me, right between the cheek and the shoulder. The crowd let out groans and gasps as the CRACK rang out.

I hesitated, watching him writhe in pain on the ground. Then I felt a pair of tightly held fists coming down onto my back, sending me to my knees. Before I could retaliate, a stiff kick to the gut floored me outside the ring. My new opponent, someone in purple and red, crawled back into the ring and gave a serious blow to the fourth guy. In pain and still with the kendo stick in hand, I crawled over to the apron, pulling myself upward. The lucha behind me popped up and tackled me against the apron before I could get in, though, grounding me again. Pain coursed

through my core, but wore off within seconds. Scrambling back into the ring, I charged at all three men with my kendo stick, wiping out all of them with only a couple strikes.

I was the only one standing amongst the trio and the crowd was eating it up. Suddenly, the luchadore sprung up and lifted me up for a powerbomb. There was no time to react, so he slammed me down hard, knocking the wind out of my lungs. Strength left my body and he covered me, hooking my legs.

One. Two. Three.

The bell rang and he got up, holding his arms high in the sky. Championship gold was presented to him, and he held it up high for the world to see. Everyone lit up in either jeers or cheers. My lungs were huffing and puffing, playing emergency for my whole body in tandem with my heart.

“Here is your winner: Fuego! Leeeeeon!”

Fuego Leon; Golden Lion. Of course that was his name.

For the record, professional wrestling is a sport dedicated to putting on a show for the audience. I know that now, but looking back at my history, I don't think my younger self quite knew that yet. You're not supposed to intentionally injure your opponents in the ring (unless you really want to make it look like that). That said, I took immense pleasure in imagining what I would do to him the next time I saw him in the same ring with me. When I got to my knees, he and the other wrestlers had already left the ring and went back to their tents. The people in the crowd that had remained gave me a standing ovation, even as I stumbled out of the ring and to my tent.

By dusk, the ring was torn down, the tents were being packed up and people were heading home. The only ones that remained behind were some of the other local wrestlers who were reminiscing on what they did wrong. As I exited my tent with my gear, Carlos crossed my path, with his father Carlos next to him. He eyed me and scoffed.

"Hey look, son: it's the chica who said she was 'stronger' than you." Carlos gloated, giving Carlos a strong pat on the shoulder, who reciprocated.

"Yeah, loser." He looked like he was really close to spitting in my face, or at least on the ground in front of me. All I could do was stare back at him with a hateful gaze.

"Oh, what are you gonna do? Fight me? Lose again?" He bumped up the belt on his shoulder and walked off. *"I'm the champ now!"*

I watched as they walked off to their car and drove away. Tears started welling up in my eyes, but I wiped them away before anyone could come by and notice. My phone buzzed again with a call from my father, but I clicked the hang up button; I didn't feel like it was the right time to talk. There needed to be more time to practice and train for if I saw Carlos again.

As soon as I was about to leave, Sabu and some other folks who had ties to some big name wrestling magazines and radio shows came up to me.

"Good wrestling out there." Sabu said warmly. *"These guys wanted to know if you wanted to swing by their gyms and train with them in maybe going to the WWE or other indie shows."*

I eyed all of them, still with a vengeful look in my eye. Maybe they were off put by it, but I didn't care.

"Sure." I said, walking off without little more than a handshake with them.

Years and years went by in a bit of an endless spiral of perpetual budding wrestling life. Every day, I would train and wrestle with myself and some dummies in the ring. I'd eat proteins like I was mad. I'd spend most of my time researching wrestling techniques from all the greats like Bret Hart, Chris Benoit and Kurt Angle. When I turned 18, I took up the offer Sabu made and joined up with a number of indie promotions. They were all eager to have me wrestle under their names. After joining up with a few of them and hopping in between, I got really good at working almost four to five star matches with near anybody I wrestled with. The art of kayfabe, or keeping the illusion of competition up, was one of the major things I learned about on the indie circuit, but probably one of the hardest as well.

To be an effective wrestler, I learned that you had to earn the respect of your fellow wrestlers in the company. No big bumps or moves to make yourself look like a star. You had to follow the plans as they were made and act accordingly. Luckily, my abilities convinced most I met that I was worthy of being "put over". My energetic wrestling style and in-your-face attitude got many people excited to see what I could provide next. Most of the promotions I wrestled for even gave me the industry rare opportunity to wrestle men, as I quickly wrestled through all of the women I had faced off against.

A year later, when I turned 19, I met a guy from Idaho who had heard of my exploits in the indie circuit. His name was Victor "Ironman" Marcussen, a heavyweight. He moved over to California to make it big on the west coast where his name would get more appeal. It just so happened that he joined up with one of the indie circuits I was working for at the time. At the opportune time, he caught up with me a while after one of my matches.

"You're Siren, right?" His Dutch accent bled through a little, but his English was pretty on point.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Victor." He outstretched his open palm to me, to which I obliged. *"I heard of your time in the circuit. I've been working on getting over to the WWE for awhile now too."*

"How do you know I'm going-"

"I read your blog."

"That... would do it." I nodded and stared down to the floor. *"You looking to tag or what?"*

"Tag team?" He lit up at the idea. *"Hell yeah, I'm down."* There was no trouble in giving me a confident smirk.

"We gonna be tag champs, yeah?"

"Wouldn't go that far, man." I held a hand out to him. *"We just met. I gotta see how you wrestle first."*

"Alright, wrestle me. Legit."

I paused in surprise. *"Straight to the point. Okay... Meet me in an hour in the ring?"*

"You got it."

We met up in the ring when the audience had left, but before the building would close up shop for the night. I had my trusty kevlar vest and pads, while he came to the ring in blazing red and orange shorts. The fiery pattern wrapped around his legs and down to his ankles, making it look like the fire was oozing down his legs. He was pretty well built too top wise, maybe weighing in at 260 to 270 pounds.

"Ready?" He asked, getting into position in his corner.

"Yeah, let's go."

We rounded each other in the center of the ring and locked up. Immediately, he overpowered me and slammed me to the ground with a strong thud. I quickly rolled over to the

side and got up, ready to strike his side with my leg. He shot his arm around and caught it as fast as I threw it, and pushed me down. Without a chance to recover, he swung me on my belly and got me in a twisting ankle lock. The pain shot up through my leg and to my core and chest, and I let out a rigorous and prolonged groan. Suddenly, he let go and knelt down to me.

“Sorry, that was a bit rough.” He gripped my foot firmly. *“You’re not hurt, right?”*

I brought my foot past his hand and closer to mine, giving it a gentle rub. *“Nah, doesn’t feel like it. Goddamn, dude, you have the strength of a bear.”*

“That’s why people call me ‘Ironman’.” He said as he got up and offered me a lift up.

“C’mon, can you walk?”

I grabbed his hand and shot up, putting some weight on my ankle. It was pretty painful to put pressure on it, but nothing seemed broken or out of place.

“I’m good.”

He seemed to accept that answer and walked back with me to the locker room.

“So, that tag team deal?” I uttered underneath my drawn back breath.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, maybe it can work. I’m the striker, you’re the grappler?”

Victor paused in thought and then nodded. *“Sounds good.”*

“Good. See you... here later, I guess.”

I wrestled him a couple more times for practice, and he was as good and consistent as he said he was. There was rarely a time where I could push my body far enough to get him up and over with a suplex. We paired up in plenty of matches with other indie stars, but more importantly, made a name for ourselves in no time at all. Victor even took it upon himself to travel with me wherever we would go; it’s like he was following me just because. Every

promotion we went to accepted us, of course, and our legend grew with each passing match. A couple championships here, a broken wrist there, some broken tables and we were finally setting our sights on the WWE's Performance Center.

At this point, I had bought a new laptop, way better than the old one I had at home. It was packed with a processor twice as fast as my old one, 16 gigabytes of RAM and a powerful graphics card too; the thing made me feel like I could run every wrestling simulator ever at once. I used it initially to keep in contact with my father, and age wasn't being too kind to him; he looked about as old as the wrestling legends he had admired in the 60s and 70s. Once we figured out how to run video conferences, we were connected within seconds.

"Hello?" His voice crackled through the built in speakers. *"Sylvia? How're you doing?"*

"Doing good, dad. How 'bout you?"

"As good as my legs will keep me walkin', heheh..." He leaned to his side and coughed for longer than I would have expected.

"You okay, dad?"

*"Yeah... *cough* my lungs have been putting up a fight with me lately. Diagnosis was pretty lenient, now that I think about it."*

"Mmm..." I leaned in with my hand against my neck. *"Did you get an estimate?"*

"Huh? Oh no, not a specific one. The doc said 'maybe a year or two'."

I gulped. *"Let's hope for the latter, than."*

My father went silent for about five seconds before rebounding and cracking a smile.

"So how's wrestling going? You get into any big league promotions yet?"

"Not too big, no." I sighed. *"WWE's still the main goal, but... I joined a few indie promotions so far."*

"But you at least sent an application in, right?"

“What?”

“An application! You just said you went to some indie companies, so why not take the big step up?”

I paused and leaned back in thought. *“... You’re right.”*

“Course I am.” He chuckled.

“Okay, well... I’ll send in an application soon.”

“Great; I wish you the best of luck, honey!”

“Thanks, dad.” I smiled as I went over to close the call. *“Bye.”*

I whipped up a quick document and studied the requirements and qualifications for being at the Performance Center. Most of it was stuff I had most definitely already done on the indie circuit. Unique identity, though, stuck in my mind like a sore thumb that I felt needed to be finalized. Through scouring the entire internet, I carefully pieced together the image I made in my head at the tournament in Calville.: that green, menacing-looking smile and the font for blaring out the illuminated word “Siren”. Soon, draft sketches of my outfit were coming out. There would be more than just kevlar on my torso, I’d have military-style boots prepped for in-ring usage, each of my arms would have deeply cut out sleeves with fangs protruding outwards. Everything I wanted on my person would scream “DANGER” to any opponent I faced, and the audience.

Finally, my character was constructed. I sent in the full application to the Performance Center and patiently awaited a response. Since I had just quit the last indie promotion I was at and was alone in my hotel, I decided to get in touch with Victor. Considering how physically strong he was, I thought he’d be a perfect candidate to apply with me, just so I can have a little company and he can grow bigger. With haste, I called his phone number and waited.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, Victor?"

"Siren? What's up?"

"Yo, I just sent in my application to the WWE's Performance Center. You wanna apply with me?"

Victor paused on his side of the phone call. *"Why?"*

I responded with a pause of my own, processing what he just said. *"What do you mean why; don't you wanna make it big?"*

"Yeah, I do but..." Again, another pause. *"Our tag team? Our partnership? It ain't gonna happen in the WWE."*

"What do you mean 'ain't gonna happen'?"

"You don't know? Vince doesn't like mixed tag matches. He doesn't even like women like you. You're meant to just wrestle other women over there. I dunno how you're so excited over that."

I let my mind wander a bit, analyzing the situation Victor had laid out. *"Well... Vince doesn't know me. I'll prove it."*

"Good luck with that." He said in a defeated tone. *"I mean, I can apply with you, but I'm just sayin'..."*

"I know. Don't worry about it; I'll be fine."

"Alright... I'll apply soon; gotta finish up my last matches for next month."

"Alright, tell 'em I said 'what's up'."

For my 20th birthday, I spent it hanging around my hotel, saying parting goodbyes to the staff and treating myself to some delicious Japanese style ramen. Another month went by with complete silence, a whole month of more training and rigorous exercise to prepare for the Performance Center. Then, finally, an email popped up in my inbox.

Dear Sylvia,

We're thankful you have expressed interest in the WWE. Since 1952, the WWE has been dedicated to providing the best in sports entertainment to the world. Fresh, new faces like you help keep that tradition alive to this day.

After reviewing your application, we would like to bring you in for an interview some time next month to gauge if you'll be an ideal addition to the WWE family. Please reply if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Thank you!

I pushed myself back in my chair and let the energy soar through my veins. My heart started racing, fluttering the longer I stared at the letters on the screen. Before I could catch myself shedding tears, I lurched back forward and wrote my reply. Ensuring I was available at most times throughout the week, I sent the reply back and packed my bags.

I heard things about the WWE's brand NXT headquartered in Orlando at Full Sail University. It's a smart crowd, one that knows who went where, what they specialize in, whom

they've wrestled for and against. My kind of crowd. It was the next big step up from the Performance Center and thus, was my new goal. I've learned how to sell a match as real, working my muscle memory to memorize the attacks and defenses for an entertaining bout. Now, it came down to the biggest of the big: the WWE.

The moment I walked into the Performance Center, I could tell something was off. The building was way bigger than I would imagine, almost stretching 50 feet into the air. Rings made of black and goldish-yellow accents were being tarped over to prepare for the day's wrestling. The few workers' faces I saw didn't look like any of the recruiters I had talked to. I set my bag down near the front door and took a seat, not opting to look at my phone but to observe the ring I would be fighting in. The ropes were tighter looking, much more rigid than those I was used to in the independent scene. The mat was neatly arranged so that no wrinkles or bumps were anywhere a wrestler could trip over. High quality build there.

"Excuse me, are you Sylvia?" A voice breaks the silence. I see a man coming up to me in a really formal dress shirt, blue tie and silver Ray Ban glasses. I pop up to meet him.

"Yeah, Siren. You my recruiter?"

"Yup, good to meet you. Let's walk and talk if you don't mind; I'll give you the grand tour."

I lift up my bag of gear and follow him into an office off to the side of the building. There's nothing overly spectacular in it, however, save for the numerous pieces of wrestling memorabilia. The first Intercontinental Championship belt awarded to Pat Patterson, a legit golden trophy with the silhouette of a man giving another man a suplex, and a whole host of wrestling action figures. Though it was all very reminiscent, I couldn't help but stare, eyes glazed and determined, at the Intercontinental belt. The contrasting blue-coated globe covered

by a plate of solid gold shot off the black leather backing with a glisten of jewelry on the side plates. It was the picturesque image of a championship made to make its bearer look like a million bucks.

“Fan of old school wrestling, huh?” The recruiter snapped me out of my stupor with a smirk. I let out a relieving sigh as I sat down across the desk from him.

“Yeah, it’s a badass looking belt.”

“Glad you have such a keen interest in it.” He retorted, taking out a stack of papers from one of his drawers. He laid it on the table and flipped through it with careful hands, all while I sat motionless and eager to await his next words.

“Alright...” He finally piped up. *“So, Sylvia Arzt.”* The slow reading of my name ticked me off a bit, but I gave him a confirming nod.

“They call me Si-”

“Siren, right?” He interjected immediately. *“Yeah, I know you. Darren scouted you for a while when you were in the indies. You’ve probably seen him or... at least... heard of him, right?”*

I simultaneously nodded and bumped my eyebrows up. *“Hell yeah, William Regal. Heard good things about him being a trainer and all.”*

“Well, you heard right. No better place to train for the WWE than here.”

The recruiter then flipped to another page in his stack of papers and clicked a pen in his hand. Hunched over it and not lifting an eye to me, he asked, *“So, what’s your schedule looking like? Can you make it in for training every day?”*

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Okay... and how would you describe your proficiency in maintaining kayfabe?”

Admittedly, I was thrown off guard by that question. I never took into account how far-stretching my need to maintain an illusory veil over my attitude would be.

“Well...” I cleared my throat. *“I try to keep my in-ring personality and my outer personality the same. Energetic, insane, nonsensical sometimes, you know.”*

The recruiter noted that with precision and with a slight nod.

“Mhmm, tell me a bit more about that, because... if I heard right from Darren, you had a bit of a tendency to let that personality go a bit too far. Can you elaborate?”

“Okay, well... Sometimes I go off the deep end, but only to give the audience a bit more flavor, right?” I extended my arms across the desk in a beckoning position, in the hopes that he was understanding me. *“It’s all about entertaining the audience, right? So sometimes I push the envelope to keep them engaged.”*

No vocal response from the recruiter. He kept writing it all down, for some hypothetical nefarious purpose in the future no doubt.

“Okay, that’s all the questions I had for today.” He stood up and extended an open palm to me. *“We’ll expect to see you in here tomorrow?”*

I obliged his handshake with a glint of confidence in my eye. *“First to arrive, last to leave.”*

“Excellent! See you then.”

And thus, my career in the Performance Center began.

The night came and went in no time. Morning shone over on my first day with the WWE. This time, I brought two gear bags: one filled with weights and other strength building tools and the other with nutritional snacks to keep me up. I entered the building once again to witness the three wrestling rings set up, but now with a couple other wrestlers gearing up. Among them was

William Regal, Darren, giving pep talks to the recruits. I saw other WWE legends around too: Matt Bloom, Michael Cole looking on from the sidelines, and a plethora of indie managers and trainers in the ring, waiting for the contenders to show their stuff. It was like my dream came true twice and then did a front flip to triple itself. I couldn't help but crack a smile for that brief moment, overlooking the landscape.

It was also the first day of me debuting my signature protective mask to the WWE. I had mentioned it to some people and hopefully it had made its rounds in the WWE. My mask was my personality visualized: a jet black futuristic mask stretching from cheek to cheek and emblazoned with a neon green smile. It was menacing as it was bright, an omen to any opponent that they were by minimum a plaything in the ring with me, and I was to have my day with them.

One of the trainers eyed me as I entered through the front doors, exiting the ring to greet me.

"So you're Siren, eh?" She scoffed, looking me up and down with hands at her hips. I returned the observant gaze. The trainer had her hair in one giant ponytail, tightly knotted and reaching down to the back of her waist.

"Yeah, ready to wrestle."

"We'll see about that." She chuckled. *"Get geared up and let's get to drills."*

She walked me over to one of the rings, now emptied, and she had me stand toe to toe with her in the middle.

"You know the roll n' step?"

"The who and where?" I joked, but she didn't respond to it.

"The roll n' step." She took a step back, motioning me out of the way. With a lunge forward, she rolled forward and popped up, stepping her left foot out firm and keeping her back straight.

"Like that."

I raised an eyebrow at the drill. *"Wait, that's it? Just a roll?"*

"Yeah, something not making sense about it?"

"It's just... so simple looking."

"And?"

"And... I've done far harder drills in the indies."

The trainer furrowed her brows at me and faced me. *"Listen, this isn't the indie circuit anymore. What you learn here is what you're going to be doing here, nothing else before that."*

"Alright." I sighed and shrugged. With ease, I rolled through and came up with my left foot out, identical to how the trainer demonstrated. Still, she didn't seem to be impressed or satisfied. Roll after roll and she still watched over me.

The way WWE does their wrestling drills isn't all that different from how I usually did them to get myself prepped in the indie circuit. They were just longer and with more of a focus on specific form rather than practicality and application. It was the first thing to focus on in the indies but still, it was trivial here. I didn't give too much attention to it and gave the best of my best, not paying attention to their specific instructions.

"Hey, hey!" The trainers yelled at me. *"Come up faster! Faster!"*

"No time. You have to reorient and be ready; that's all that matters." I thought to myself.

"This ain't ballet or breakdancing! You're wrestling!"

"Glad you noticed."

"Kip up! Kip up! You gotta be up before your opponent!"

“And if they’re a foot taller than me? No going for the feet or legs?”

Every session of training I participated in, their instruction grew more hasslesome to hear and worry about. It was only the first day, but nothing I was hearing seemed like it was preparing me for what WWE had to offer. I took a rest from drills, barely breaking a sweat from how easy the drills were on my body. When I finally peered up and around the Performance Center, I was noticing something odd: none of the other performers were taking time out of their break time to talk to each other, me included. Maybe two guys shared a chuckle in between water breaks, or people gathered around for food, but nobody was coming up to me and conversing. Sated and hydrated, I was ready to do anything the day was going to throw at me. Sadly, it didn’t seem to care about that fact.

I left training that day pretty underwhelmed. When I got back to my hotel, I immediately went through my usual regimen, building up the usual sweat and exhaustion. It felt like I was pushing myself beyond the limit, with the WWE’s training tacked on. By the time I was done, I had felt like I had actually trained for the day. Flopped onto my bed and imagining the calendar days being ripped off one by one, I closed my eyes and dreamed of the day I’d skip over it all and land in a WWE ring. Patience was a virtue, but one I hadn’t envisioned just yet.

After a few weeks of training in the Performance Center, the actual wrestling matches started popping off. Each trainee had to put on a full-scale wrestling match with believable strikes, holds, grapples and the like. It was to showcase our stamina and ring prowess. Perfect. Whoever showed the most promise and improvement were given priority, save for a couple who had existing relations with current WWE stars. All of the trainees gathered around one of the rings on chairs, gawking at the size of some of the competitors inside. I opted to sit further back, to get a better eye of things.

The first match I watched had some pretty good moves in it, but little emphasis on making it appear as though an actual fight was going on. Maybe I thought it was just because we were trainees, but I didn't let it get to my head. Then, the match was done. One of the trainers took a minute to critique the goods and the bads of the match and then opened it up to the other trainees.

"Alright, what did anyone else see in that?" The trainer shifted his gaze over the mini crowd of trainees.

Silence.

"No one?"

I threw my hand up as I leaned into the back of my chair.

"Siren, in the back."

"I saw you guys tossing around lots of moves, which was good, but I just didn't get a... feel for kayfabe in it."

"Okay..." The trainer droned and crossed his arms. *"Explain?"*

"Like... the moves you were doing were nice and evenly spread out, but I just wasn't buying that it was a legit fight, you know? You can have all the moves in the world but if you're not putting enough believable effort behind any of them, what's the point?"

The trainer squinted a bit toward me and turned to the two guys in the ring with a nod.

"Alright, you hear that? Make with that what you will."

The two trainees nodded and exited the ring, along with the official. All the other trainees dispersed too, without so much as a passing glance. My mind was confused with the apathy of the whole conversation, but I cleared my head soon after as my own training match was supposed to be set for tomorrow.

A good night's sleep later, I returned to the Performance Center, ready to wrestle my butt off and prove myself. I came into the Performance Center to a familiar sight: all the trainees huddled around a ring and awaiting the competitors to duke it out. Though, as soon as I noticed who was in the ring first with the trainer, I almost lost grip of my training bag.

White mask. Green accents. Blue flame on the cheek.

Fuego León. Carlos Medina.

He seemed to notice me too and gave a smirk as we locked eyes.

"Well look who's here! The Niñita."

I stared a hole through his mask as I approached the ring.

"Didn't expect to see you here." He chuckled as I climbed the ropes and got in.

"You two know each other?" The trainer exchanged looks between me and Carlos.

"Painfully." I replied.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the crowd of trainees were inching ever so slightly closer to the ring, like moths to the flame. Carlos kept his eyes locked on mine, still bearing his cocky smile.

"Well, you both ready to start?"

"Yes." I growled.

"Hope you're ready, amiga." He reciprocated as we both circled the ring, eyes locked.

"Don't make me regret requesting this fight."

"I don't intend to."

And we were off.

Right away, he dove for my legs and barely grabbed hold, the same strategy he seemed to have considering how quick he was. Smart move too, with my new moveset involving my

legs. I kicked him off with my other leg, got around him and wrapped my arms around his waist, ready for a suplex. With one giant motion, I hurled him up and over but he landed on his feet, stumbling back to the turnbuckle. The opportunity to charge at him was too great and I sprinted at him full steam. He dodged, I hit the corner turnbuckle and he caught me in the rebound, lifting me up and slamming me in a TKO. Before I could get up, he pinned me down with a knee to my back and got me in a crossface, pulling his forearms up against my face. My spine bent backward as he held my free hand down with his foot. No amount of squirming and wrestling out of it freed me from his pin.

Carlos was good, damn good. His speed was hard to keep up with, his strength was expected in an intergender match like this, and he seemed to know my moveset better than anyone else I had wrestled with. Not bad for someone who apparently showed up here on his first day not knowing how tight the WWE secured its ropes. I didn't hear anything about him for the time I was in the indie circuit, so I assumed he just trained at home as hard as I did.

Thankfully, the trainer called time just as I was sure Carlos would legit snap my back in two. By the time we both got to our feet, we were both exhausted. We ended the match to a round of applause from the trainees - and slow claps from the trainers. I slouched against the corner turnbuckle, breathing heavy and holding a firm hand to my lower back. Carlos was also noticeably tired, but just rest his head backward as he stood in the middle of the ring, eyeing me through his tiger mask.

"Hell of a match, you two!" The trainer exclaimed, giving Carlos a pat on the back. His piercing eyes locked onto mine one more time and then left the ring. He hopped out of the ring and grabbed his bag, packing things into it before strolling out of the building. Before I could even find enough strength to pull myself up from the floor, another trainer came up to me from outside the ring.

“Good fight,” she started, “but something tells me it wasn’t all just for show.”

I shot the trainer a disgusted look. *“You’re right.”*

The trainer nodded and looked away as if the answer was on a whiteboard across the room.

“Take a look at the wrestlers who are on the main roster right now. Carlota Bliss. Sasha Banks. Bayley. Charlotte. You hear about any of them having legit beef with each other?”

I took a moment to let my breathing stabilize, but hung my head again. *“No...”*

The trainer shook her head and ran her hand through her hair. *“That’s right. Now, promise me you’re not going to be the first one out of that list.”*

The pain coursing through my muscles and tendons was too great to give a straightforward and immediate answer.

“Ey! Look at me.”

I turned my head, wincing in agony.

“Tell me you won’t.”

“Fine.”

And with that, she walked off without another word. I couldn’t retort any more through my exhaustion, so I crawled out of the ring to my bag to pull out and take a bite out of an energy bar. I looked around the Performance Center at all the trainees, most of whom had only recently been applauding me. None of them were paying attention to my exchange, no one approached me with comments or questions, no one seemed to even notice I was there. Still with the stinging pain of submission running through my spine, I sat alone, quiet, taking small bites out of my energy bar. It felt like an eternity sitting there, waiting for my body to accept each chunk of

fiber-infused granola and chocolate. Then, when my body was good enough to stand, I took my stuff and went back to my hotel.

The training for me didn't stop, though. I still did my research, pumped my weights, lifted, ran, ate like a champion. Each lift and step I took, I devoted it entirely to getting myself ready for the main roster. I performed the same in my training matches, passed written tests and outshined everyone in my promo work. Now that Carlos was there, I didn't want to stop for any reason. He was a massive roadblock that needed to be uprooted. Researching his history in wrestling brought up very little, however; he truly didn't have any recorded history with indie promotions I had heard of, and the most I could find was his own videos showing his training routines.

They were no more different than mine, focusing on image and cardio more than strength and ability. His cocky attitude bled through the computer screen, boasting about how he was the realest champ to ever grace the wrestling world, and how every title was just waiting to be held by him. The comments on his videos were all of his close friends, no doubt, and/or other general jerks praising his jerky attitude. In essence, he advertised himself as the "greatest of all time". There was even a video of him just tossing around money for a few minutes. Literally. That's all it was. It made me want to punch a hole through the monitor and through to the other end of the world.

Even after that, every week would see him not appear in the Performance Center. It's as if he requested to come train only for that day just to beat me. He didn't show up for training or drills or to watch/critique anyone else's matches. When I tried asking around about Carlos, I got zero useful answers; most just commented on how good he looked in the ring and how promising his future career was going to be on NXT. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find

any trace of him coming into the Performance Center on any day that coincided with mine. I opted to remain vigilant and ready.

Then, word came of contracts being issued to those in the Performance Center. Usually, it was rare for trainees to be directly and swiftly brought onto WWE's indie-like show NXT. It was a valuable and orchestrated time to show our skills and develop storylines to a live audience. I sat in the locker room of the Performance Center on a rare break and stared at the ceiling, waiting for it to spawn a contract to land on my face. All of a sudden, the booming of cheers filled the hallways. I sprang up and pushed my head out into the hallway to see what was being celebrated, but couldn't make out who had gotten their contract. I followed the cheers into the main backstage area, where the trainees were crowded around a computer.

It hit me instantly: there was a camera setup behind the TV, aimed at the trainee crowd. They were recording a pre-taped celebration for trainees moving up to NXT. The newest additions were, of course, Carlos and some other girl. My anger boiled up inside of me and I was almost ready to storm out of the room. Instead, I decided to join in on the fun, knowing I couldn't really do anything immediate about it. I slowly started to join in on the clapping, occasionally adding a celebratory, but weak-willed "woo". As expected, no one really noticed me there and I was just another somebody celebrating the promotions of fresh new talent. It didn't last very long after that; only one other name was read and it wasn't mine. We all returned to our daily routine in the Performance Center and after some time, I was back into the usual rotation.

Then, to my surprise, I noticed a group of trainees huddled around someone familiar. He was staring at his phone with a grin, already rounding up others around him and his phone.

“Siren!” The familiar Dutch accent bled through. *“C’mon, get over here!”*

“Victor?” I smirked as I stood up and walked over to him. *“Hell yeah, dude, you made it! What’re you watching?”*

“This video! It was when the contracts came out.” One of them exclaimed behind tears and chuckles, pointing at the top left corner of the screen. I peered in closer and saw it just as he described: sure enough, I was at the back, playing coy and looking like I had been planted among a group of WWE trainees without any context. The video “me” slow clapped and rolled her eyes, at one point lifting her arms up a little and doing the “raise the roof” motion. Apparently, the guys huddled around the phone were snickering to no end in place.

“Scroll down, scroll down! Show her the comments!”

Before they even did that, I could see how many views the video was garnering. I only had a brief glimpse at WWE’s social media presence, but millions of views on a Performance Center video is pretty unheard of. The top comments weren’t anything to laugh about either. I felt a welling in my chest when I saw the hundreds of comments saying “I came here because Siren” and “Siren planning her wall flower part well”. I kinda chuckled at that one as it flew by. The overall message among all the fans, however, seemed to grow more and more on the group. The more comments that praised me over the others sent the group into deeper silence, still scrolling through the comments, maybe to see if anything was there to comment on the other trainees. Nothing of the sort came. Victor, though, seemed to be the only one still even remotely invested in the video.

“Damn, there’s sooo many views and comments here!” He kept on scrolling through, revealing more and more praisings of my presence and acting. The other guys began to

disperse, eventually leaving me and Victor to ourselves. I pulled up a chair beside him and scooted in closer.

“Lemme see that?”

He handed me his phone and reached for some snacks in his training bag.

“Everyone in the indie scene knows about you. Now they’re here, still following.”

“Hell yeah.” I mumbled, looking at each and every comment. *“Where’ve you been?”* I said, handing him his phone back. *“I haven’t seen you training here for a while.”*

“Well... my application got messed up in processing for some reason. Maybe because they have so many applicants coming in.”

“Yeah, answer them in waves kinda thing?”

“Yeah, maybe. How’ve you been?” Victor gave me a playful hit to the knee.

“Been... better.”

Victor noticed the subtle undertone in my voice and looked at me. *“Something wrong?”*

“Yeah. Yeah, something’s wrong.” I sighed, looking around for any sign of Carlos.

“What’s up?”

“This Carlos Medina windbag.” I leaned in, running my hand through my hair. *“He’s been messing with me ever since I started wrestling. He followed me here.”*

“That’s legit...” Victor trailed off in thought. *“What’d he do?”*

“Took the fight out of me and almost cracked my spine in two.”

“You gonna settle it with him?”

“Oh hell YEAH I’m gonna settle it with him.” I vigorously nodded. *“But I can’t right now, not while I’m still being evaluated.”*

“Got it. You need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks man.”

I gave him a fist bump and peeled away back to the ring, ready to roll through another set of drills. The trainees were all separated and went their own ways, barely interacting with me afterward or at all throughout the day. Most of the trainers noticed the brief discovery of my popularity too, for better or worse; the majority of their time was spent looking out for the newer and less seasoned recruits rather than myself. I didn't mind it, though. I still enjoyed time on my own, occasionally conversing with the passerby in the hallways and learning more and more from my training.

Then came the next day; a massive bomb that came out of absolutely nowhere, and one of the few times I would be caught off guard.

On another hot June day in the Performance Center, I was lacing up my boots for another day of matches to hone our skills on the fly. All the trainers and trainees were present and even some cameras were set up on ringside. They told us that they were filming for a documentary that would shed light on our "stories" in the Performance Center. While it may have started out nice and dandy, things started to go very wrong once my opponent and I started to wrestle.

As soon as the first big moves were coming out, there was barely a reaction from the immediate audience. No one cheered, no one jeered. It felt like we were being looked at like lab experiments with how seriously analytical everyone was being. I focused hard on the moves I was pumping out, again taking down my opponent with ease. As I went down for the final pin, I glanced over to the corner of the ring and saw the familiar figure of Carlos Medina whispering something to William Regal, their backs turned to me. The bell rang, I jumped up and turned my entire body toward Carlos, my fists balled up tight. One of the trainers got me to back up into a turnbuckle to lecture me, but I kept an eye on Carlos and Regal. They would occasionally

exchange glances with me, and Carlos would turn away and whisper something to Regal in short bouts.

“Ey!” My trainer barks at me. *“You payin’ attention?”*

“Yeah...”

“That doesn’t look like a ‘yeah’ to me, okay? Look at me.”

I obliged. My trainer was staring a hole through my eyes. His eyebrows furrowed haphazardly as he moved his hands to draw out motions.

“You can’t be worried about what’s goin’ on outside the ring, alright? You are in THIS ring right now, wrestling your opponent, no one else.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“Show it to me. Show it to me that you know.” He motioned to the referee to ring the bell again. *“Let’s keep goin’.”*

“Wait!”

All of a sudden, I heard William Regal call out, loud enough to grab everyone’s attention but soft enough to not make it sound alarming.

“Siren. C’mere.” He motioned me to exit the ring and join him. An emotionless Fuego León walked away and into the mass of people.

“Kai, take her place.” He firmly ordered another trainee as I exited the ring. I hopped down next to him and put my hands on my hips, again feeling the exhaustion. William and I walk quite a distance away from the rings and into his office.

“Please, take a seat.” He said, closing the door behind us. I let my body fall into the comfort of his black leather chair, the cushions enveloping me and with their softness. William took his seat calmly, like the businessman he was, and leaned forward on his desk.

“Excellent wrestling out there today, Sylvia, I must say.”

“Heh... thank you.”

“Just what I would have expected out of someone who’s been wrestling for quite some time in the indie circuit. Well done.”

His smile soon changed after a brief lick of the lips.

“Ehmm... Do you know why I brought you in here, by any chance?”

I took a moment to stabilize my breathing, staring intently at him, baffled at his inquiry.

“Uhh... no? What, did I... do something really wrong in the ring or-”

“No no, it wasn’t anything to do with your wrestling.” His hands shook in the air, wiping away any initial doubts in my mind. *“Again, your wrestling is picture perfect.”*

“Then... I really don’t know why you brought me in here.”

“Well...” he let out a sigh, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. *“I’ve been informed that you have a history of... drug use. Is that true at all?”*

“Wh-what!? Drug u- I have never used a SINGLE-”

“Calm down, Sylvia. Ca-.”

“No, I’m not calming down! Who said that?”

“Sylvia, I NEED you to be rational here. Let me finish my point.”

My fist balled up, squeezing every bit of anger that shot through my veins. I mimicked him, leaning back and letting out a sigh. My heart was racing at a mile a minute and my mind was in a blur.

“I’m not by any accounts claiming that you currently use drugs. I’ve seen you at your craft and you do good work. Though, that does not mean I can’t just... ignore a claim made by someone else.”

“Carlos was the one who told you that, huh?” My voice grew deeper, angrier at the devolving situation.

"I'm not at liberty to confirm or deny that-"

"It WAS him, wasn't it? That's what you two were whispering about outside the ring just now, huh?"

"Sylvia, again: calm down. I know this all comes as a shock to you right now, but we cannot take these claims lightly, I'm sure you know."

As much as I hated the implication, I couldn't refute him. All I could respond with was heavy breathing and an incredible resistance to not punch the nearest object. The WWE is heinous with their intolerance for any substance usage, even the lowly medication for extreme conditions. I was still perplexed by the idea that someone out there thought I was using drugs at some point.

"So here's what's going to happen. You're NOT going to be suspended or benched, don't worry. What IS going to happen, however, is we're going to have to keep you here at the Performance Center until we can thoroughly investigate this."

I pushed my body forward to counter his points, but he held up a negating finger to me.

"I promise you aren't going to be looked at any differently from any of the coaches; the other trainees are a mixed bag however. How you deal with them is up to you."

By the time he was done with his presentation, I was ready to give my side of things.

"Can I speak now, sir?"

"You may."

"Okay. JUST like you said earlier, you've seen me wrestle and perform at countless promotions all over the world. You've looked at footage of me in and out of the ring with no issues! No issues at all! Every time I'm on camera, I'm at peak performance. There's no WAY I'm on drugs in any of those videos."

“I understand that, truly I do. But what isn’t recorded is the most damning, I’ve come to understand and I’m sure you understand.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“That’s irrelevant to how we’re approaching this. It’ll all come to light once we make sure of it.”

A brief moment of silence laid out over us both, me fuming in my seat and William still leaned in toward me.

“Are we at an understanding here, Sylvia?”

I grimaced at him through my mask for a second.

“Yes.”

“Good. I hope you come out of this okay.”

Without shaking his hand, I left the room and slammed the door behind me. Nothing in my mind or body could stop me from leaving the Performance Center then and there. No picking up my stuff, no saying my “see ya’s” to anyone, and no checking out with a trainer. I went straight to my hotel and stayed there for a day or two, slamming my fists into my punching bag. Sometimes, you just need to let your anger rise out of you and slam it into some helpless inanimate object. I was even one step away from punching a pane of glass instead. Good thing I kept my head straight on that night.

When I returned to the Performance Center with a clearer head than days before, the atmosphere was similar to what William had foreseen. Most of the trainers were doing their thing like usual with the trainees and no one stopped me from entering the building. My mind was in target mode, for better or worse. There was no way in my mind that it wasn’t Fuego León who

reported me to William. I didn't see him anywhere in the Performance Center that day, but I could sense he wasn't that far out of my proverbial reach.

Plenty of other trainees, though, found the time out of their schedule to ask me about the controversy I found myself in. Some of them joked about whether or not I had "rows" ready to go in my bag, or expressed how surprised they were that I didn't stumble over myself walking through the front door. Even as I trained, I heard them mumbling among themselves. Victor, on the other hand, opted to simply watch me in silence. I felt bad for him, but glad too; he had to be the only one directly refusing to get involved with that kind of talk and kept his focus on me. It was around that time when Victor and I were petitioning for us to be a tag team, one that would confidently wrestle as a team as long as we could. We worked best together.

However, whenever I talked to any of the trainers about the prospect, they shook their heads, citing that it would never get approval. Vince was a shrewd businessman; whatever went on under his corporate umbrella, he was expected to have some kind of hand in it. While Triple H was the one spearheading NXT, he was still under the purview of Vince. Back in the day, Vince singlehandedly built the professional wrestling industry as it is today. Through rough mergers and even rougher staff management, he built up stars and star-studded shows for the past 40+ years. The business practices then remained today, but I can be described as a little more than annoyed with that fact.

First and foremost, their drug policy evolved from a simple slap on the wrist fine in the early days to a full on suspension or even firing for as little as pain medication. Huge stars like Brock Lesnar and Roman Reigns suffered similar fates but despite their infractions, they were brought back, enthusiastically too. No matter what kind of outside drug you had, you were going to be punished severely. The WWE learned its lesson from the early 90s; no more drugs were to hurt the company's reputation, or its stars.

As the day dragged on, I noticed some changes to the routine. My practice times were shorter and lot more people were coming up to me asking about my supposed drug use. I either brushed them off or passive-aggressively threatened them, minus those who were legitimately trying to understand the situation. A few of those people enjoyed a sane and stable conversation with me, but those kinds of talks were still few and far between. It was like a cloud hanging over the Performance Center, always on everyone's mind and something they couldn't ignore. It's hard to pick out a specific time in which there was a day where no one mentioned it at all. I can't blame them either; what else would someone do when one of the best wrestlers on the planet right now is suspected of illegal drug usage while in the WWE?

When day turned to dusk, however, the focus shifted from my controversy to big news that had landed in NXT. As I understood it at first, someone from the Performance Center who was called up to NXT had won the NXT championship on his first night. Comments like "Goddamn, he deserves it" and "NEVER would have seen that coming" made their ways through the locker room and on social media. Once I read up on the specifics, however, my blood went from lukewarm to nuclear.

Carlos Medina was the new NXT Champion.

I read every article, every news post, every video, every forum talking about how "Fuego León" was going to be the next "big thing". His flashy, lightweight style of wrestling captivated audiences and it was rumored he was even in line for a main roster call up within the month. His demeanor with the crowd was captivating and his cocky, arrogant style somehow resonated with the audience. It was rare for something like that to occur in such a rapid time frame, since fresh new recruits from the Performance Center were expected to be just that right as they came into NXT. Apparently, enough of the higher ups in the company thought otherwise and

wanted to propel Carlos to the stratosphere and hoist him up as their new face of the WWE. As I was scrolling through the playlist of videos on the WWE's channel, one of the videos stuck out more to me than any of the others.

Léon was being interviewed by an independent wrestling radio station, giving his insight on the NXT championship, his future and a host of other topics. One of those that came up, which Léon himself segwayed into, specifically focused on my controversy.

"Well, here's the thing. Siren's known for wrestling dudes, right? WWE doesn't really take too kindly to that style of wrestling. It looks weird. I mean, who wouldn't think she's on something if she's wrestling like that, against those opponents?"

"Any sane person, you son of a bitch." I growled into my phone, holding it in a vice grip.

"Now, you look at someone like me, the son of El Fénix, Alejandro Medina, mi papi, someone who is bred for greatness, and someone like Siren... there's no contest there. And hey, if she's been doing drugs... ain't gonna surprise me, man."

I turned my phone off and was ready to chuck it across the room. There was no question in my mind that he had spread the initial rumor; he reported me for drug use. It was all coming together in my head, at last. Stuff like this was happening regularly in the industry, but I didn't think it'd happen to me; I was pretty convincing otherwise. If anything, I'd say it was a clever move. Selfish and sure to make enemies, but clever.

Victor caught me as soon as I turned to leave the Performance Center.

"Yo."

"What do you want?" I sighed, turning my gaze away from him.

"Well for one, a contract to NXT or the main roster. But for now, I'd like for this drug stuff to be done with."

I didn't present him with any response.

“Siren. Tell me you don’t use drugs.”

That got him a nasty stare from me, but still no words.

“You don’t, right?” He continued on.

“No.” I snarled at him. My vision was blurring from the tears building up in my eyes. *“I have never done ANYTHING like that. Ever.”*

Victor opened his mouth to respond but paused, noticing my tears escaping onto my cheeks. He nodded and gave me a pat on the shoulder before walking away. It took me off guard and I stood motionless, staring at him as he returned to the ring to practice with the other trainers. I took the moment to wipe the tears away and go home.

The walk back to the hotel was short, but long enough for me to have some thinking time to myself. Something had to change. I had to change. One of the first things I focused on was my temper; punching bags and stress squeeze dolls were helping, but they weren’t enough. Anger management was a step too far, in my mind, so I opted for a simple plan to allot myself the right amount of time. I called in to the Performance Center and convinced them that I was out with a serious medical condition. We both agreed that a week would be sufficient for recovery.

Then came the plan of action: simple meditation. I wasn’t a believer in spirituality or any of the talk of “connecting to another dimension”; the only thing I wanted was some peace of mind for the time being. Through vigorous Google searches and tens of minutes of practice, I finally found myself some time to sit in the middle of my room and breath.

In... and out.

In.... and out.

I cleared my mind. All other sounds and distractions faded into nothingness. The vortex of rage and revenge sunk deeper and deeper into a mental hole I had dug for it. Each breath I took beat back the temptations and triggers that would have normally set me off. For the duration of the whole week, I did nothing but sit in the middle of my room and meditate, with the exception of eating and staying hydrated, of course.

I even found time to fit in ample time to train and wrestle, just like I had done before the Performance Center. Paused were the times in which I had to worry about what other people thought about me or my style of wrestling; practicing alone was the best thing I could have done. My mind was clearer on subjects I was supposed to have learned and picked up on in the Performance Center; I could execute their practices and teachings to a tee on my own, much better than any trainer could have hoped to get out of me.

A week of that kind of training and I was ready to return to the Performance Center.

It was the most serene, yet chaotic day I yet had in that building. The weathered pattern of trainees asking me and gossiping about my drug controversy bounced off of me like hail on a steel house. None of what they said, no matter how negative it was, phased me from practicing to my fullest. Victor seemed to be satisfied with it too, always smiling on the sidelines when I was in the ring. My performance in the ring, both in drills and matches, was off the charts too. Suplexes were on point and crisp, submissions were locked in tight, promos were charismatic and energetic. With every motion I made and every opponent I faced, I felt on top of the ball and the greatest wrestler alive.

When I found the time to take my first break, Victor found me again resting on the benches.

"Well, you seem a lot more feisty today, huh?"

"Hell yeah, dude." I chuckled and took another bite of my energy bar. *"Oh man, these are stale."*

Victor replied with a chuckle a bite out of his energy bar too. *"Glad to see it. What'd you do for that whole week you were out?"*

"Mmm... almost died... n' stuff."

"...died?"

"Yeah. You know, coughing up blood and whatnot."

"O...kay, I knew you were confident but being all 'buddy buddy' with Death is a bit much."

"Ah, it's nothing." I shrugged with a smirk. *"All you gotta know is that this whole drug controversy thing is done. Finished. Out of my mind now."*

Victor tilted his head but had a hint of a smile anyway. *"Good to hear it. You might be even happier with the newest rumor."*

"Oh yeah?" I gurgled, still chewing on a freshly bitten chunk of energy bar. *"Whus'sat?"*

"You're the first in line to get another contract to NXT."

I spat out my bar onto my feet, covering my mouth so nothing more would fall out. *"Wha-you serious!?"*

"Yeah." His smile widened as my excitement level skyrocketed. *"I dunno when, but word's going around that you're getting moved up, probably within the week."*

I slapped my head in amazement and gazed blankly forward. The meditation did more than I thought it would.

Chapter 3: The Blood-Soaked Road

As I continued my training in the Performance Center ignoring doubts about my legitimacy, I kept hearing news about Fuego León's successes in the WWE. I never let up on missing any of his acquired awards: Winner of Most Promising New Athlete, Most Likely to Win the WWE Championship, Most Valuable Wrestler. Every single one of them added onto the hit list of things I would smash through and show myself as his better. I kept my calm with the investigators as they probed my background and history with drug use, unsurprisingly coming up with barely anything to show for it. The WWE wasn't going to get anything concrete out of me. The other trainees, however, didn't see it that way. There's no way to force a human being to change beliefs even if proof is presented or lack thereof. I still performed my best in the ring, but the trainees elected to avoid me, masking it as them "not wanting to get involved".

Apparently, León was in a storyline at the time revolving around him and Kallisto, another of the prominent luchadores in the WWE. They both had deep roots in Hispanic culture and were fighting over which one had the more prestigious legacy. Of course, it sounded like the kind of storyline where León would shine, with his arrogance and self-centered outlook on wrestling. As a viewer, though, I took an equal stance and wanted Kallisto to win, if not to put León in his place. In the end, León came out on top and had moved on to the main roster, still in possession of the NXT Championship. He and the United States Champion were slated to go one on one to see who was the better champion at the Royal Rumble.

The rest of the card was pretty well structured, but it seemed like everyone and their mother was wanting to watch just the match with Fuego León, rather than the main event 30-man Royal Rumble. It had huge star power, sure, but who wouldn't get excited over a match

type like the Royal Rumble? Still, the Champion vs. Champion match was a belter; both men wrestled for an extended length of just under 20 minutes. Thing is, Léon wrestled with the same kind of style he did with me: cowardly. He dove for the legs, got the opponent is rest holds, submissions and any other move that involved as low of an effort from him as possible. Moveset-wise, he was boring to watch, but was still slated to win matches.

Then, of course, he won the match via submission knockout. The Performance Center cheered and chanted “NXT”, whereas I gave slow claps and rolls of the eyes. I was tired of seeing the successes of Léon as they piled up one after another while I was still considered a trainee. All I could really do was wait for the word that I was going to be called up to NXT. NXT itself was supposed to be a great brand to wrestle, especially for wrestlers who have had experience in the indie scene. It was the perfect place for someone like me, but I had to wait.

Not being able to do anything progressive to my career didn't help when I heard even more big news from Léon. This time, everyone in the Performance Center was talking about it, from backstage hands to the trainers to every single trainee.

Fuego Léon was Intercontinental Champion.

Within weeks of his match against the United States Champion, Léon had dropped his NXT title to someone else back in NXT and almost immediately afterward, beat the Intercontinental Champion clean for his title. His astronomical push was infuriating to witness, like a rocket ship blasting to the stars with an engine that wasn't his. Everyone I talked to that would reciprocate talked about how excited they were to see this random guy win the championship and how awesome he was going to be to watch. The fans online, though, started to sound like they didn't agree. Comment after comment said he was boring to watch; his moveset was not at all far-reaching and he didn't seem like he could go in the ring if it were a

real wrestling match. Like me, the fans could smell a manufactured push from a mile away. The only difference between us, however, was that I was ready, willing and able to do something about it.

At this point in time, the art of professional wrestling was sorely sought after. People wanted to see wrestlers who used wrestling to tell stories, get over and naturally become stars. For far too long, people have been fed the 100% face (good guy) versus the 100% heel (bad guy) narrative time and time again. There's been few wrestlers in the WWE with such a large grey area in their personality. Word in the locker room was that Fuego León was one of those potential guys who was called up expecting to be a face early on and then become a heel into his Intercontinental Championship run. In other words, a perfect setup for someone like me to contest him and take the title.

For what seemed like forever, I was in limbo in the Performance Center's investigative campaign against me. Suddenly, I was called into William Regal's office once more. This time, the circumstances were different. He called me in and had me sit down properly, akin to when he informed me of the investigation's start.

"Well, Sylvia, let's not dawdle around the subject any more."

"If it's about the-"

"No, it's not about that. Rather, it gives me great pleasure to announce that WWE is extending to you a yearly contract to NXT."

He slid a sleek, black folder to me across the desk. In the top right corner was a black and gold rimmed NXT logo and a pen slotted above it. I stared at it in disbelief as William sat in silent patience.

"...is something wrong?" He broke the silence finally, snapping me out of my stupor.

“Uh... no, no.” I quickly flipped open the folder and read through the contract. *“I just... this is kinda out of nowhere.”*

“Yes, it is. We looked through the reports and the interviews and we can definitively say that you’re in the clear.” He continued on as my eyes scanned through the wordings on the paper. *“There are some pretty big plans for you in NXT right now, including, as you can tell in the contract, your intergender tag team... idea.”*

Sure enough, in plain writing, the contract was for both me and Victor. We were to actually be an intergender tag team in NXT. I couldn’t help but choke up and rub my temple in wondrous thought.

“This is... this is so damn awesome.” I closed it off with a nervous chuckle.

“I’m glad you’re feeling so excited about this,. Congratulations.” William responded with a smile. *“We’ve been needing a superstar with your flavor of fervor, so to speak.”*

I picked up the ballpoint pen and scribbled incoherent marks that somewhat resembled letters, sliding the contract back when I was finished.

“Thank you very much, Sylvia and again: congratulations.”

“I won’t disappoint, Darren.”

That was a promise I intended to hold onto tightly. Even though he was rough, Darren had the best interests of everybody at heart. I walked out from his office and went over to my workout bench, enthusiastically reaching for another energy bar of all things. Victor noticed my almost bubbly mannerisms and came to sit next to me.

“You look happy. Can I assume?”

“Yeah, take a guess, hotshot.” I grinned, showing off the bits and pieces of chocolate and granola in my teeth.

“NXT?”

“NX-freaking-T, baby.”

Upon arriving at Full Sail University ready for my debut match, I had the pleasure of meeting Triple H, or “Hunter” as the boys liked to refer to him. With the prestigious position of COO of WWE and the boss’ son-in-law, Hunter watched over the development of every NXT talent on the current roster. He had a keen eye for scouting and attracting indie talent to the show, like Shinsuke Nakamura and Finn Balor, now mainstays on the main roster. Word from the other NXT wrestlers mentioned that he was pretty nice to talk to and work with; though, I’d be the one to judge that for myself.

My debut match in NXT was to be against Nikki Cross, who I liked to refer to as “Siren 0.5” when I was in the indies. Her personality in the ring was akin to mine, but her appearance and wrestling ability were as such: sub-par compared to me. When we met to rehearse our match, she was surprisingly cheery and happy to work with me; she had heard of my exploits over the years and was herself eager to face me. Even the spots we went over for the match reflected this; lots of power moves, quick cruiserweight sequences and plenty of energy throughout the match. Nikki was a grade-A “builder” in my mind: someone who was content in their position as a wrestler who let their opponent get big moves on them to gain popularity. I had to be the middle grounder and give her a few spots, but Nikki insisted.

As Nikki performed her entrance and I waited backstage for my cue, Hunter approached me from seemingly out of nowhere. He placed a firm hand on my shoulder and leaned in.

“Just do what you normally do, yeah?”

"Then make this match a no DQ and gimme a kendo stick." I replied with a grin. Hunter also smirked at me and gave me a pat on the back before walking off. The producers gave me the thumbs up and I put on my signature black mask with the green, broken smile.

The lights shut off. A faint whine fell in pitch and exploded in a flurry of electronic synths, pulsing to the image of my green smile flashing on the titantron. I moved up the stage in blackness to my position and waited. Suddenly, spotlights flooded the stage and converged on me, my arms outstretched and my back arched back to drink in the heavenly glow. Cheers echoed throughout the building. My head swung downwards and my eyes locked onto the ring, where Nikki was pacing back and forth in anticipation. Her look made it seem like two hyenas had made eye contact and were now ready to tear each other apart for the last bit of meat. Within seconds, I stomped down the ramp to the ring, cricking my neck constantly to observe the fans to my immediate left and right. With a strong grip on the top rope, I flung myself over and into the ring, immediately coming face to face with Nikki to a furious uproar.

For what felt like hours, Nikki and I stared each other down, searching each other's' psyches and sizing up our respective odds. The crowd's cheers and chants drowned out any lingering noise from our callouts.

"So headbutt into suplex?" Nikki said under her lips at normal speaking volume, confident it wouldn't be heard by the crowd. I responded with a slow nod and widening of my eyes, playing up the suspense. Without warning, I rammed my head into hers, knocking her to the floor to the sound of loud "oohs". Shocks rippled through my head and tapered off down my spine, making me stumble in place. As she fell, Nikki's eyes almost rolled to the back of her head; she supported her weight with her arm and rubbed her forehead with her other hand. My stance over her was firm and strong, and my chest heaved up and down, in and out with heavy

draws of breath. When I peered down at her, Nikki glared back up with a wicked smile on her face, slowly rising up to meet me again. A spot of blood oozed out of her temple and slid down over her eye, dripping off in quick drops and staining the canvas. The audience was eating up every second of it, gleefully applauding the intense opening bout.

Suddenly, I pushed her around and gripped her waist with my arms, pulling up and back with vigorous force. Nikki let out a yelp as she went over and grunted hard as we both slammed into the mat. Before Nikki could recover, I bounced up, spun around and grabbed hold of her legs. With a jumping spin, wrapped my legs around hers and noodled us both into a figure four in the middle of the ring. Launching herself upright, Nikki let out a painful shriek and play-beat her fist against my legs in a bid to escape. I shook my head vehemently, lifting myself up with my arms to assert my visual dominance. Within seconds of applying the submission, the crowd at ringside was slapping the barrier in front of them, chanting "*tap, tap, tap, tap!*"

"Lemme know when you want out." I said to Nikki under my breath. It wasn't immediately clear whether or not Nikki even heard me as she continued to writhe in agony on the mat. She twirled over onto her side, pushed back, reach for the ropes, anything to find salvation. Every inch brought the crowd's energy to new heights. Before Nikki was within fingertips away from the ropes, she tilted her head down a bit and muttered, "*now!*"

It took me a second to react, but I shot up out of the figure four and pulled Nikki up to her feet, ready to give her another suplex. Luckily, I gave her enough time to spin around and whack me with a strong right hook to the head, toppling me to the mat. As I tried to get up, Nikki stumbled over to my head and dragged me up and over to the corner turnbuckle. She slammed my face into the corner, got herself up above me and rained down fake punches just a hair away from my temples.

"1! 2! 3! 4! 5! 6! 7! 8! 9! 10!" The crowd counted along with Nikki's punches until she exploded and laid down even more punches than any human could visibly count. Nikki's punches were well placed, only sometimes making actual contact that could hurt me; I could feel a bruise or two welling up against my shoulder when she got off of me in the corner. I stumbled backward toward her, waiting in anticipation in the middle of the ring. She let out a scream and rose her arms up, ready to strike, but I retaliated. With one big flip, I jumped backward and caught Nikki in my finisher, fulcruming her face down to the mat with my legs. The crowd lit up in shock as I rolled Nikki's body over for the pin.

"1! 2!"

Nikki kicks out. I flip my head up and freeze in mock disbelief. As I rotate my head over to the referee, the crowd is elated, chanting *"yes!"* and overall voicing their satisfaction with the opening sequence. My hand propped up two fingers to the referee, who waved his arms in and out, saying it was only a two. In reaction, I roll over to my knees in the corner and stare at Nikki, scratching my head; she was much more capable in the ring than I thought she would.

I got a closer look at her outfit from my close up view of her. Her green and black vest proudly displayed the Scottish flag on her shoulder and chest pocket. Blood was now streaming down her face and rolling off into small splatters on the canvas; sure enough when I felt my own head, my fingers were stained a crimson red. The lower buttons at the front had come undone, revealing a bit of the loose grey undershirt underneath. Maybe I was spacing out or letting the moment sink in for the audience, but I sat there motionless, only letting my breathing do the storytelling.

I got up when the clapping died down and wandered over to the opposite corner. When I flicked my head up and gave Nikki the death stare as she got up, the crowd instantly knew what I had planned and ramped up their excitement. My breathing intensified, I stomped my feet in

rapid escalation, I hopped in place, pleading, beckoning Nikki to get up faster. She turned around, I charged and dove for my finisher again. Like a cat, Nikki dodged out of the way, letting me fall face first into the mat, and opening my defenses up for a suplex of her own; with great force, she grabbed me by the gut and hoisted me up and over without any support from me. We slammed down and she bridged the suplex on her toes.

“1! 2!”

I kicked out. As we both regained our breath, we let the crowd react again in elation to our performance. We eventually got up and did the rest of the match like any other; moves to show off our skills, rest holds, near falls. Then came the finish to the bout.

Nikki missed a wild right punch and fell to the mat from exhaustion. Seeing the opportunity, I quickly dove on her with punches, making sure she was down and on her back. I clambered over to and up the corner turnbuckle, perched and patiently waiting for the right amount of audience cheers. For the first time, I was genuinely excited about something I was about to do in a wrestling match. At that moment, I envisioned a finisher move that would be so devastating that no opponent would be legitimately be able to kick out. With my back turned to Nikki, I launched backward and bent my knee in midair, slowly rotating it around on a collision course with Nikki’s torso area. She didn’t have any time to react to the strike and simply took it, groaning as we collided.

Fiercely lifting her leg and arching my back over her, I waited for the count.

“1! 2! 3!”

The bell rang. Nikki fell. I rose.

The crowd was ecstatic for my victory even continuing the cheers as I returned backstage. No amount of calming down could actually keep me calm; my hands were shaking

and my lungs could breath in no more than it was already managing. Everyone backstage was giving me a hearty round of applause, albeit with stone dead smiles. Hunter was the first of the lineup and gave me a hug as I was almost about to pass him.

“Awesome job, Sylvia.” He said with a firm pat on my back. *“Awesome job.”*

“...hah... thank you.” I wheezed, on the verge of tears and with a snuffle. Hunter pulled me away and sent me further down the hallway, where more stagehands were waiting to congratulate me. Their smiles were offsetting, though, for some reason. At the time, I imagined that they were simply tired from working the prior matches. For that moment, though, I was happy.

When I returned to my room, I found none other than William Regal standing outside my door, waiting for me with a big smile on his face. Without a word, I walked right into him and let him embrace me.

“Good debut, eh?” He chuckled.

“Hell yeah...” I chuckled right back.

“Good.” He pushed me back and held me by the shoulders. *“Because we have much more to discuss with your future.”*

My smile half wiped away, I looked at him with a quizzical face. *“Oh? What did you have in mind?”*

“Three words. NXT. Women’s Championship.”

Over the next few weeks, I discussed plans with WWE executives, including Hunter and William. My debut match had their attention and they wanted to see me challenge for the NXT Women’s Championship. It wasn’t going to be a short campaign for them, though; they envisioned me taking the championship in a year’s time, just before Survivor Series. The

reasoning for it was that they were going to give me booking that was similar to Carlos: I would be a promising, upstart wrestler with the NXT Championship coming up to help the Women's Survivor Series team against their opponents. Hopefully and with enough viewership, the WWE aimed to have my legacy built up in NXT and put on display on the main roster with all the other NXT talent.

The months following saw me challenge big name wrestlers like Kairi Sane, Peyton Royce and none other than Nikki Cross again. Most of them had previous indie experience and were a pretty good fit for me; each of them battered me in the ring (whether or not they intended to fight legit) and made me push my own limits for the audience. By the time I was through with half of the NXT women's roster, I had the experience of a cruiserweight, middleweight and heavyweight under my belt. However, that was only against female opponents. I still craved for the magical day where I'd get word that my tag team with Victor would come to fruition. Promises of fighting men in the ring hung over me like a mistletoe. Patiently, I waited as each feud of mine ignited and then burned out, one after another. Nothing else at the time mattered to me more deep down than wrestling a guy.

Then, a couple of months before Survivor Series, I get a text message from Hunter.

"Hey Sylvia. We're starting your championship program next week."

I paused, staring at the message in confusion. Then, I typed back.

"Really? Thought you would have me fighting the guys sooner..."

"Plans changed. Things are accelerating faster than we thought."

"Okay..."

"Talk with Adrienne yet?"

"No."

"Right, forgot. She'll fill you in."

“Might be prodding, but I wanna fight the guys, Hunter. When’s the ETA?”

It took Hunter a few minutes of nothingness to respond.

“Still in the work, will let you know.”

“No ETA, then?”

Hunter didn’t reply to my messages after that.

I talked with Adrienne about the Championship feud between us. She seemed pretty excited to give me the title, a sure sign that she was going to be called up to the main roster soon. In the ring, she was absolutely entertaining to watch as Ember Moon; her wrestling was crisp and mixed well with her character. Her mic skills were now decent and she had a good image for the main roster, so it made sense that the championship feud happened around now. Like my debut match with Nikki, the feud would be a definitive squash; I would trample all over Ember Moon in almost every encounter with her, showcasing my strength and wrestling prowess while barely breaking a sweat.

That kind of plan puts me in a real bad mood. In squash matches or even squash feuds, there’s barely any growth for the person being squashed. I had my own goals of getting over and winning the Intercontinental Championship and all, but I also loved the concept of professional wrestling. Each time I got in a ring with somebody else, I wanted to make both of us look like good wrestlers; I saw no point in having only one of us flex our wrestling muscles while the other simply lets it happen. Wherever I saw a chance in helping the business get better, I wanted to make it so. In the WWE, however, that wasn’t the case.

While I saw the flaws in the approach, I still went along with it. Week after week, I’d show that I was smart enough to outwit and outwrestle Ember. I’d attack her backstage to have an advantage in the actual match and I’d move quicker than her to execute moves and get in better

positioning than her. All the while, Ember did very little on her end to combat the strategy; her character simply cruised on through the storyline as if nothing was happening to her. She was champ and didn't need to worry about it. The whole time, the crowd understood that I was the bad guy but still cheered whenever I did anything.

Finally, the championship match came, just days before WWE's own show that weekend. It was considered a lowkey show too, since it wasn't apart of the "Big Four" Pay Per Views of the year: Summerslam, Survivor Series, Royal Rumble, and finally Wrestlemania. I expected that a lot more people would turn out to watch and talk about the NXT PPV as it catered more towards people who actually liked professional wrestling. In thinking that, I came out first for the match, doing my usual entrance performance, but a bit more nonchalant; there was no need to expend any more energy than what I was putting in already. Then, Ember Moon came out, also with a similar function. Yet, the crowd was ecstatic for the upcoming bout. She got in the ring, held the championship up as she stared me in the face. The referee got in between us and pushed us to our corners.

Then, the bell rang.

Ember and I danced around in the middle of the ring, circling each other like vultures to the slaughter. Suddenly, she dove for my legs and pulled me down. With a swift and powerful kick to my gut, she leaped up to the top rope, signaling an early finish on her end. As she launched herself up, I rolled out of the way, making her slam face first into the canvas. Without hesitating, I slammed Ember down with my own finisher, sending the audience into a frenzy as I covered her for the pin.

"1! 2! 3!"

Elation erupted from around the arena as I popped right back up, staring dead center into the camera at ringside. The referee placed the championship in my hand and I raised it up

slowly for the world to see it. I screamed loud into the main camera, my hand shaking in vigor with the belt flying around in reaction. Leaning into the ropes, I spoke to the camera below me.

“I’m the champ now! One more step! One more step, baby!”

With that, I stormed around the ring with the championship held high, reveling in the glorious moment. I even rolled out from under the bottom rope and leaned back into the sea of fans, all sharing my celebration with me. Oddly enough, though, a peculiar chant started in the crowd: “queen of strong style”. The only other person I’ve heard that chant used in conjunction with is Asuka, the Japanese women's wrestler who created a wave of indie love in NXT. She was particularly known both in Japan and in her previous time with NXT as the queen of strong style; her style of wrestling was strike-heavy, making it appear as though all of her offense and defense hit hard and legit. It wasn’t hard to replicate, but the style seemed to now be at its peak with me.

When I went backstage and celebrated proper with those who were immediately backstage, I went back to my room and sat in silence, staring at the NXT Women’s Championship. The glistening gold off of its central plate reflected my mask in distorted reality; my green smile bounced off of it with a neon bloom. I could only see the title as a mock Intercontinental Championship, however; the merit was beyond comprehension for me, but that prestigious white leather that awaited me in the main roster was far more alluring. I rode out the remaining months retaining my title with ease against the rest of the women in NXT, all of whom were equally as willing to put me over to the nth degree.

Chapter 4: Defcon

For as long as I could manage, I made the best out of my initial run as NXT Women's Championship. A champion in any capacity was expected to keep up the public ruse they had worked so hard to maintain in the ring. When I was anywhere near any sense of transportation, clumps of fans would reach out from prison-like blockades, requesting an autograph on something they would most likely sell on eBay (assuming they were too busy to go get a real job). I was intent on having my NXT run be a demonstration of my abilities in front of a live audience, for the whole world to witness; I was going to send a message to the world and the WWE that I was nothing to ignore.

While I was out publicly traveling as the NXT Women's Championship, I was invited to an independant talk show for professional wrestling, and had the contractual go-ahead to say whatever I wanted on air. Naturally, I responded back with an emphatic "why didn't you ask me sooner" and flew out to record.

I walked into the studio, title hung proudly over my shoulder. The greetings agent shook my hand with a smile and immediately handed me off to the host, who did the same. He had a forest of a beard and was wearing a black baseball cap with the Undertaker's logo on it.

"Siren! Glad to meet ya."

"Same, man. Let's get to talking." I said, bumping my title on my shoulder.

We entered the recording studio, a lavish set up with a gigantic soundboard and four mic arms holding studio-quality microphones. The chairs looked like they belonged in a high luxury office building; they even reclined back, making it even more comfortable to lay on your back

and talk about stuff. As we took our seats, the door closed behind us and I saw the producers in the back preparing everything. A countdown timer from ten seconds flashed in the far corner of the room.

"In 3.... 2..." The producer mouthed in the back, signaling one with his index finger.

"Aaaand welcome back to the show, everyone." The host leaned in toward a camera beside us, trained on him. I noticed at least two other cameras further back, one focused on me and the other with a wide shot of the room. *"Listen, I have the most electric, hype-inducing person in the studio right now. She's from Eureka, California. Please, everybody give a hand for the NXT Women's Champion, Siren!"*

I meekly waved at the camera staring at me, its red light blinking on for a few seconds.

"I have to say, what an honor it is to have you on the show. I even remember the email you sent back saying 'I honestly don't know why you waited on requested this interview', because it was the first time someone from the WWE wanted an interview THAT badly, haha!"

"Well, I mean, it's my first one so here's hoping it goes well." I answered him with a shrug.

For about half an hour, we shot the breeze talking about the industry and how I managed to go from a lonely child watching TV in my living room to being a champion in the WWE. We talked about the people I've met, my opinions of them and my training regimen. Then, towards the end of the interview as a whole, with only five minutes left, I was asked a pretty heavy question..

"So... it MAY not be my place to inquire this, but there are reports from within the WWE that you have some legitimate beef with one Fuego León. Is that right?"

I wiped my smirk off of my face, knowing that nobody would see it change, and sighed heavily. My gaze wandered away from the host's face.

"I mean... Léon is just... one of those guys who you knew growing up, right? Had all the same... aspirations as you did, wanted to be the best wrestler in the world. Then, he goes and sabotages you."

"Sabotage? Elaborate?"

I could see the expression on the host's face change from interest to realization.

"Wait..." He said without giving me a chance to continue. *"Don't tell me Léon... like... made that up, did he?"*

I closed my eyes and slowly nodded my head.

"No way! You serious!?" He exclaimed, grabbing his chair's arms and pulling back. *"He MADE UP that whole thing?"*

"100%." I came close to growling into the mic. Without hesitating, I turned my whole body to the camera facing me and only me.

"Carlos, if you're watching this and I know you will at some point: you are nothing more than a spineless, arrogant child."

As I berated into the camera, I could see the host holding his fist to his mouth, his eyes widened at my outrage.

"That championship you wear on your shoulder is not deserving of a wrestler like you. A title like that should be MINE! It should belong to someone who can live up to its reputation!"

I took my championship belt off of my shoulder and held it, center plate first to the camera.

"You see this? Huh? THIS is what a real championship is! THIS belt belongs to someone who can fight day in and day out against people twice her size without breaking a sweat! I give it three monthes - no - month and a HALF for this belt to be more prestigious in my hands than

that belt is in yours! And if you want to do something about it, you know exactly where to find me and do something about it."

I shot up from my seat and stormed toward the door.

"I'm done here."

I returned to NXT with the same fire that propelled me toward the main roster. My outburst fueled a new blaze in my soul that was burning too bright for the NXT Women's Championship. While I awaited news of my main roster call up, I was receiving hundreds of text messages and emails about my "promo" that I delivered on the talk show. Other radio stations and even news organizations were asking for me to talk to them since my rant captivated wrestling fans all over the world. It was translated time and time again and published to countries worldwide, garnering a new and expanded fanbase. The number of fans that were lining up at the arenas I was performing in seemed to multiply instantaneously.

Victor also caught wind of it and called me.

"Yo Sylvia, that promo was SO good!"

"Promo? You really think it was a promo?"

"Course not, but everyone else thinks it was." He had a really upbeat tone throughout the whole call. *"You know how much hype there is around you and Navarro now?"*

"I can imagine plenty."

"Hell yeah. Even my sister wants to see it and she doesn't like wrestling."

I was pretty surprised with that sentiment. As I climbed the ladder of the wrestling world, I was so insanely focused on improving myself as a competitor that I was silent on the effect I was having on people who didn't wrestle. Victor wasn't the only one to tell me, but hearing that I was actually doing him some good made me feel even more fulfilled.

“By the way, you hear anything about our tag team deal yet?”

Victor gave an audible sigh. *“No. Chances are we aren’t getting it; it’s been too long, they would have told us something already.”*

I ran my hand through my hair and sighed as well. *“Yeah, you’re probably right.”*

“Doesn’t mean we gotta stop talking, you know.”

“Well, what would we talk about? Jock straps? NJPW?”

“Ha, no. Maybe with the fact that I’m going up the main roster with you.”

“Really? How’d you manage that?”

“I have my ways.”

“Sure.” I scoffed. *“They got anything planned for you up there?”*

“Yeah, they got something. I’m sure you got plenty of big stuff ahead of you now.”

“That’s for sure.” I mumbled, leaning in and beholding my NXT Women’s Championship.

“See ya later?”

“See you later.”

Blood, sweat and tears defined my NXT run, defeating everyone that faced me. Now it was time for me to move up. I had received word that I would be brought up just in time for Survivor Series. It was booked that I would come in as a ringer for the good guy women's team at Survivor Series, filling in for the “injured” Carlota Bliss. The stigma was pretty attracting seeing as Carlota Bliss seemed to be the only one on that team that the audience had any sort of excitement for. Now, I was to fill that enormous gap.

I got in touch with some executives who were going to be managing the whole setup and took me to the arena before the show; we rehearsed the entrance with flying colors within an hour. The other women on the team also met up with me and got me caught up with the idea of

the match. It was going to be, again, a showcase to the main roster and the main TV audience what I could do in the ring. Everything was going according to plan for the debut match; all I had to do was get ready for the big night.

Survivor Series started off with the usual snoozefest of a pre show. Lots of talented wrestlers were out there putting on good performances but the simple lack of a live audience did little to make people care for them or their matches. I had even watched a number of them wrestle in other promotions like NJPW and many of the indie companies; these were really good wrestlers who were being shackled to the pre show just to fill time. Then, came the women's Survivor Series match.

The heel team made their entrances and entered the ring. While my team started theirs, I got a message from Victor, who at this point was backstage; he informed me that Carlos was watching from the room they were in. Instead of training and prepping for his own match that night, Carlos was watching me. Even though it was a simple message, Victor's text fired me up more than any training I did ever could: "he's watching".

The other women on my team stood side by side, the captain, Becky Lynch, with a microphone in her hand.

"You might think we're down one person, but ohh ho ho, do we have a surprise for you."

The crowd peaked in anticipation. They all stood up and looked in the general direction of the entrance ramp.

"We found someone else back there who was itching to get in on this, so let's bring her out - without further ado."

The lights went off and the cheers in the arena rose in excitement level.

Once my music blasted, the cheers exploded in volume. The lights and sounds did little in overplaying my presence; the crowd knew what they were going to be getting. I came out expecting a pretty brutal fight. My fists were taped up, my gear resembled that of the Shield (special forces-like black vest, heavy combat boots, and the like), and my mask blared that signature green smile of mine. No one could possibly not take interest in me. When the spotlights burst onto me, I threw my hands up, kendo stick in hand, and closed my eyes. I made a wave-like motion coming down and ran a clawed hand through my hair, eyeing the fans at either side of the ramp. Once I approached my teammates, my eyes locked onto the opponents in the ring, soon to be prey for my slaughter.

The match was a solid 5v5 matchup between us. Even though I didn't immediately start, the moment where I was first tagged in was beyond electric. I slowly ran my leg through the ropes and swung in to massive applause and cheers. Each opponent I got in the ring and squared off with fell to me like wheat to a scythe. Rarely did I reach back and tag one of my teammates in again; I could take on all of them, even one versus nine, and barely care. Every move and pin I made was on the crowd's good side. I was welcomed with open arms by the audience. Pretty soon, the match ended decisively for our team. Estimates for how long I spent in the ring compared to the rest of my team, by my account, seemed like 80/20. Cheering and fanfare played throughout the celebration, again mostly for me being there.

When we all made it to the back, congratulations came out and basic banter occurred, but nothing beyond that. It was eerily reminiscent of my time in the Performance Center. Of all the places I thought I'd be somewhat close to similar to my coworkers, I didn't think this wouldn't be one of them. I tried to accept all the warm congrats and whatnot, but one thing was on my mind: Carlos. Victor said he was in the same room with him watching my debut match. With

haste, I explored the hallways backstage for any sign of Carlos. For someone so apparently popular, one would think his name would be known in the locker room. Plenty of people acted as navigation signs, pointing me through the labyrinth of an arena to his room. When I burst open the door, no one was there; just his collection of wrestling memorabilia and training bags.

I turned and opened the door to exit his room but was face to face with William Regal. He had a look of indignancy on his face as I slid the door shut behind me.

“Hey Darren.” My voice cracked a bit. *“What’s up?”*

“What’s up? What’s up? What’s up is the fact that after your debut match, you’re nosing your way around backstage looking for your personal vendetta.”

“Look, at this point, I can’t ignore it anymore.” I swung my thumb behind my shoulder to Léon’s room. *“He’s got things to answer me for and there’s no way I’m not-”*

“I don’t want to hear it, Sylvia.”

“Look,” I sighed, *“I have legit heat with Léon, alright? He is the reason I’m not-”*

William shook his head in tandem with my explanation.

“Enough!” He shot a glance back and forth down the hallway, then leaned toward me. *“Enough, okay? The last thing anyone needs from you right now is heat, especially with someone who’s in such a big position right now.”*

I paused and tilted my head.

“Big position? Don’t tell me...”

He sighed and again looked around for any eavesdroppers.

“He’s lined up to be the next WWE Champion.”

“I knew it.” I replied in disgust, pacing back and forth in place.

“He is not to be-”

“SHUT UP!” I exploded and kicked the garbage can. “I don’t care! He doesn’t deserve a SECOND of that time!”

Without warning, I got a firm slap across the face, making me stumble.

“I gave you plenty warning, Sylvia, but THIS is unacceptable. I am simply a messenger, not a booker. And quite frankly, Vince does not care if you detest his plans with Carlos, nor do I. It seems like THAT is something you still need to learn about this business.”

He straightened his coat and walked off.

“Good day.”

I wiped my cheek and grimaced at him as he walked off down the hallway. As I made off in my own direction, I checked my phone again, now with a new pending message reading “he’s gone”, tagged as sent 38 minutes ago.

“What do you mean gone? He has a match tonight.”

“Not anymore. He called in sick.”

“With WHAT? He has a championship match tonight!”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said.”

“Who cares what he says! What did his dr say?”

“No word from him either.”

The blood in my veins began to boil once more. I wanted desperately to punch something, kick a trash can again, anything to sate my growing pains in my mind and heart. As soon as I left the building and got back to my place, Victor texted me back.

“He has a cold.”

I didn't bother responding back.

Working weekly episodes of RAW and house shows in between is no small task. It puts a huge load of pressure and exhaustion on the wrestlers, demanding that they devote nearly their lives to an on-the-road entertainment show. Lesser men and women told tales of the elementary numbers of hours they got in between shows, the jet lag from their many flights and their ever-changing opinions of all-you-can-eat buffets. For them, it was too colorful of an experience. My own experience was nothing more than a step up from the indie circuit; it was just a little more travel and a little more nutrition.

That said, I had to unfortunately drop the NXT title when I got moved to the main roster; it wouldn't make too much sense to have one brand's champion on a different brand's show, at least not in modern times. Despite this, the fans gave me a warm and excited reaction no matter where I went. My indie circuit runs were all over the country and people had gotten word of me being in the WWE. People were flocking from every rural area to the nearest arena to see me perform. Whenever time allowed it, I'd hang out with the fans at ringside, take some pictures and even have a short conversation after the matches. The character I was portraying would fit that kind of bill - and I was happy that it was.

Once I settled into my main roster gig, I started getting letters from my mother of all people. They were enclosed in beige, gently textured envelopes, as old-fashioned as she was. The aroma from opening the letter smelled of lavenders behind the red center stamp. I pulled out the first one and began to read it.

Dear Sylvia,

You may be wondering why your mother is sending you these letters about your wrestling career. Yes, I don't have an innate "love" for it, but I do love you. Watching you grow and become an incredibly popular icon makes me so proud. Your father and I now sit side by side at the television, watching our daughter show the world that she's the best wrestler ever. I probably sound cheesy writing this, but what can a mother do?

Be safe, Sylvia, and know that we're cheering you on from the sidelines.

Love, mom.

My heart hung heavy when I folded the letter up and tucked it away into its container. I found it hard to hold back the blushes in my cheeks and even more difficult to pen a response. All I could do was keep it stored in my drawer as a much needed reminder. As the weeks went on and I was starting to get into more coherent and stable storylines, another letter came, this time from my father.

Dear Sylvia,

It's dad. I'm sure your mother already told you, but we really are happy that you're living your dream in the WWE. I remember watching wrestlers like you back when I was your age, like Bruno Sammartino. Did you know he holds the record for the longest reign as WWE Champion?

Anyway, to other news. Sorry to report, but my health has gone down considerably recently. Your mother and I thought about going to the hospital, but it hurts to have to go all the way

downtown for that. Don't worry too much about me, though; I've been through much worse.

Mom can attest!

I hope everything is going well for you!

Love, dad.

Like the previous letter, this one made my heart sink, but even harder. I saw it coming, but didn't think it would be this fast. Again, I couldn't find the words to write back, so I tucked the second letter into my drawer, right next to the first. The best thing I thought of was to simply keep wrestling, keep getting better, keep showing the world that I WAS the greatest wrestler of all time. I talked more with my feud partners, went through more and more detailed spots, did everything I could to improve myself yet again. In each consecutive match, I put it into practice, beating my opponents and proving more and more that I was well out of my own league; I needed men to wrestle.

For the initial stages of my main roster run, I was given storyline after storyline against a plethora of other women, though. In the WWE, our storylines got the least amount of attention booking and planning-wise. Hundreds of hours slaving over presentation and storytelling with my partners only to be potentially overwritten by a writer under the thumb of Vince McMahon; whatever went by him, it had to have his final seal of approval. Thing is, his idea of wrestling deteriorated through the years, becoming more and more self-centered on his interests. I had it hard, especially in this current day and age.

My headaches grew in number over the months as more and more news of story changes came down the ladder. Our matches were changed on the fly unless we had a stereotypical thing to do as women. Plans to get either of us over in our matches were soon converted to something silly for a holiday or silly in general. I picked up creative writing as a hobby, just to help myself understand the storytelling process better. It came in use quite often, considering that the majority of WWE's writers are expected to have some form of TV writing experience. And despite what people may say, creative writing and TV writing are two very different forms of writing.

I took my hobby and turned it into a weapon for justice. Before each and every planning meeting for a match with my partners, I drafted out each specific moment, spot, speech between the opponents and sequence of moves to reinforce our storyline. If I was to be given a seed, a plot of land and expected to give a farm back, I was going to give them a greenhouse, a gift that would keep on giving. My partners in my storylines appreciated it too, but did little to ease their doubts about me and my background. No one seemed to be a fan of the spots where one of us would viciously lay into the other in a blood feud, or if one of us was to take a nasty looking bump from the other person. As a planner, I and a select few could see my genius. It just seemed to have a hard time translating over to my colleagues.

Then came the season time for one of the most anticipated PPV matches of the year: the Royal Rumble. It was a simple yet fascinating and exciting concept: two wrestlers would start the match and the only way to eliminate other wrestlers was to toss them over the top rope and onto the floor. Every couple of minutes, a new wrestler would emerge and enter the ring. No limits to how many people would be in there or if any weapons could be used. I couldn't stop talking about the PPV as soon as it was scheduled in mid January. Growing up, I watched some

of the most classic and highly-rated Royal Rumbles in WWE history. Knowing what makes a Royal Rumble great is key to executing one perfectly. And this was the perfect time to lay out my plan to executives.

I found an executive backstage during an episode of RAW who I knew well as one of the writers. If anybody was going to be an impact on the way I was going to be booked, it would at least be someone like him. No amount of refusal or disdain for the ideas I had was going to stop me.

"Yo Sylvia, what's up?" He said, removing the black earpiece from his ear.

"I got some ideas for you."

He instinctively rolled his eyes at me. *"Don't tell me it's another one of these dares you have? I already got guff from Darren about the whole 'pissing in his tea' thing."*

"No, although you really should have went a bit farther with that one. Woulda KILLED the locker room in laughter." I cleared my throat and ran my hand through my hair, giving a serious look from my eyes. *"Okay, for a while now, me and Victor have been wanting to be a mixed tag team, right?"*

"Okay?" He folded his arms, tilting his head in interest.

"We met in the indies, did a little bit of work together and it's got some traction. People already pop for me, right? So add Victor into the mix and everyone's happy!"

The writer scratched his five o' clock shadow and furrowed his brow.

"I dunno... Like, it's cool and all, but I dunno how it'll fare with the others, ya know?"

"Yeah, but sell it."

"Sell it?"

“Yeah, everyone wants to see it, we’d perform better together, and we’d have a blast doing it.”

The writer sighed, but with a smirk. *“Fine, I’ll bring it up. It’s a good idea! We’ll see how it goes, alright? I’ll let you know what they think.”*

“You. Are. A GOD, man! Thank you.”

I gave him a thumbs up as he turned and left down the hallway, putting the earpiece back in. Immediately, I whipped my phone out and texted Victor.

“Yooooooooo!”

“Just got us a tag team deal!”

“For real!? It’s locked in?”

“Not yet, but I got a writer buddy who’s gonna vouch.”

“Awesome! We doing our own stuff or is it scripted?”

“Dunno, we gotta hear from him.”

“Cool, keep me posted?”

“Sure.”

For once, we finally had someone directly say they thought our idea was good. To make it better, it was someone who actually had some amount of say power in the WWE. If someone was going to make the recommendation, it definitely had to be one of the writers. Victor kept texting me throughout the night, coming up with ideas for feuds, tag team maneuvers and promos. I did the same and threw in a couple of entrance-specific antics and presentation ideas. Already, I was envisioning a run for us that would go the distance in the WWE.

It only took about a week for my writer buddy to email me back. After another exhausting episode of RAW, I was sitting in comfort in my room drafting up more ideas for the tag team between me and Victor, when a notification popped up on my laptop. I went over and sat down, clicking the little desktop notification in the bottom right. My email opened up and it was from the writer alone, with no CC and no other recipient.

Sylvia,

I talked to the guys a few days ago at the production meeting about your tag team idea with Victor. At the face value, we thought it was a good idea, but ultimately, enough votes brought it down. It was a slim vote though; I think a few votes would have swung it in your favor. Some of the main arguments going around the table was that some of them didn't have enough confidence in you to pull it off, and that there wouldn't be much room for any feuds since no other intergender tag team exists on the roster. Ideas were thrown around to get around it, but many stuck to their guns.

Sorry I couldn't be more help to you. Hopefully, you'll see more success in the future.

Oddly, he didn't attach his signature to the email, with the usual bolded name and "WWE Writer" credit. Plus it looked crudely written, and not at all what a normal WWE corporate email would look like. I emailed him a response.

Marvin,

I know you said it wouldn't get much traction, but I SORELY need this to happen.

I have to break it to you: I'm not having fun, at least not in my current predicament. I have WAY more fun wrestling men, who can give me a decent challenge in the ring. With other women, I don't feel like my talents are being shown off properly or thoroughly; I'm hitting a glass ceiling that's about knee high right now. Yeah, I'm sure I sound greedy and snippy right now, but I'm not going to take that for an answer. I want to wrestle the guys, tag team or not, and I want to wrestle them sooner rather than later or even never.

Please make sure this gets through.

Sylvia

I hesitated on clicking the send button, but ultimately hit it out of frustration. After shutting down my laptop and flopping into bed, I stared up past the blankets to the highrise view of the city. It wasn't normal for me to be there. WWE looks for similar talent in all of its new acquirees, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was hired for no reason at all. No explanation was given, no one pointed out my qualities, or told me what was good or bad about me as a prospect. For the life of me, I couldn't piece it together, no matter how long I stared into nothingness.

The next episode of RAW was a pivotal one for one Carlos Navarro. Coming into the building, it was hard to hear someone not talking about it. He was slated to start his push for the WWE Championship; at the moment, he had a good track record against the current champ and was promising to make "big waves" at the Rumble. To everybody (and almost certainly to the

live audiences), he was the next #1 contender. When I got to my locker room in the arena, I couldn't stop hearing about how he was gonna be the next big thing in the WWE, albeit with some grumblings about how much of a jerk he was being backstage. That got me into a bit of a lighter mood, but not by much.

Pretty soon, I got word that some executives wanted to get into touch with me that night about what plans they had for me during the Rumble. Nothing could stop me from racing a million ideas through my head about what they had in store. Maybe they were going to have me run in as a surprise participant, or have me replace someone who was sick and couldn't make the Rumble match. Even still, I thought my email had maybe gone through and convinced the higher ups that I was ready to move on to something greater. At any rate, one of the executives found me preemptively as I exited my room and brought me to a backstage area to talk privately.

"So, you ready to hear what we got ready?" He said with a smirk and rubbing hands.

"You know it, man. Give it to me." I responded with a smile of my own.

"Alright, we were thinking since you got a pretty good background of being, quote unquote 'unorthodox'... let's say, you'd be a good person to distract one of the wrestlers and get them eliminated."

I nodded my head, with a furrowed brow. *"Okay...?"* The exec let the silence linger however, giving no visible sign that he was going to continue.

"Well?" I interjected. *"Then what?"*

"Well, I didn't tell you who you were distracting, did I?"

"No. That's kind of important, ya know. Who is it?"

"Mike."

I stared at him; my eyes blinking was my only visible response.

“Okay!?” My head shook back and forth, forming its best image of what was being proposed. *“What’s gonna happen after?”*

“That’s all coming later, don’t worry. Focus on now.”

I stood speechless for a second before snapping back at him. *“I don’t care about NOW; I care about the follow-up, man. What’s happening AFTER that?”*

“Well, nothing so far.” He said with a lackadaisical shrug.

“Nothing? NOTHING at all?”

“No, not yet at least.”

“NOTHING at all?” I exclaimed back at him. *“Miz isn’t gonna challenge me for a match? He isn’t even gonna get his wife Maryse to fight me? Absolutely nothing? Am I getting that right?”*

The exec motioned his hands up to block me, signaling that he thought I was going a bit overboard with this. He was peeking over my shoulder from time to time, checking to see if nobody was coming across this heated exchange.

“Look, I can’t change this on the fly now; it’s already set in stone. If you have anything you want to add, you gotta bring it to the higher ups.”

I puffed up my cheeks and shook my head in disbelief. I balled up my fist and raised it a bit, ready to strike at him. My sudden exhale held me back and calmed me down. Without another word, the exec hurried off, pretending his best to look like he was busy. At some point, I was sure my head was going to explode from all of the anger and frustration. To try and settle it, I stormed back to my room and slammed the door shut, locking it immediately. In the center of the room, I sat down, furiously breathing in and out through my nostrils, trying my best to meditate once again. For about an hour, I couldn’t align my head straight and I then resorted to

putting in a few drills into my punching bag. My phone buzzed with text messages from Victor again, but I ignored it and kept punching.

Once my anger subsided, I finally emerged from my room with slumped shoulders. It was already closing time for the venue and we were on the move again to prep for the next RAW episode before the Royal Rumble. I packed my bags and headed out to my ride outside. No one else had waited any longer; I was the last one to get a ride out of the city and to the next. My ride partner was Bayley, one of the top stars on RAW and one of the people I was competing against for the Women's Championship next show. I walked up to the shiny black Chevy truck we were riding in and she opened the door for me.

"After you, ma'am." She said with a grin. I reciprocated but it didn't show past my mask.

"Huh, courtesy. Rare sight."

"Okay... Why's that?" She called out after slamming the door shut and rounding over to the driver's side.

"I think you can tell, right?" I muttered, resting my head on the dashboard.

Bayley closed the door and paused for a moment, lost in thought.

"Maybe?" She quizzically glared at me. *"Oh, the whole... locker room bullying thing?"*

"If that's what you wanna call it, yeah I guess."

"I can see that." She groaned, starting up the truck and driving out onto the road. *"I mean, I can't really... blame them, per se."*

"Oh?" I squinted at her. *"Do tell."*

"Well, you know Asuka, right?"

"Yeah."

"You can't really be too excited about wrestling against that kind of opponent. The chance of you being legit hit in the face? I don't want that."

"That's... that's not what I'm talking about..."

That answer didn't get any reaction out of Bayley. She kept her eyes forward and focused on the road.

"That's not really the point." I repeated.

"Than what is it?"

"You really want to know?"

"If I didn't, we wouldn't have talked for this long." Bayley said with a coy smile on her face.

"Wow, okay." I let out a heavy sigh. "The producers and stuff don't care about me. Like, AT ALL. I'm stuck with the worst storylines, the worst people to wrestle against - no offense, Bayley, though."

She tilted her head and grimaced, as if that answer didn't leave a good taste in her mouth.

"I'm just... I'm just frustrated with how WWE handles things, is all."

"Well, have you looked at it from their perspective?"

I silenced myself for longer than what was necessary for a response.

"Yes. And it's stupid."

"I mean... okay." Bayley shrugged, eyes still locked onto the road in front of us.

Nothing much else was talked about during the three hour drive, not even what was going to happen during the Rumble. We both knew I was going to win the Women's Championship on the next RAW, though. It was a step up for sure, but still short of what I

wanted to achieve. Léon and his apparently luck-filled opportunities were all that buzzed around in my mind.

We made it to the next venue just in time to prep for the Women's Championship match. I came into the locker room a bit moody. The other women and I got to equipping ourselves with whatever we needed to make the match work. Some did their makeup and hair just right while others did fitness reps to get in shape. For me, however, I felt it calming and much needed to find a box of miscellaneous supplies off to the side and lay on top of it. I could listen to the low hum of electricity flowing through the miles of cabling, the distant chatter of producers and wrestlers, and the occasional bout of laughter from whoever got hit in their funny bone. My phone buzzed constantly in my pocket, no doubt with messages from Victor or other people trying to talk to me for some unknown reason.

"Hey, Sylvia."

A voice pierced the calm from below. My eyes shot open and I turned over on my side to see Bayley looking up at me.

"Hey. What's up?" I mumbled, turning my head back up to the ceiling.

"You got everything down for the championship match?"

I rolled my eyes, resting my head in my hand.

"Yeah, yeah. All the important ones at least."

Bayley responded with a sigh and a rolling of the eyes of her own. She shifted her weight a bit forward while still keeping her hands to her hips.

"You'd better. This is a big match tonight. I just wish you'd take it a bit more seriously than... not at all, you know? It's for the RAW Women's Championship, for crying out loud!"

"Yeah, look, I get that." I pushed my body up, straightened myself and dangled my legs over the side of the box. *"But worst case scenario, I can lead the match no problem. I can wrestle guys twice as good as I can the girls."*

Bayley looked as though someone had dropped a bag of ice down the back of her shirt.

"Lead the ma- you mean by yourself? With two other people?"

"Yeah. No problem. I'm good at this kinda thing, ya know."

"Are you sure? I don't want us to just be shouting at each other for every spot."

I gave her a serious look and leaned in. *"Then we'd better hope everyone is somewhat decent at wrestling."* My voice came out in a mocking tone, my head going tilting back and forth with each syllable.

"That's a... tall order for everyone. I don't like it." Bayley said, looking down at the box and folding her arms.

"I told you, don't worry." I lowered myself onto my back, staring at the ceiling again. *"I got everything under control."*

Bayley pursed her lips, but gave a shrug and walked off.

Championship gold was within my reach and I was yet still unsatisfied. I could lead a match of tens but was tripped up by a fatal four way. Someone who I had considered a fair colleague was now doubting my in ring experience. No amount of self stipulation would help me, though. It was time to wrestle.

Standing in the backstage broadcasting area (colloquially named the "Gorilla Position") made me feel a rush of something I hadn't thought would give me an impactful feeling. It was the same position that legends like the Undertaker, Hulk Hogan and Shawn Michaels stood in and walked out of into the eyes of the world. The electricity in the room was palpable. Some

stagehands were signaling the other competitors to walk out at specific times, so they'd be synced up with their entrance music. First it was Bayley out, than Carlota Bliss, than Nia Jax. Each one received a pretty respectable reception from the crowd, but I could feel that they were preparing themselves for my entrance.

"Alright, Siren. Three. Two. One."

I took off, pushed through the drapery that led to the entrance ramp and the lights went off as my music started. The crowd exploded in cheers in the darkness, filling the void of silence between my music starting and my actual entrance. Then, a single spotlight doused me in light, the roar of the crowd starting again like waves crashing against the seashore. My head swung up and my arms outstretched, the signature kendo stick dangling just barely from my grip. If that was what my entrance would be like for any WWE match, I wouldn't want to leave or stop. A digital image of green flames illuminated the entrance ramp and I began my mini warpath down to the ring. As planned and expected, the other competitors in the ring had their eyes fixated on me, like deer afraid of the sight of their predator.

I swung my body up and over the top rope and into the ring, trading glances with the other wrestlers.

"From Eureka, California: SIREN!" The ring announcer bellows my name and, in tandem, I lean back and soak in the excitement and fervor. No one with functioning eyes and ears could disagree that the crowd was firmly on my side for this match. The referee held the Women's Championship up for all to see, and I felt like I was the only one in the ring staring a hole right through it. As it left the ring and into the hands of a ringside official, the bell rang - and I erupted.

I charged straight ahead into the biggest and most threatening opponent in the ring: Nia Jax. With great force, I speared her into the corner, trading blows back and forth while Bayley and Carlota fought behind me. Nia leaned into my shots, making it known that they had stuck to

the original, scripted plan. Happy to oblige, I swung Nia out of the corner and launched her toward Carlos who was given the same treatment on the other side of the ring. The two collided and they rolled out of the ring, leaving a staredown for me and Bayley. Applause and chants of “yes!” filled the arena, signaling to us and everyone backstage that a Bayley vs. Siren match would be exciting to watch.

Within seconds, I had maneuvered myself to be the better of us, pinning her down in a headlock. It’s this resting position that makes for a good time to plan out immediate spots.

“*Suplex.*” Bayley muttered as I pulled her back up. Right away, I wrapped my arms around her and launched her up and over my head, sending her airborne and crashing to the canvas. She rolled over into the corner, setting me up for a perfect signature move. I ran at her, leapt up off of her chest and used the corner rope as a fulcrum to swing myself back into her chest as she was on the mat. Immediately, I rolled her up for a pin, but could hear her give a small cough as we went down.

“1! 2!”

Bayley kicked out and rolled away, still coughing a bit. I didn’t want to ignore the danger so I quickly scrambled over to her and grabbed hold of her neck.

“*Alright?*” I muttered without fear of people seeing my mouth move under my mask.

“*Yeah.*” She replied, pushing herself up straight. “*Kick out?*” She requested again, then spinning around and gripping my whole waist. With one giant pull, she hoisted me up and over in a belly-to-belly suplex, which was her finisher. The crowd gasped and rose out of their seats.

“1! 2!”

I shoot my legs up and break the pin, to the relief yet excitement of the audience. Within minutes, the match was leagues better than any normal episodic match we’ve had on RAW in a while. As I laid on the canvas, I saw Carlota coming back in to take on Bayley, so I promptly

rolled out of the ring to give them space. Nia was on the opposite side doing the same. If there's one thing I hate about these kinds of scripted matchups, it's that wrestlers without anything to do for the time being kneel at the apron, watching the action but also faking their fatigue. Without hesitation, I got to my feet and started a jog around the ring to Nia. On approach, I go into a sprint and give her a devastating dropkick into the barriers at ringside. Like I expected, Nia didn't see it coming but took it anyway, knowing that I was positioned to be the best wrestler in the match.

Nia and I proceeded to duke it out on the outside, bringing the fight to the announce tables. The crowd got even more hyped as we got up on the tables, signaling that one of us was going to go through one of them. I gave Nia a few punches to the body and tried my fulcrum leg slam on her, but she caught me midair. Her hands gripped my body, pushing me far up into the air and then slamming me down into the first table, shattering it on impact. Collective "OHHH's" swarmed the crowd, followed by chants of "holy shit!" and "that was awesome!". My body was in a sudden and sharp world of pain, more so than any weapon being slammed against me. All I could do was roll around in pain on the outside as Nia re-entered the ring.

Certain people in the crowd behind the announcer's tables were egging me on, telling me to get up and into the ring. I followed their requests and slowly got to my knees, still in pain and feeling a bruise developing on my lower back. As I clawed back up to the apron, I saw all three of the other women lying on the ground motionless. Unfortunately, I missed out on the action in the ring, so I assumed they all skipped to the spot where they all knock each other out with various moves. On queue, I slid back into the ring and the crowd quickly realized the situation I was in. They cheered loudly and were motioning me to pin one of them. Like a heel, I cackled as I saw the layout of the ring, switching my gaze from person to person, debating with myself who the tastiest prey was.

Before I could decide, however, Bayley stirred and got up to one knee, signaling that she would be the one to take the finishing move. My eyes snapped to her and I hyped myself up in the corner, stomping my feet, beckoning her to get up faster. She stumbled as she got to two feet, swaying away from me to get in position. Finally, I charged at her and let my legs lock to the back of her neck and in front of her gut, slamming her down face first into the canvas. Cheers as loud as they could be popped from the crowd and I pushed Bayley over with my head to go for the pin.

"1! 2!"

Bayley kicked out.

The exhaustion running throughout my body did little to ease myself. I was confused with what just happened, but had no time to react. Nia Jax came running at me and kicked me out of the ring through the bottom rope. I flopped onto the ground, but got back up to go back into the ring.

"1! 2! 3!"

Cheers from the crowd continued as the finish was all but written in stone. The bell rang three times, signaled the end to the match and the coronation of Nia Jax as the RAW Women's Champion. I remained on the floor on two knees, still reeling from the immense amount of pressure on my body. When I pulled my neck up to glare at the new champion, Nia had already left the ring and walked up the ramp behind me, title in hand. Bayley and Carlota got up and eventually followed suit. However, I was the only one remaining, still frozen in a blank state at ringside. The audience rose in applause for me, assuming that it was going to be an emotional farewell, as most endings like this are.

"Cmon, Siren, you gotta leave." The ref told me as he grabbed my arm and tried to hoist me onto my feet. My body obliged, but my mind didn't register any of it at the time. He managed

to turn me around and get my feet walking, but my face was still stricken with an innate sense of shock and awe. Just before passing through the entrance curtain, I crumpled to my knees again, thinking a bit more clearly about what had transpired. With a swift and firm tug of my arm, the referee got me up and backstage.

As I made it to the back into the Gorilla Position, I came upon a backstage crew giving me warm applause, not rounding, but tame. Some of the higher ups even dared to motion for a hug, but I spotted someone in the back that grabbed all of my immediate attention: Carlos Medina. I straight up ignored anyone's offer for hugs or congratulations and made a beeline for him, but he started to leave as soon as he saw me approach. My title dangled from my hand as I stomped past everyone, not even making eye contact. Plenty of people were at Gorilla Position, but it was more than empty as I followed Carlos throughout the building. He weaved in and out of hallways, trying to shake me off of him, but I kept giving chase. Pretty soon, I lost sight of him and gave up, assuming he left the building. But by the time I came back to the Gorilla Position, everyone had left and the few that remained only gave me a repeat "congratulations".

And with that, I left the building and went to my hotel room, fury building in my core.

The following days had me trying to come to terms with what had happened. That finish was well too arranged and organized for it to be an accident. We had never agreed that the finish would be played out like that; I was under the impression that I would at least have some confusion over whether or not I had pinned Bayley. A million different thoughts flooded my mind and kept me awake; I got barely enough sleep, much less than I usually did.

At the same time, one topic continued to arise every time I looked up any wrestling news articles regarding me: my ongoing and troubling relationship with the backstage locker room. I read up on hundreds of articles, titled "On stage, a hero; Backstage, a Pariah" and "Is the WWE's most popular star their worst enemy?". Analysts were turning their heads upside down trying to make sense of the situation and look at it from all perspectives. Only in rare circumstances would they get close to what was actually going on; they thought too much about it and added details that never existed. Admittedly, I had a brief chuckle at the sight of a reporter saying that I was hated backstage because I had eaten too much of the backstage catering.

Still, it implanted a thought in my mind that something was definitely awry. The next time I would see people was at the Rumble itself and it was a week away. I decided to get to the bottom of it myself and went down the hall to Bayley's hotel room.

I knocked on the door twice and waited for it to open. My eyes stared right into the peeping hole, assuming Bayley was standing there staring back at me. Suddenly, the door swung open and Bayley answered in her pyjamas.

"Hey, can we talk?" I blurted out with a serious look on my face.

"Sure...?" She said, leaning against the door frame and lowering her phone. *"What's up?"*

"It's about our match yesterday."

She widened her eyes and straightened up. *"What... what's wrong with it?"*

"Wrong?" I raised my voice a bit. *"Wrong doesn't even BEGIN to describe it; what the HELL happened with that ending?"*

"What, when Nia pinned me?"

“Yes! I thought I was supposed to get the pin and do the whole ‘was it a legit pin’ thing. What changed?”

“Nia pinned me, that’s all.” Bayley sighed as she shrugged her shoulders. *“There’s no ‘screwjob’ here, if you’re wondering.”*

“Oh, I think that’d be very important to know. Was Nia in on it? Huh?”

“What are you talking about? What time is it?” Bayley pulled her phone up to check the time, but I swatted it out of her hand and onto the floor. *“Hey! What-”*

“Don’t change the subject, okay? What changed?”

“I dunno WHAT you’re talking about, Sylvia, but you need to calm down and go to bed.”

“I’m not calming down until I figure out what changed about that finish! I wanna know what was so necessary to change that no one told me about it!”

“I’m gonna close the door now, go to bed.”

Instinctively, I planted my foot in the doorway hard and forced myself into Bayley’s room. Bayley shoved her shoulder into my sternum, pushing with all her might to get me out the door.

“Get out!” She grunted.

My foot slipped on the tile flooring and slid back, sending us both back out into the hallway. We both got up, but Bayley insisted on continuing to push me away. I combated, and sent her into the wall, making her hit her head against the door frame. She fell to the floor holding the back of her head tight and groaning. Crawling backwards into the opposite wall, I stopped putting in any more effort and watched as Bayley struggled to re-enter her room and slam the door behind her. Between breaths, I stood up and went back to my room, still livid over the lack of a satisfying response. When I got back into my own room, I locked the door behind me and fell face first into my bed. I was falling apart on the inside. My heart felt like it was in tatters and my mind was in more of a haze than it ever was.

Minutes turned to hours and hours turned into the next day. I barely pushed myself up from the comfort of my bed and opened my crusty eyes to the alarm clock: 7:16 AM. With a grunt, I flipped over off the bed and onto my knees on the ground, shuffling over to my wardrobe. As I picked out some casual clothes to wear that day, I saw another notification on my laptop, an email. Stuck in the neck hole of my sweater, I hunched over the computer screen and lowered myself into the chair. The email was from someone named George in Talent Relations, already spelling out a bleak message for me.

The email read:

Sylvia,

It has come to our attention that you were involved in a confrontation with another WWE superstar. Currently, the allegations are hearsay but this matter is not being looked upon lightly. We are now reviewing the details of this incident and would like for you to contact Talent Relations at the earliest convenience.

The rest of the email detailed the WWE's policy on backstage violence: physical violence, sexual assault, the whole manual. It even went into previous incidents of similar nature. At any rate, I was too tired to deal with it and shut my laptop. I continued preparing for the day, a break of a Thursday, and took to the streets.

I went downstairs to the hotel's nearby Starbucks to clear my head. While I didn't enjoy coffee all that much, it was at least a waker upper. When I went down, I had my mask on, fully expecting at least some people to recognize me and interact with me. Oddly enough, however,

no one in Starbucks noticed me, not even the cashier. The order for my decaf mocha went abnormally regular, with no interruptions at all.

When I went to the corner seat overlooking the rainy highway, I got a buzz on my phone. Victor was texting me.

“Yo.”

“So... what happened with Bayley?”

“Long story.”

“Didn’t sound like a long story from what I heard”

“Well, it is”

“Was it bad?”

“No, we got in a little scuffle and she’s crying about it”

“Well, define scuffle”

“A push”

“It was literally just a push”

Victor didn’t respond afterward. I went back to sipping my coffee and staring pensive-like out the window. The more I thought about it, the more a little element of worry grew in my stomach. I was under the microscope yet again, but for a much more serious action. My coffee grew colder and colder in my idle hands as my mind raced with consequences for myself. They would fire me, label me as a disgrace to wrestling; I’d be branded for life, not able to wrestle for any other promotion again.

Worry evolved into anger yet again when I noticed a different sort of buzz on my phone. The text message didn’t read Victor, but Carlos.

“Have fun in indie hell.”

“Fuck you.”

I wanted to chuck my phone straight through the window pane, like usual. How Carlos got my phone number eluded me, but I knew now that I had a direct line of communication to him. Still, I hesitated in typing out heinous things to him; I didn't want to find myself in even hotter waters because of it. When I went back to sip my coffee, it had all but cooled on me, leaving nothing more than a sad, cup of half empty random liquid. It found itself in the garbage quickly as I shuffled out the front door.

The rain was giving off a poignant smell on the sidewalk. A car just nearly missed splashing me with a puddle collecting in the gutter. While I originally wanted to return to my hotel room and do nothing, I decided to do nothing right then and there by wandering around. My phone buzzed and buzzed, throughout the whole journey around, but I didn't bother answering it. I simply looked up at the sky most of the time and wondered how life would have been easier if it all had gone my way. If no one had batted an eye to my outlandish nature, my outbursts and my direct personality, I... probably wouldn't even be in the business to begin with.

The whole trip around the hotel wasting time did little to ease my concerns, nor was the phone buzzing on and on in my pocket. Seeing as I didn't have anything else to do outside, I returned to my hotel room; I also lost track of time and forgot to eat lunch. When I returned to my room, I found even more nothing to do. Texting Victor or my parents didn't even seem to calm me down. Still, my phone was buzzing all morning long so I decided to bring up the messages it was receiving.

“Sylvia, it’s mom.”

“I have bad news...”

“Your father has passed away. I’m so sorry to tell you, but he wanted me to tell you as soon as it happened.”

“He also wanted me to let you know that he loved you. Even if you didn’t do much right or felt you were messing things up for yourself, he still loved you - and he was proud of you.”

“I’m sorry.”

I didn’t think it could get worse. I thought wrong. I sat staring at the messages, all spaced apart in five minute intervals. The last thing he had ever told me was that he loved me. And that whole time, I neglected my phone and my emails, everything that he could have used to tell me. I crumpled in my chair, almost to the floor. My eyes watered up within minutes and mucous dripped from my nose. I folded my legs up close to me as I sat on the floor, flooding my pants in tears and sniffing uncontrollably. My body shook in sorrow and I rocked back and forth to ease it out.

After about an hour of bawling on the floor, I finally got the courage to look up and wipe away my tears. My laptop remained open, still open on the email tab from the WWE executive. Something helped me push myself off the floor and stumble over to the chair. I clicked my mouse and typed out a response, giving him my Skype info and waiting halfheartedly for a reply.

Finally, the window for a call request popped up with his smug, smiling face on the profile image. I hit accept, but not the video call option; he seemed to accept it after some pause.

"Hello, Sylvia?"

"Yeah, hi." I muttered.

"How're you doin'?"

I rubbed my eyes against my sweater and sniffled hard. *"Been better."*

"Mmm... okay..."

He briefly paused, letting me hear the flipping of papers on the other end of the call. I maintained my hunched over posture and kept wiping away residual tears onto my jacket.

"So... as it was reported to Talent Relations..."

"Yeah, I know."

Silence.

"Just... never mind, just.... just keep going." I sniffled and rubbed my nose as it started turning a red hue.

"The reports say that you had... assaulted Bayley yesterday, is that right?"

"Mmm..." I gave a half-assed answer in between yes and no.

"And you admit to this being the overarching issue, right? That you can confirm?"

"Yeah..."

"Okay... and that you quote 'rammed her head against the frame of her front door'?"

In my mind, I knew that wasn't right, but my mouth proved otherwise.

"Yeah..."

"Mhmm..." I could hear his papers flipping again.

"Wuh- no, I... I didn't RAM her head..."

"That's not what I'm seeing here, Sylvia. The evidence says you 'rammed her head against the fra-'"

"I-I know, but..."

"But what? Am I reading this wrong? Were there other details to this that I didn't hear about?"

"Wha-"

"You said you didn't do that, so what DID you do?"

I froze in confusion and disorientation.

"Sylvia? Can you-"

"Just SHUT UP!" I bellowed into the laptop screen. *"My father just died and you're here interrogating me like a goddamn prisoner"*

"Okay, I'm... sorry to have upset you."

Out of anger, I hung up the call and shut the lid of my laptop. My chest and face felt like they were both on fire. I once again fell backward onto the bed and closed my eyes. No amount of pushing the bottom of my palms against my eyebrows made any of the pain go away. The tears returned and I rolled over with my face to the mattress. Time flew by again, and I spent the rest of the day indoors, not answering any of the phone calls that rang off by the dozen.

By the time morning had come the next day, I woke up to an email I was all but expecting: a letter of suspension from Talent Relations. I was no longer an employee of the wrestling company I had worked so hard to aspire to be a part of. All because of a little shove into a door. The departure from my hotel building and back onto the road was anything but relieving; I left without giving anybody a goodbye, but rather a confirmation that I was moving on.

Chapter 5: Spokes in the Wheel

The weeks following the suspension were some of the roughest I had ever endured. My original plan was to rejoin one of the indie companies I had the most amount of fun and developed the most in. Though, I found myself moving between motel to hotel, living off of the temporary reputation of being an ex-WWE star. My mother kept sending letters as she usually did, most of them to comfort me, but none of them helped all that much.

I managed to finally get around to working some low key indie shows around the western area of the US, making guest appearances and run-ins but no full length matches. My ultimate goal by the time I was securely on the road was to go overseas to NJPW and see if I could find better times over there. Having to work so many shows just to get money to move somewhere was pretty down in the gutters for me. I lived off of tiny meals in the form of microwaveable pizza and udon bowls. I barely found times where I had fun after putting on my mask for any reason, even if it was just to put smiles on the faces of children who didn't know any better.

Once I had gotten enough money to actually book a flight to Japan, I headed over to San Jose to set it all up. It just so happened that the WWE's shows were making their pacific rounds and had just landed in Santa Clara. Almost on cue, Victor sent me a text.

"Hey, you around?"

"Yeah."

"Wanna hang out?"

"Why?"

"Well, for old times sake."

"Sure, I guess."

"Cool. Meet me at the arena?"

"Why? I'd just start rumors again that I'm coming back. Which I'm not."

"Still, you coming?"

"Fine."

I really didn't like the idea of meeting with Victor anywhere near a WWE thing. Part of it was the idea that the fans would get the idea that I wasn't actually suspended, but the other part was facing any WWE employee after what happened. Regardless, I made my way over to the convention center where the show would be held at. Victor managed to arrange a meetup just after his match early in the night, so we had plenty of time to talk.

As I wandered around aimlessly in the arena, I slipped through a backstage door and kept my head down, hidden by my hoodie. Luckily, no backstage people pointed me out or even recognized me, I think; some walked by and turned to look at me, but didn't bother stopping me. Pretty soon, I caught sight of Victor resting against some production boxes, checking his phone and sweating from his match.

"Yo, Vic!" I murmured at a slightly raised volume, shuffling over to him. He whipped his head in my direction and backed up further behind the boxes, keeping us out of sight.

"Sylvia!" He whispered, squeezing me in a big bear hug as I walked right into him.

"Damn, I missed you."

"Glad to hear." I said in a monotone voice. *"How you been?"*

"Well, okay I guess. They gave me a shot at the United States Championship but they don't have me booked to win until next year at least."

"Jesus christ, that's a while." I sniffled as Victor let go of me. *"Is it long term booking?"*

“Seems like it. It’s a good storyline.”

“That’s good, at least.” I lowered my head to Victor’s feet.

“You okay?” Victor put a hand on my shoulder, rubbing it. *“I heard what happened with your father. I’m sorry.”*

“Not your fault.” I rubbed my eye, anticipating a resurgence of tears, but the most they did was well up underneath. *“I did this to myself.”*

“No you didn’t.”

“YES, I did. I- I appreciate what you’re doing, but the only person that can help me is me right now.”

Victor let the silence hang between us before I continued.

“I’m going to New Japan.” I sighed.

“What?”

“Next flight out.”

“New Japan, huh?” He rubbed the back of his neck while I kept my gaze lowered. *“Well, I... hope you can find better chances over there.”*

I came up with a half smirk and play hit Victor’s pec. *“Thanks, man.”*

He paused as my fist hit him, then smiled and reciprocated. *“Keep in touch?”*

“Sure. I could use an outlet.”

“When’s the next flight out, by the way?”

“Uhh...” I whipped out my phone and pulled up the ticket. *“A week from now, 5:23.”*

“In the morning?”

“In the morning.”

“Damn. Send pics, huh?” Quickly, Victor’s demeanor changed from sympathy to optimism. I didn’t understand how he did it, but he made me feel a little better with his well

wishes. I gave him a nod and farewell hug before heading back out of the arena. Everything I had ready to go for the move was in place, but there was one more thing I needed to do before leaving.

The next hotel I booked a room for the night had a stack of stationery on the working desk next to the TV. I pulled out a pen and got to writing.

Mom,

Just wanted to let you know that I'm doing alright. I'm not working for the WWE anymore but I'm still going around looking for more wrestling promotions that will take me. I haven't forgotten what you and dad taught me early on and I won't forget about it.

I booked a flight to Japan again to rejoin NJPW. For the time being, I'm going to wrestle with them until I find something better for myself. You can watch my matches if you want when they come up; just go to NJPW's website, as they have it available in English.

I love you, mom.

Sylvia

With that, I sealed up the letter and slid it into the mailbox just outside my room. That night, I did some polishing on my mask; over the years, it had collected some dirt and grime from all the traveling across the US and it was about time I cleaned it up some. As I scrubbed off the seemingly endless dust particles, the green maniacal smile shined back at me. I thought about something that would be cool to try and make for myself, something that originated way

back when I fought in my first tournament: attaching a device inside the mask so that whenever I spoke, the mask's green brightness would follow along. I'd still have my maniacal smile, but people would know exactly when I was talking. A quick Amazon search and hours of research led me to make a pretty makeshift prototype, ready to be debuted when I returned to Japan once more.

I got onto my flight and endured the double digit houred journey to Japan, enjoying the morning sunrise as I went (and also taking pictures). At that point, my Twitter page was growing in popularity and my excursions outside the WWE were only beginning to be documented. Once I sent out a tweet that had me saying "I'm headed to the land of the rising sun", people immediately started drumming up rumors, still half confused about whether or not I was even still a part of WWE. At any rate, I relaxed as best as I could until I got in contact with my agents in NJPW.

They were elated to hear from me, as expected as I didn't think it would be. Plenty of people backstage in NJPW missed me and were excited to get to wrestle with me again. At that time, a guy named Kenny Omega was one of the top guys in the company; strongly built, pretty handsome, the epitome of a foreign heel champion. As soon as I landed and made myself known in NJPW, I immediately caught his attention, as he responded to my tweet within minutes. Upon arrival, I was more of an exciting prospect than I ever was coming into the Performance Center. Kenny got in touch with me and was pretty ecstatic with the idea of us wrestling each other.

Unofficially, he came to me with a legit offer to wrestle at Wrestle Kingdom, NJPW's equivalent of Wrestlemania. Hearing about him only remotely, I didn't think someone like him would even be receptive to such an idea, but still, it intrigued me. I responded with an emphatic "tell me more" and we got to planning. The next Wrestle Kingdom was a while away, but Kenny

seemed to have the whole thing planned out as soon as he laid it out. We would start with me returning to NJPW, but I would brag about how I was the greatest wrestler to ever come into NJPW, which would tick off Kenny's character. He would then try everything he could to sabotage my own matches, either by paying off other women to interfere or injure me backstage, or by simply distracting me during my matches. Throughout the whole feud, Kenny and I would exchange personal remarks to build tension and realism, leading to the climactic showdown at Wrestle Kingdom.

It was a plan made in heaven for someone like me and so, I brought it up to the higher ups, who were more than receptive to it. It wasn't the prettiest plan, so they tweaked it, making it so that I would come back, squash the women wrestlers to establish that I could hang with the heavier weight classes, and THEN pit me and Omega up against each other. To both me and Kenny, it made sense and we set it up as so. I came back, plowed through a bunch of women no problem and then Kenny interfered.

The weeks following the first initial spark of the feud saw an explosion of hype and talk over the angle. Every newspaper, online article and social media post was talking about how it was going to be Siren vs. Omega and how revolutionary it was going to be. I couldn't go a single day without hearing from hundreds of fans about how excited they were. I'm pretty sure that it was the most amount of immediate attention I had ever garnered in a single feud ever in my whole career as a professional wrestler. A warm, fuzzy feeling developed within me as I wrestled my matches week in and week out, something that made me wrestle at my finest. Instantly, I could feel an improvement in my matches on my end, and that I was having more fun with my new NJPW run than ever before.

Kenny got in touch with me pretty early on in the feud and wanted to go over every single interaction between us; I could clearly see he had a keen eye for detail with each of our encounters. He wanted as much meaning and importance to go into this feud as humanly possible. We went over specific spots, promos, actions on Twitter even and the whole nine yards too. Organizers also played into it and pitched in by hyping it all up. Once me and Kenny found ourselves in the middle of the biggest feud in NJPW to date, I felt as though there was nothing to stop us.

Halfway through our program, though, I got a text from none other than Carlos Navarro, still Intercontinental Champion over in the WWE.

“Omega huh?”

“Thought you could do better than that.”

“Fuck off, Carlos.”

“Big words from a little girl.”

“Try it.”

“Come at me.”

“Oh, right, you cant.”

“Cuz yur fired.”

“Thought you were moving up in the world.”

“New championship.”

“You call in sick like a lil bitch again?”

“No they gave that to someone else.”

“Someone still better than you though.”

“So dont worry.”

“I hope someone shits in your mouth someday.”

There was no more point to continuing the conversation; I had ample, rage-filled ammo to fire at him any day of the week. The fact that Carlos still had the Intercontinental Championship stuck in the back of my mind, but I was in too good of a mood to let it divert my attention away from the feud with Kenny.

I was finally able to get a glimpse of Kenny Omega’s capabilities when we started training for our match at Wrestle Kingdom. His size and speed made for an incredibly hard body to lift and toss around, even for someone who’s trained against people his size before. Whenever he would get the upper hand in our rehearsals, he’d do things that he thought would amplify the storytelling side of the match. For me, I was a sucker for that kind of attention to detail, doing my best to maximize its impact in all of my previous matches; Kenny, however, brought it to a new level I hadn’t seen before in the WWE. Everything he did was charged with emotion, no doubt able to get a rise out of both the audience and my character. Through rigorous and repeated training, I caught up with his rhythm and eventually started putting out almost perfect rehearsals with him. The select few organizers who were watching and giving critiques would regularly give standing ovations when we finished, signaling that everything we were doing was already high above the usual standard.

Pretty soon after, and just months away from the Wrestle Kingdom match, I got a text from Victor.

“Yo!!! You vs. Omega!”

"Yeah. Pretty big deal."

"No kidding!"

"Everyone over here in the states is talking about it!"

"Even some of the legends!"

"Legends, eh?"

"Like who?"

"Chris Jericho, Edge, Steve Austin even!"

"Holy mother of god."

"I know right!!"

"That's so awesome that you're in that big of a feud!"

"Thanks man!"

"How's the US title feud going?"

"Going good, we're still on track here."

"They're probably gonna give it to me at Wrestlemania."

"Nice, nice."

"Anyway, good luck with your feud!"

"I'll be watching as soon as it comes on."

"Then I hope I can put on a good show for you!"

"For sure!"

In addition to the text, I got a letter from my mom, now with an international stamp on it. I couldn't imagine how she figured out how to send those letters that fast, but I could imagine.

Sylvia,

I heard about how much popularity you were getting in Japan and I wanted to let you know that I'm really happy for you! I'm sure your father is looking down on you with as much pride and joy as I am. I went to the company's website and signed up; I'll be watching your match as soon as it goes live!

Make mom proud!

I was filled with a new kind of vigor after finishing the letter. Somehow, I knew that my father was for sure looking down on me, cheering me on. With just a few more weeks before the Wrestle Kingdom match, I dedicated my match to my father and made it known to the world, posting it on Twitter, Facebook and any other medium that told the world.

Finally, the date had come. Wrestle Kingdom. The show's card was stacked, featuring huge names like Katsuyori Shibata, Minoru Suzuki and Hiroshi Tanahashi. They all had blistering matches with each other, all rated very highly throughout the night. However, the final match, the main event, was the prime hour of everyone's interests. Just hours before the match, I got word that the stadium was packed to the rim with spectators with a sold out seating. Millions of ticket sales were also being reported on the online website; so much traffic came in that the streaming servers had to be reset multiple times to handle all the new connecting viewers.

Kenny Omega made his entrance first, a lavish display of his "Cleaner" gimmick complete with a half terminator mask and grandiose red cape. He strolled down to the ring, acting like me but at 50%; he had similar crazed movements and mannerisms and

enthusiastically got into the ring as the announcer bellowed his name across the stadium. The fans clearly loved him and their applause reinforced that fact. As I watched him do his performance, one of the backstage guys prodded me to get into position; my entrance was going to be just as elaborate and staged.

I got into place in the darkness, just as Kenny's music faded out. A roll of my shoulders and slap of the kendo stick against my feet later, my music hit like an atom bomb. The energetic sounds of grinding bass and popping synths filled the stadium, as did the enormous cheering from the crowd. The spotlights showered down onto me like heavenly rays, celebrating my existence. My arms flew up into the air and I tilted my head back to soak in the atmosphere of the Tokyo Dome. Something coursed through my body like nothing else, a feeling of unrivaled attention and adoration from millions of people. When I lowered my head to gaze at the ring so far away, I started my powerful stomp forward, making a beeline straight for Kenny in the middle of the ring.

I hopped over the top rope and stood face to face with Kenny immediately. His eyes bulged out in hungered anticipation for the imminent bout, as did I. Unlike Kenny, though, I started to build up my signature insane laugh right in his face. My hand clawed its way up my face and through my hair, as Kenny cricked his neck. We then circled around each other, eyes locked in a perilous harmony. Kenny and I sized each other up and played to the audience, who rose up in "Let's go Kenny!" and "Let's go Siren!" chants.

"Whenever you wanna start." Kenny whispered to me.

I took the cue.

With a quick snap of my arms, I got Kenny up on my shoulders to go for a quick suplex, but Kenny wriggled out of it. When he dropped, he gave me a stiff kick to the groin and suplexed me with ease. I backed up into the corner and played up how strong I found out Kenny to really be. The crowd erupted in cheers and applause for how successful I was in getting Kenny up. Without hesitation, I resorted to a different attack plan: straight on. I charged at Kenny and tackled him in the gut, taking him to the ground with ease. With a couple solid punches, I pummeled Kenny on the ground before he pushed me off and grabbed hold of my legs. My hands instantly reached for and grabbed the ropes, enough for Kenny's hands to fall further to the mat; I jumped up quickly and stomped the ground around them, but Kenny sold the attack anyway, pulling away in one giant motion back.

Once I got my bearings, I gave him a stiff superkick, sending him to the mat. Knowing that wasn't going to be enough, I clambered to the top rope and balanced myself facing away from Kenny. With a ton of force behind my feet, I leapt off and brought my knee around to strike at Kenny's chest. A direct hit. Kenny jerked on the ground and I flowed right on top of him for the pin.

"1!"

Kenny kicks out, rubbing his chest like I gave him a mere hand slap. Instinctively, I kept on him and tripped him up, setting him up for a leg submission. He quickly countered it, though, to get me down on my feet and into a submission of his own. The crowd popped up as soon as he did it too; it wasn't clear to me who the crowd thought was the good guy and who was the bad guy in this fight, but I was fine with the face vs. face they seemed to settle on. Kenny's arms were wrapped around my neck and I could feel the tiniest bit of pressure on my lower back as he wrenched back. My slender body, though, made it easy to slide out from under him and whip

my feet into his gut, pushing him away. We both got up and locked arms, going for a traditional test of strength in the middle of the ring.

For the initial struggle, it seemed like Kenny would legit overpower me. My muscles, however, disagreed; I brought my weight forward and down again, bring it to a stalemate and then slowly forcing myself down on Kenny. As soon as I got him to his knees, I lashed one of my legs out at him and nailed him square in the chest with a thud. He fell back and I dropped a quick and stiff elbow on him, followed by another pin.

“1!”

The referee barely got to two just as Kenny kicked out. This time, Kenny was making it visible that his chest was in some kind of pain. Once I saw it, I pulled Kenny up by the head to his feet, but he swatted my arms away and gave me a stiff uppercut. I held onto my mask, which was now giving me a weirdly moderate amount of pain, as I stumbled back into the ropes. Kenny charged at me and tackled me against the ropes, bouncing off and running to the opposite ropes. He jumped up and gave me a stiff kick in the clavicle, sending me over and out of the ring. The brief respite Kenny got in the ring was enough time for him to taunt me, imitating a bullet being fired at me with his finger gun, and play up to the crowd. As I got to my knees and looked around, my eyes caught sight of a steel chair sitting at ringside. Without hesitation, I lurched my body forward and slapped it shut, washing the crowd over with an audible “ohhh”.

I stomped my way back into the ring, keeping my eyes honed in on Kenny as I came in. He took steps back, heavily breathing and losing some strength in his legs. Just as I went up and swung the chair over my head, he tackled me in the gut and took me to the ground within milliseconds. The sole of his boot raised up and over my head; I rolled out of the way just in time as it stomped down where my head was and it continued all the way over to the ropes. With haste, I rolled out of the ring and grabbed Kenny’s legs, dragging him out and onto the floor.

Raining down heavy punches, I kept Kenny pinned on his back and arms, wailing on him for a good 15 seconds. Cheers and jeers rained down on me as I finished, twirling around in sight for more options for offense.

“*Table.*” Kenny muttered to me, reaching over in the general direction of wooden tables placed at ringside. They were more plastic looking compared to the thinner ones in the WWE, but they were rigged to break with enough impact. I hobbled around the turnbuckle and grabbed one of the tables, picking it up with ease and with one hand. Once I got back to where Kenny was, he pushed himself up and gave me a stiff punch to the gut, making me drop the table. Within seconds, he set it up himself and got up onto the apron to dive through it - and me. Knowing what was going to happen, I lurched off the table as soon as Kenny was going to leap off the apron; he flailed his arms wildly to regain his balance, giving me enough time to lift him up and toss him through the table.

It cracked and shattered in half, sending the crowd into a frenzy. I held back and leaned my body against the apron, looking over the damage I had caused. Kenny arched his back and wrenched his face up, selling the huge amount of pain he was feeling at that very moment. Pretty soon after that, I climbed back into the ring through the ropes and began running the ropes. Back and forth, back and forth I ran from edge to edge, building up my adrenaline again, finally coming to a stop and letting out a fierce battle cry. The audience shared my enthusiasm and gave me a huge standing ovation. I took the chance to stand in the ring, waiting for the ref to go through his ten count while tightening my muscles and showing off my muscle mass. If someone didn't know any better, they'd estimate me at a little over three fourths the size of Kenny, who was at least 230 or 240.

Finally, Kenny started to stir at the count of seven, stumbling to his feet and barely making it back into the ring by nine. Like a vulture on vulnerable prey, I grabbed Kenny and brought him up, propelling him to the opposing ropes, ready to execute my finisher. But when I hopped up and spun my legs, Kenny stopped and grabbed hold of them, tightening and twisting on them in a kneebar submission move. I writhed in pain on the ground, making it look as though a ten ton iron weight was dropped on my calves. Shifting my weight back and forth only made things hurt worse; my leg felt as if it were literally on fire. My arms clawed desperately for a rope break, but Kenny's whole body weight on my leg made it far more difficult than I thought.

"Loosen up." I bent my head down and muttered to him. Kenny didn't seem to hear me and jerked his body in place, making it seem as though he was applying more pressure. I obliged him and screamed in agony at the twist, but because it actually did hurt a little bit. With one strong and swift push up, I dove for the bottom rope and clung on, waiting for the referee to finish his count to five. Mercifully, Kenny let go of my leg and laughed as he backed up, still playing up to the crowd as though he was the master of the ring. When I brought my leg in to sell the move, I actually did feel a bit of sharp and lingering pain in my calf; it hurt to put any kind of pressure on it. When I got up, I eyed Kenny with a death stare and hopped on my one leg to try and motion it to him that I actually got a bit hurt from his submission move.

I breathed a small sigh of relief when he brought his eyes down to my leg and instantly back up, and with a single blink, started to laugh again and stomp his leg mockingly. It was good to know that Kenny noticed it and gave me some space to recover. He had turned the next minute or so into a mockery "woe is you" spot where I would try my best to get the pain out of my leg while he taunted me recklessly. With each bellow of a laugh Kenny took, I hit my leg a couple times to check how it would fare; it quickly got better as I circled the ring once or twice. As soon as I saw Kenny spin around in a flamboyant fashion, I charged at him and tried another

time with my finisher. Luckily, he was in perfect position to take all of it, flat on his face and on the canvas. Firm nudges of my head made Kenny flip over for me to go for the pin.

"1! 2!"

Kenny kicked out a millisecond before three. I sat up straight, heaving in and out, and slowly bringing my stare to the referee

"Three." I mouthed under my mask, pleading with the referee that it was actually a three count. When he gave me enough of a reason to say it was two, I rolled over nonchalantly, then vigorously slammed Kenny's head against the mat. The crowd ate up every second of the whole sequence, the cheers easily drowning out the boos most of the time. Kenny still stirred and was getting to his knees, ready for the next sequence.

I charged at the ropes and slingshotted myself back, approaching Kenny on my hands and fulcrum slamming his face into the mat with my legs again. Quickly, I caught his head as he rebounded up and slammed his face again into my knee. Again, I went over his body and covered his shoulders.

"1! 2!"

Another near fall. The audience erupted in shrieks, then cheers, then a slow buildup of applause. No other time in my life did I feel more exhausted than the final moments of that match. I was well aware that Kenny could go for another half an hour, easily, but I was reaching my limit as the match drew to a close. Suddenly, Kenny managed to wrangle his arm around my neck as he slowly rose up, captivating the crowd once again. He spun me around and got me ready for what seemed like a back body drop, but once I flipped over, Kenny caught me on the fall with his knees, right to my own face. I'm sure his knees were actually meant to land near my forehead, but it caught me lower down, right across the jaw. When I came down on him and crumpled to the mat, I could feel an intense shock of pain course through my jawline.

I lifted my hand to my jaw and it hurt still; whatever happened earlier in the match to loosen my jawline set me up for a much worse injury. Kenny quickly covered me and tucked my shoulders in.

“1! 2!”

I barely managed to kick my legs and hoist my shoulders up, beating the three count. A surplus of applause from the crowd made the entire match seem like the greatest match of all time at that point. Both Kenny and I slowly rose to beat our exhaustion and faced each other, but Kenny responded first with a gut kick. It made me crumple to my knees, holding my gut firmly. Kenny grabbed my jaw and gently made me get back up to my feet to get me ready for his own finisher. As he lifted me up, I struggled and slipped through his grips, favoring my uninjured leg, and gave him a stiff elbow to his own jawline. His head snapped back and his body followed, soon coming back towards me. Taking the chance, I leaped up and went for my finisher again, but Kenny let my legs slip over his head. When I came back up, selling my landing, he got me into his finisher again, lifting me up, but I slipped through again. After I gave Kenny a stiff kick to the gut, I charged at the ropes and did a running, drive-by version of my finisher, driving his face into the canvas with thunderous force.

“1! 2! 3!”

The bell rang enthusiastically, sending me off of Kenny with a gasping scream. I rested my face on the canvas, eyes bulging and chest heavily expanding and retracting. Cheers and applause filled the entirety of the stadium, and every single person in every row was standing up and clapping away feverishly. As I scrunched my face in pain, I rose to all fours and then rested on my knees, reveling in the adoration of countless people in the arena. Before I felt my body give way and collapse to the ground again, the referee caught me by the elbow and helped me

up to my feet. He took hold of my wrist and hoisted it high into the air, signaling a chorus of boundless cheers and applause.

For the first time in awhile, I felt as though I really did accomplish something that I hadn't set out to do. Not in a million years would I have imagined coming over to NJPW and beating one of the most decorated and top tier wrestlers in the world today. I would have expected it to be a legend of wrestling, like Kurt Angle or even Stone Cold Steve Austin. This match wholeheartedly filled in that gap for me.

Still struggling to stand on my own two feet, I rested my body against the corner turnbuckle, taking in the sights, the sounds and the feeling of unparalleled achievement. While I looked around, I saw Kenny stir from the middle of the ring, also being helped up by the referee. As he rose, his eyes locked onto me amidst his exhaustion and he cracked a smirk. He held his oblique with an empty hand and held out an open one to me. The crowd responded with all sorts of cries, both wanting me to either shake his hand or slap it away. I stared for a good minute at it, then up to Kenny, then around the arena in thought, then back to Kenny.

"Just shake my damn hand!" He said with a wide grin, satisfied with his now relaxed state.

I obliged. The crowd cheered - and so did my father.

The next day, I woke up in my Tokyo hotel to the sound of all of my electronic devices buzzing constantly with notifications. When I got ready for the day and checked my phone first and foremost, there were messages from a bunch of people on Twitter, through Facebook and through text, linking me to various articles on the web. Almost every single one of them ranked my wrestling match with Kenny Omega at Wrestle Kingdom five stars. Many of them quoted it

as being “the greatest wrestling match that has ever occurred, period” and “the ultimate benchmark of in-ring storytelling”. As I opened each article, my humorous side couldn’t help but come out more and more as my mind blurred out some of the finer details. My worst critic was myself the day after.

Victor and my mother each left their own messages, praising me on how well I did during the fight and saying I was indeed the greatest wrestler on the planet. Funnily enough, Carlos never sent me anything close to a communication. When I went online to research how he’s been doing, he did still have the WWE Intercontinental Championship and his plans to be WWE champ were delayed by a year. Even better for me, the match garnered me an incredible amount of money from sponsors and other companies placing their stakes in the professional wrestling business. My bank account was well on its way to breaking a billion dollars, simply from wrestling a match with Kenny Omega. Incredible amounts of star power was critical to being successful - and I reveled in every ounce of it.

I also got messages from other big name wrestlers, some legends of the business who were still going at it, but now wanted to experience wrestling with me. The people I had looked up to growing up held more weight with me than anyone else in my life, besides my parents; their admiring of my wrestling ability made my heart hang heavy in my chest. I, of course, ended up responding to a fair amount of them, planning out dates to have top tier matches. NJPW, luckily, offered to transfer me over to being a free agent to allow for this kind of activity.

When I finished writing up all of my proposals, I then moved on to my email inbox, also full of unread messages. I almost laughed at the amount that had piled up: 27 emails in the past day and not a single one of them from a random wrestling magazine. However, one of the emails stuck out to me like a sore thumb, closer to a thorn. The WWE had sent an email to me

with the subject line “Renegotiations”. I opened the email to find another one of WWE’s people from Talent Relations wanted me to return to the WWE and work their big PPV shows. In the email, they not so slyly acknowledge my ability to make headlines elsewhere in the industry and wanted to regain a grasp of a star they had unfortunately and unwisely let go. Something inside of me tempted me to write back a sarcastic and sassy reply, just to rub it in their faces a little, but something else struck me as an opportunity.

To whom it may concern,

I’m glad the WWE has decided to revisit the character of Siren as a potential candidate for a big name WWE wrestler. Your contract is very lucrative, I will admit, but as a professional wrestler, there’s more to buying my support than meets the eye. It’s not secret that I enjoy the art of professional wrestling and strive to compete against the best wrestlers that the world has to offer, regardless of gender or weight class.

What I ultimately offer to you as a counter proposal is this: I would like to compete against men exclusively and have the ability and freedom to challenge for all current titles except the WWE Championship. In addition, with this request, I want one feud and one feud only included as a bare minimum: a chance to defeat Carlos Navarro for the Intercontinental Championship. If at least this cannot be provided to me, I will no longer consider any offer the WWE has for me.

This may sound like a tough deal I’m making for the WWE policy wise, but that’s because I am.

Toodles,

Siren (Sylvia Arzt)

And with that, I sent the email off to Talent Relations. A bit of the sass I was feeling did admittedly make it into the final response, but I felt as though it was sorely deserved and needed.

Living live as a free agent was pretty relieving. I could travel anywhere I wanted to just like a normal human being, but had the freedom to accept any wrestling appearances or matches whenever I wanted. If I wanted to go to a wrestling show in New York in a week, I could set it up myself. Any promotion that wanted me as a commentator or a referee even could request such a deal and I'd be able to do whatever I wanted with any of the offers. While accepting a number of these was fun for the time being, I decided that the freedom I had would be best spent at home. I caught a flight to Sacramento International Airport and then drove the nearly 200 miles northwest to my hometown or Eureka. In the humble neighborhood of Myrtle town, I drove around a little bit to make sure no overly annoying/invasive paparazzi were following me, before coming up to the curb of my suburban one story abode.

Remnants of my first homemade wrestling ring were piled up at the right side of the house, tucked away in the back corner of fence and foundation. The blue painted, wooden rims of the house had started to lose some of their vibrant shine, but at least some new flowers planted out front evened it all out. An odd sight, the curtains were drawn behind every window and a single light was on in the kitchen. As I headed up the short flight of stairs to the front door,

I could hear the faint sounds of a classic CRT blasting throughout the house. I knocked twice on the door and it instantly shut off, followed by the shufflings of feet to the door. It creaked open and the face of my oldened mother appeared from within.

“Sylvia!” She exclaimed, just before I gently reached in and gave her a hug. *“Oh my goodness, it’s so good to see you!”*

“I missed you, mom.” I muttered with a bit of a heavy tone, overcome by the feelings of finally being home. My foot closed the door as we both retreated back into the house.

Everything was as it should be. Dad’s figurines were lined up on the back wall of his study on the left and the dining table in the living room was still turned at a 45 degree angle to the front door. The rugs were even still well kept, minus some odd cat hairs. On cue, it seemed, a black and white cat bolted out from the kitchen and slowed to weave its way around my legs, coiling its tail as it went around.

“Knowles, baby! I missed you too.” I knelt down to my heels and ran my hand across his back, making him arch in pleasure.

“What are you doing back so early from Japan for?” My mother interjected, motioning me over to the dining table.

“Well, I’m a free agent now.”

“Free agent?”

“Yeah. I can do pretty much anything I want now, sign up for any promotion, whatever.”

“Wow...” My mother went to the kitchen and set up a feastful dinner for me. *“So what are you going to do now? Just sit around waiting for stuff to happen?”*

“Mom, it’s not THAT simple.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t. I still have to get the Intercontinental Championship.”

“Oh, that’s the uh... the kid you used to hang out with, right? Carlos?”

I sighed heavily. *“Yeah, Carlos. And he isn’t my friend. We’re mortal enemies.”*

“Oh? What happened?”

“Long story.” I waved my hand to bat the topic away. *“I’ll tell you when I have the title.”*

“Alright.” My mother shrugged as she brought in a delicious looking plate of sliced ham and a Caesar salad. *“Now go on: eat up.”*

I peered down at the odd portions of food sitting in front of me as my mother sat down opposite me. She gave a heartwarming smile, which erased any doubts in my mind.

Throughout dinner, my mother and I caught up on things we didn’t realize we’d hear anything about. I learned that my mother was a part of a philosophy club, of all things, and still regularly watched professional wrestling just like my father. She was surprised and taken aback by the tales of my exploits in the indie circuit and the WWE, the highs and lows of both and how I went about living past the WWE. It was a swell and relaxing day at home, capped off with a fairly delicious dinner too.

My mother bore a warm smile as she cleaned the table and I wiped my lips of the leftover ham. Her smile, though, soon turned to a neutral-happy expression. *“I really wish your father could have been here to see all of what you’ve done.”*

I pursed my lips and looked down for a second before coming back up with a smirk. *“No, I’m sure they have cable in heaven.”*

Chapter 6: Queen of the Rubicon

After spending some much needed time with my mother and settling back into the home i once forgotten, I started to draft up game plans for if the WWE would accept my ultimatum. In the one event of the WWE accepting my offer, I would return and conduct a massive, legitimate wrestling campaign to defeat as many people as I could on my way to the Intercontinental Championship. If the WWE refused, however, I would simply crash the Royal Rumble and ensure that I was the victor, even if it wasn't planned to be that way. I had a sneaking suspicion that the live audience would be able to back me up.

I spent day after day checking my email for any new replies from the WWE, aside from the occasional text message from Victor and the seemingly hundreds of communications from promotions, legends and the like. Knowing that I was pretty well secure in my position, I got complacent until the time for the Royal Rumble. The closer the date of the PPV got, the more concerned I grew over whether or not the WWE had even seen my counter proposal. Conspiracies ran through my mind as they usually did of what the WWE could have been doing with my offer; maybe they took it and passed it around the locker room and tried to slander my name even more. Even worse, Carlos may have gotten word of it and spread even more falsehoods about me.

Luckily, I had Victor as a consoling partner through my paranoia. He texted me a bit more regularly once I told him about my plan.

"Think you can pull it off either way?"

"I'm pretty damn sure, yeah."

“Well, I know a guy in WWE”

“He may be able to get us some news.”

“Cool.”

“And if he doesn’t answer back in time?”

“Then I guess plan B.”

“Right...”

As much as I really wanted it to come to that second option, I still thought about what kind of trouble it would bring me if it didn’t go the way I planned. If I was eliminated before I could win the Rumble in a short amount of time, what then? Would I just run back out of the arena? Fight people? Risk a lawsuit? No matter. I would just have to rely on my expertise as a professional wrestler, which in itself was a pretty big head start.

The first thing to do would be to plant the seeds of rebellion. I sent out tweets to other legends, dropping subtle hints of my dislike for the WWE’s current champions. Some I named and some others I didn’t, but the first one to really get my attention was Carlos Navarro. I had reopened an old wound, hoping that the memory of that wound would have survived all these years later. For the general public, from my perspective, that seemed to be healthily the case. Fans immediately started to rumor amongst themselves, albeit with small and insignificant rumors, that I would be setting my sights on Carlos and his title.

Then came the connections. I hooked up with some former WWE legends who recently worked with the company and had the prestige and respect to talk freely about it. Their information about how the WWE worked was absolutely vital to my master plan. Some of them informed me of the WWE’s handling of reality-based conflicts, their security protocols and even

the names and tendencies of people who were the most involved with the immediate security of the ring. It was an intricate web of communication, editing, and impulsion that kept the organized fabric of kayfabe adrift in the WWE. Hundreds of details flowed in through these sources but I wasn't about to be done just yet.

Lastly, I wanted to maximize my understanding of what made the crowds go ballistic for their favorite wrestlers. I looked up podcasts and YouTube videos that analyzed this kind of dynamic, learning what each and every person or organization's outlook was on wrestling. Getting such vast troves of knowledge was a herculean task for any other wrestler, but I kept on going. I sat for hours listening to people blabber on about singular PPVs, what made them great, what made them horrible, which stars performed the best and which ones performed the worst. Every little bit of information and opinion I could absorb, I left no stone or even pebble unturned. In the end, I understood the core principles to a great return: lack of expectation and logical consistency.

As a result, I slowed down with the vocal hazing on social media and silently, patiently awaited any further word from the WWE. However, they never replied, leaving me with the risky but bountiful option of crashing the Royal Rumble. It had never been done before in the history of the match; years and years of it being a popular match type and no one has ever externally changed the outcome of the Rumble. Whatever I had to do to make that a first, I didn't let up.

I went online and checked the prices for front row Royal Rumble seats. Pleasantly, the prices were no more than a mere \$900, at least in the seats that were directly facing the hard camera. It would be the perfect spot to remain invisible and then emerge when the time was right. Thanks to my incredible profits from the Kenny Omega fight, I was able to secure a seat

specifically in a spot where there would be plenty of people in front of me to hide my face, while still allowing for a straight shot to the barrier.

The only thing that was proving to be an issue going forward was my mask. I had never removed my mask as a professional wrestler, partially due to how many tattoos that were layered underneath. If I were to be seen without it, it would not only shatter kayfabe, but it would also mean that I would be singled out pretty quickly among the crowd or worse, recognized by everybody and thus revealed to the WWE. So, I got hold of a huge collection of plain white masks, usually made for keeping coughs in from sick people. I drew green replica smiles on all of them just like on my mask for every single one. The package they came in labeled that it came with 100 masks and I colored every one of them. Then, I stored them under my bed for safe keeping.

Next, I texted up Victor again.

“Yo Vic.”

“What’s up?”

“You know what’s going on at the Rumble?”

“Like, booking wise?”

“I know Carlos is for sure going to win it this time.”

“They recapped it for us and rehearsed it just last week.”

“Good. Gimme the deets.”

“Well, Carlos is going to duck out of the ring as soon as Braun Strowman enters.”

“Figures.”

“Haha, and he’ll come back in for the final three and toss out the Miz when he’s busy taking out Seth Rollins.”

“Okay, one: SUPER figures.”

“Two: that’s a horrible match ending regardless.”

“Three: thanks for the info.”

“No problem?”

As expected, Carlos was going to capitalize with his cowardly personality and run in to cheaply win the Rumble. For a heel character, it was fine, but for someone who is essentially chosen to challenge for the WWE championship, it’s a piss poor way to build their legitimacy up. Still, it was the perfect setup. Carlos would be the instrument of his own demise without even knowing it - and that made it even more juicer than it had any right to be.

The Royal Rumble was scheduled to take place in a week, so I had to get moving quick. After packing the last of my bags, I stood out on the sidewalk getting ready to stuff them all into my car again when my mother came out to join me.

“Are you sure about this, Sylvia?” She placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“As sure as me saying I’m gonna be the best wrestler in the world, mom.”

She seemed to accept that answer and gave me a firm hug.

“Well whatever you end up doing, I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, mom.” I said, reciprocating her hug and patting her on the back.

I finished packing my things into my car and drove off to Sacramento. There I booked a flight to LA, the town that the Royal Rumble was going to be showcased in. It had its fair share of PPVs there before and it was a surefire way to ensure the crowd would be hyped to the nines for anything spectacular. The Pacific states are rarely touched by the WWE in terms of Big Four PPVs, so the date was going to be an important one.

Once I landed, I immediately booked a hotel a mile away from the stadium, and conveniently next to a Starbucks; I was pretty well satisfied with my side return to the decaf mocha latte. Just days before the Royal Rumble, though, Carlos managed to slip in a farewell text to me.

“Hope yur gonna be watching the Rumble.”

“Oh don’t worry. I will.”

No response. He was probably too busy getting his butt shined or something.

The day of the Rumble, midday. I woke up like the rest of the days leading up to it: a nice coffee in the morning, a packed meal at lunchtime and a coup of the WWE lined up for the night. Even after lunch, there were a truckload of people waiting to get into the arena. The ticket masters at the gate were punching holes already, letting fans wander around freely in the stadium grounds, hours before the event would start. I approached one of the gates, hunched over and with my masks in hand and one on me.

“Scuse me.” I muttered in a vaguely attempted Eastern European accent. The ticket master lifted an eyebrow to me, but still replied.

“Yeah? You got that box checked out yet?”

“No no... I wuz wondering how I would eh... check these?”

He rolled his eyes at me and pointed to a kiosk just to the left of us. *“You let them know, have them check it out.”*

“Okei, thank you.” I nodded and went over to the kiosk, placing the box of masks in between me and the receptionist.

"I heve masks."

The custodian inside took one look at it and smirked a bit. *"Heh, Siren masks? That's a new one."*

"Yes. She is VERY popular in Japan."

"I'm sure she is." The custodian chuckled as he stood up and inspected the innards of the box. *"Alright, you're clear. Go on in then."*

"Thanki."

I told the ticket master I was checked, got my ticket verified and I strolled on in with my box of masks.

Immediately upon entering the stadium, the hallways were completely packed with fans, much more deceiving in size from the outside than in. Huge lines formed at almost every concession stand and the merchandise booths were crowded with handfuls of parents and kids buying branded t-shirts and Cena foam fingers. At the top of the hallways were digital signs that read off the match cards: John Cena vs. Cedric Alexander. Neville vs. Finn Balor. All of the matches were big names and big stakes, including the 30-man Royal Rumble main event. Rumor has it that John Cena was considering entering the Rumble on his own accord (which he apparently had the right to do for a while now), even though he already had a match scheduled for tonight.

Most likely, however, I would need to time my run-in perfectly. If Carlos was to eliminate the last person and win, he'd need to be eliminated at the same time as his last opponent in the ring, to make for a super confusing end for the original plans. I'd need to be able to work quick enough and put enough effort in to make sure they both hit the floor at the exact same time. I made my way through one of the vomitoriums to the seatings areas of the arena. The layout was massive, with hundreds of thousands of seats surrounding a tiny squared circle in the

middle. Every inch of the upper stands were decorated with banners and signs, all saying various things to get the crowd hyped for the matches. Already, there were fans lining up into their seating arrangements.

Once I found my own seat, I started to take out masks from my storage box, waving them seductively around my face as I pulled them out to entice those around me. Sure enough, some fans noticed my merchandise and asked for their own masks, immediately putting them on afterward. Luckily, nobody was any the wiser to look underneath my hoodie and simply turned around and went the other way once they got what they wanted. I kept my head low, but the masks still went out the box faster than I thought; by the time the arena was filled up and the show was about to start, I was almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the entire supply. Most of the masks went to fans who were in the immediate viewpoint of the hard camera, on the opposite side of the ring from us. There was no way, I thought, that the camera wouldn't be able to pick up at least a hundred people with mock Siren masks.

Finally, the PPV was underway. The pre show opened up with a match between Enzo Amore and Big Cass, two real funny guys backstage and decent performers. They told an amazing story with their blowoff match here, Enzo getting the win and the edge over Cass. In the end, they made up and shook hands, to the warm delight of the crowd.

Then came a battle royale with all of the cruiserweights, to see who would get the opportunity to participate in the main event later on in the match. It was a plainly set up match, with nothing but punches and kicks making up the majority of the action. Within ten minutes or so, we were already down to the final two: Kallisto and Mustafa Ali. Both of those guys had a good feud sometime last year for the same title and were now at it again. Kallisto pulled out some pretty nutty cruiserweight style moves, but Ali out-maneuvered him and tossed him out. Ali

wasn't anything of a super mainstream star for the WWE, so I didn't expect him to get anywhere in the Rumble later on.

Neville versus Finn Balor was, though, the highlight of the night at that point. Both men were considered masters of their craft, in various forms. Finn was a mega huge name over in Japan, much like Kenny Omega nowadays. He started the Bullet Club, a mega influential wrestling faction that dominated Japanese wrestling promotions for years. Neville was an indie darling, someone who had flexibility and capability of a super athlete. For the whole length of the match, neither of them lost the interest of the crowd, even during the usually boring rest spots. They both displayed their in-ring prowess to a tee in the ring, easily making their match the match of the night for many.

John Cena versus Cedric Alexander was pretty tame, following the Neville versus Balor match. Cena was starting to show his age and his actions got slower and more pronounced over time. Usually, there would be a huge spot here and there but everything else in between was bland and predictable. Cedric, though, was one of those guys that really needed the kind of push that Cena got back in the day. He was incredibly talented and could get the audience behind him relatively easily with his moveset. The crowd applauded when the match was over.

Then, the RAW Women's Championship match came up. I popped my head up quick for this one. Immediately, I heard Bayley's music blare through the arena to cheers. She came out doing her usual entrance and keeping her shoulder firmly held; her opponent, Nia Jax, had "injured" it the month prior and it was still in the process of healing. Nia came out next with the title and held it high with a sneer; she was definitely a heel now. I avoided making direct eye contact with Bayley whenever she circled her gaze around the arena. That said, I was weirdly surprised to see Bayley come back and regain the championship. While I felt no joy in

reminiscing about the actions I did, I still felt good for her. She deserved that title more than I wanted it, so I applauded along with the crowd for the first time that night.

Finally, the Royal Rumble was about to start. The ring announcer introduced the match that everyone knew the rules to and the first two competitors took to the ring. First came Dolph Ziggler, who was still as salty about being looked over in the company as I was and made a scene about it in a pre-match promo. A while after he dumped the mic to the ground, the lights went out and fireworks came out from the stage. Chris Jericho's music started and the entire building shook with excitement. It was just like his previous return in 2012, right down to him posing as a T at the entrance ramp with his light up jacket. He spun around and smiled as the crowd cheered his return. I was pretty excited too, knowing that he had just recently fought Kenny Omega too in a fantastic match and I applauded his appearance as well.

The Royal Rumble started when Chris got into the ring and he made short work of Dolph. Number three came out and now we were underway. Wrestler after wrestler came out in intervals, doing their own spots and then languishing in sell mode on the canvas until the next thing can be performed. I watched each and every little action as it happened: how the wrestlers fought each other on the sidelines, the unlikely alliances made and the high energy staredowns. I was awaiting the magical entrant, Carlos, whenever he came in. At last, he came in at number 24, at a time when most of the current entrants were already down from exhaustion or pain. Of course he would come in at an advantageous position.

He smiled that cocky smile of his as soon as he came out, realizing the situation presented to him, and he wasted no time approaching the ring to get to work. Upon entering the ring, everyone seemed to know that the eliminations were going to start, so they all started to get up and recover. One by one, everyone fought and starting making actual eliminations,

emptying the ring. Soon, Mustafa Ali came in at number 26 and actually got in a bit of offense against Carlos before he himself was tossed aside. Despite some huge names coming out, their main purpose was to set up other feuds while Carlos remained at the center of attention. I could even see the announcers far off in the distance expressing themselves more and talking more emotively whenever Carlos did anything.

After some time, it came down to the final four. At that point, I slowly stood up and rolled my shoulders in anticipation. My heart pulsed wildly under my chest as I looked around, surveying the layout. Security seemed to be pretty lax tonight; I couldn't see any security people anywhere, not even crouched at ringside. Carlos quickly eliminated one of the competitors and Mustafa Ali of all people almost got him out, doing the work for me and in a way ruining the plan. The Miz came in and got to working on getting Ali out. As soon as I knew he was going over, I left my seat and walked toward the barricade. An usher noticed me get up and held his hand to me, telling me to get back to my seat. Without hesitating, I got him in a choke hold and silenced him quickly and quietly, though the people immediately near me noticed and freaked out.

In a flash and as soon as Ali was eliminated, I bolted and hopped the barricade. Carlos and the Miz were fighting at the ropes, just like I hoped. I managed to dodge the referees at ringside and slid into the ring to the rising cheers of thousands, charging at both of them. With a strong sweep of the legs and a shove over the ropes, I sent Carlos and Miz crumbling to the mat. The audience went absolutely maniacal for my run-in and the bell keeper continually rang the bell. Happy with my results, I spread my fists out and screamed at the top of my lungs.

Security soon emerged from backstage and rushed toward the ring with the assistance of the referees. Already out of the ring, I ran back toward my seat and jumped the barricade, security following me as I went. I easily outran all of my pursuers, far up the arena's staircases;

the only thing that kept up with me was a single spotlight following me as I went. As I stood at the top of the staircase, overlooking the entire arena, I lifted my arms once more to the applause of thousands. Before the security guards caught up with me, though, I turned and dashed through the exit doors, leaving the arena prior and escaping the area untouched.

Mission accomplished.

After dodging a lot of physicality from the WWE's security henchmen and letting a couple days pass, I was once again intrigued with texts from Victor.

"That was HUGE!"

"Wait, no anger?"

"No one's pissed?"

"Well obviously, Vince was pretty pissed."

"Plus Carlos, I imagine."

"But everyone else is talking."

"Like MAD, about your run-in."

"They liked it?"

"No doubt about it. They want Léon/Siren for Wrestlemania now."

"Damn"

"Well color me impressed."

"You gonna start hyping it up?"

"Gonna have to on my end."

"Dunno about within the WWE."

"I could get them to book it."

“Seriously!?”

“Yeah, I’m in a good spot right now so I can talk to them.”

“You’re a legend, man.”

“I do what I can ;)”

I breathed a sigh of relief when I read the text; I took solace in the fact that Victor would go to such huge lengths to make something like this happen, considering its precedence. From the safety of my hotel room, I felt like the ringleader in a massive plot to shake the foundations of an entire country. As I saw the notifications and emails blow up by triple the usual amount, I awaited any news of this match potentially being set up.

For someone who really loved the art of professional wrestling, I felt really uncomfortable with the fact that I had no obligations until the match was booked. Going to the gym, working out and training for hours on end, and all the activities I did when I first started out becoming a wrestler came back into my daily life. My interest in nutritious meals spiked again and I watched and rewatched legendary wrestling matches; I even looked up the matches that were classified as “shoot” fights, where the attacks in the ring were legitimate. Regrettably, most of those were actual, heinous acts of violence against the opponent that resulted in harsh repercussions. I didn’t plan on having that be the case for my own match.

Victor seemed to know what he was doing backstage and through various texts leading up, he walked me through the steps to get it booked - legally. He reported that it had been the first time in a long while that the WWE allowed for a legitimate wrestling match between two opponents, regardless of the circumstances. And, to be fair, my beef with Carlos was well

beyond the bounds of anything the WWE had dealt with, especially with someone who was positioned to be the next top star in the company.

At the same time, I was getting a whole bunch of emails and calls from more wrestling radios and YouTube channels, all wanting exclusive interviews with both me and Carlos, anticipating the huge fight to come. I couldn't stand being in the same room with Carlos, though, and declined all the interview requests that requested them as such. That said, I took the offers from all the other wrestling talk shows and YouTube channels, perfectly confident that I would be building up hype for the event, even though I knew it still wasn't technically or officially confirmed. Of course, as soon as I appeared on any of the shows, their viewership numbers and subscriptions skyrocketed with people equally as hungry for information as them. And I couldn't blame them.

Pretty soon, however, I started hearing rumors of Carlos talking to the same shows as well. He was reportedly very angry, or at the very least peeved, that someone like me dare challenge him to a legit wrestling match. It was only natural, then, that he threw out insults and slurs, calling me "washed up" and "desperate for glory". Then, most notably, he cited that he had grown more as a champion, as someone who can actually wrestle a match in the ring against someone like me. I don't know how I missed any of his exploits, but he mentioned cruising around the continental US, wrestling high brow matches against some of the biggest names in the WWE. Admittedly, his presentation with it was very believable; watching some of his current matches, I couldn't seem to find that many errors in his style, speed or strength.

Knowing that, I took another road: espionage. It was a dirty tactic in my mind, but something that I found necessary to avoid firing the conflict off early and risking an injury and a lawsuit. I sent some undercover people, people who I had met on my indie circuit days, and had

them watch every single one of his matches and outings, going so far as to follow him around in their own cars and note everything he did. They got great intel on him, too. He was seemingly getting physically stronger every day and his training sessions were approaching the same rigorous regimen as my own. The Intercontinental Championship was also something he had started to grow fond of, bringing it with him wherever he went and making sure that people knew that he was a champion rather than simply some guy who had won a prestigious title.

As amusing and interesting as the spying was, I had to quickly call it quits as Carlos was apparently getting suspicious of my undercover agents; he was noticing the same car wherever he went and almost approached them one time. I congratulated my agents and they sent me some gifts as encouragement to beat Carlos.

Then, a text from Victor.

"Be on your phone soon."

"What?"

Victor didn't respond and instead, just five minutes later, my phone rang. The caller ID read out a WWE executive.

"Hello, Sylvia?"

"Yeah?"

"Hi. I'll just cut right to the chase and confirm that your match against Carlos has been accepted. You have the green light."

A shock spread throughout my body, making my arms shake. *"You're... serious?"*

"Yes. We'd like you to come in as soon as time will allow you so we can go over the booking."

"Uh-uhh...." I stammered into my phone, holding my forehead. "N-no, that won't be necessary."

"Oh? Why not?"

"It's going to be legit. Through and through."

A brief pause came over the call.

"Okay..." The exec on the other end with a hint of frustration in his voice. "Can you explain that a bit more? What do you mean by 'legit', like how much of it will be-"

"All of it." My voice deepened as my senses came back to me. "Every. Goddamn. Second of it... will be legit."

"Thats- I'm sorry, Sylvia, I can't make that happen."

"I don't care. You JUST said you accepted the match, so deal with it. If I don't get it in the WWE, I'll sure as hell get it in the indies, and whatever indie company takes me, their profits will soar into the roof! So is the match good to go or not?"

I heard the exec sighing lightly away from his phone and exchanging some mutterings to someone out of the call.

"...yes, the match is a-go."

"Intercontinental Championship too?"

Another brief moment of mutterings.

"Yes."

"Good. Bring all your guns - 'cause I'm bringing mine and then some."

And with that, I hung up and gave a heavy sigh. I tightened the tape on my fists and got back to landing punches onto my punching bag.

The game was on.

Over the next few weeks, I unloaded on the amount of promotion I gave the match. Every single talk show I agreed to talk to was now confirming that the fight was given the green light and was confirmed for the next Wrestlemania in April. Like lightning from a stormy night, the wrestling world was ablaze with talk about the match, recently confirmed to have the Intercontinental Championship on the line. It was the first time for over two decades that a woman was challenging for the Intercontinental Championship - and a capable wrestler at that. The stakes for the match could not have been any higher than it was the first month of hype. It was regrettable that I wasn't able to show up on WWE episodes of Monday Night RAW or Smackdown Live, but the words around the match was enough to garner chants on both shows.

As time went on, I traveled all over the world, still doing talks and interviews. All the while, I packed and brought along with me all of my training gear, never missing a single day to go astray from my training regimen. With each meal, I exercised. With each gym visit, I pushed myself twice as hard, twice as vigorous, twice as fast. At one point, I almost broke a punching bag off of its hinges with how hard and consistent I was throwing punches. Other patrons at the gyms and public places I went to gave me scared looks, giving me enough of a wide berth to prepare for my match at Wrestlemania.

Then came an email from an old colleague of mine in the indie circuit. He used to run one of the companies that took in big name stars just before they went big, so his word was revered among most of the indie wrestlers. Apparently, he had gotten word that one of the sponsors that Carlos had been getting as he was wrestling was planning a huge exposé type

video, aiming to sabotage my reputation, or “bury” me. Immediately, I prepared a statement on it, but the video came out much faster than I anticipated.

It highlighted my violent nature as an indie star, hinting that my energetic wrestling style was a sign of a much deeper and angrier personality. Also, it brought up my drug controversy in the Performance Center and my “assault” on Bayley backstage. If someone wasn’t any wiser, it would look like poor Carlos Medina, El Fuego León, was going to be put in the ring with a psychopath and thus, called for a canceling of the match. I instantly called up Victor.

“Hey, Vic.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you just see what I seen?”

“You mean the smear job? Yeah.”

“Low as hell, huh? Can you make sure it doesn’t change WWE’s mind?”

“Dunno if I can do that. They sounded pretty unhappy with the idea in the first place; they might just go through with it, but not because of the video. My opinion, anyway.”

“Make sure that it doesn’t happen.” My voice cracked a bit. *“I NEED this match, Vic. I have never wanted anything more badly in my life than this opportunity. I’m beggin’ you.”*

Victor remained silent on the other end as I cleared my throat and sniffed. *“PLEASE. Do NOT let anything interfere with this.”*

“I mean... I could get fired for this.”

“I... I wouldn’t be asking you if it didn’t mean this much to me, man.” My hands shook, gripping the phone harder and harder as I spoke. *“You’re the only person back there I can trust with this. I CAN’T lose this.”*

Victor again went silent, only giving a small sigh in the background.

“...okay. I’ll make sure the match goes.”

“Tha-thank you...” I let my breath go in one giant, relieving burst. *“Thank you so much.”*

A couple days later, I stood face to face with the last major flight I planned to make that year. The flight was a one-way trip to Chicago, Illinois, where I'd booked a hotel for just a few more days following Wrestlemania. Still not an official employee of WWE, I was barred from displaying any WWE merch or going to any pre-Wrestlemania events. While it did give me a little bit of reprieve from massive crowds of fans, I still ran into some on the flight. I took my seat, a window seat just behind the emergency exit row, and settled in with my headphones. Just before I put on my favorite playlist, a little girl shuffled into the middle seat, flanked by her dad. She looked no younger than eight years old and was dressed in a pair of bright blue overalls, blue jeans, and a yellow flower tucked behind the top of her ear. Her eyes flew up to me as she sat down, widening as they met my mask.

“Dad, it's Siren!” She turned and whispered to her dad, who gave a similar, yet more subtle expression. Before the father could react, the girl twirled back around.

“Excuse me, Siren?”

I took my headphones off, circling them around my neck and leaning forward a bit.

“Yeah? Hi there.”

“Can I get your autograph?” She said as she reached her hand into her pink backpack. As she searched, I noticed a black pin on the side with the word “SIREN” in neon green.

“Heh heh... ‘Course you can, sweetie.” I chuckled as I fished for a pen in my pocket. I couldn't find it initially, so I bent down to look for it in my own backpack.

“I'm a big fan of you!” The girl giggled, now clutching a notebook close to her chest.

“I noticed! You have a pin with my name on it there.”

Finally, I found a pen good enough to write with and took the notebook from the girl.

"What's your name?" I asked with my pen hovering over a blank page.

"Alyssa." She said, leaning in toward me over the armrest. I scribbled my signature very sloppily and added a much more neatly written "Alyssa" right next to it. A second before I urged to give it back, I tacked on a little heart between our names.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" She squealed with delight and bounced up and down in her seat. It gave me a bit of a laugh as I looked over to the father.

"She really is a big fan of you. Hi, I'm Roger." He extended his hand with a smile.

"Nice to meet you."

"Can I assume you're going to your match with this flight?"

"You can if you want." I shrugged and put my pen back in my backpack. *"You coming to watch?"*

"Yeah, we were planning to, right after visiting our relatives."

"Okay, sick." I nodded.

"Actually, if you don't mind, would we be able to get a glimpse of what's under your mask? We've never seen it before and, you know, what are the chances we'd meet again?"

I hesitated as I was putting my headphones back on. It had completely passed over me that that was another norm that I could break with this match. Just before putting my headphones on again, I said to him, *"watch the match; I'll do it then."*

I also made sure to look down at Alyssa too, who looked back at her father with excitement.

"We need to watch her match!" I heard her exclaim as I put my headphones back in and relaxed. As the plane started to move into the taxi lanes, I closed my eyes and awaited my arrival.

The rumbling of the plane landing at O'Hare shook me from my slumber. I looked over to the middle seat, expecting to see Alyssa and her father, but they were long gone. With a stretch of my shoulders and arms, I emerged from the seat and down the aisle with my luggage. A nod to the flight attendants and a brief stroll up the connecting tunnel to the terminal later, and I came to a gate flooded with bystanders. They all erupted in noise as I came walking out, shouting their questions over each other. My eyes widened for a second, but I simply laughed and made my way past them and down to the food court; I was pretty hungry from such a long flight with no in-flight meals.

Once I got lunch and pesky hagglers out of the way, I caught my Uber to the hotel and settled in. The hotel was extremely immaculate, one of the most decorated hotels in the city with a highrise view of the skyline. It was anything but a comfortable fit for someone like me, but I took it with pride. The room service wasn't half bad either; their steaks were cooked to perfection and they had a wide variety of drinks to accommodate. Before I dug into the meal, though, I got a text message from the same WWE executive who reported that the match was confirmed.

"Hey Sylvia. Just making sure that you're in town and you'll be making it to the match on Sunday."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good."

"It's going to be the main event too, so you know what time that's going to be, right?"

I paused for a minute. At no point was I expecting the match to be that big of a deal with the WWE. Anything that goes in the main event slot is expected to be just that: the main event.

Usually, it was reserved for either the WWE Championship or the clash between two ultra-WWE wrestling titans; I couldn't remember another time in history where the Intercontinental Championship main evented a Wrestlemania.

"Yeah... about 9 or 10?"

"Yeah, that's about right."

"Depending on how the other matches go."

"Alright."

"I'll be ready."

I took the liberty of slowing down on my steak, making sure I savor every bite as if it were a reward for each victory in the wrestling ring leading up to this match.

The day of Wrestlemania had finally arrived. Any text messages I had received that day I had completely ignored, only letting my mind focus on one thing and one thing only: beating the absolute piss out of Carlos in the ring. I went down to the gym and practiced my takedowns, my lifts and my punches. Within seconds of firing the first initial punches, I was fired up and imagined every punching bag to be Carlos; once again, all of the other people in the gym were visibly shaken by my display of speed and strength, and the fire in my eyes. Sweat beaded down my forehead and dripped off my nose, at a rate that made me feel as though I was melting ice from within my core. When all was said and done, I had worked up my heartbeat to an intense 160 BPM; I felt like I could punch a tank's cannon clean off by the time I was done in the gym.

For lunch, I ate a solid meal of nothing but protein foods: red meats, chicken and a whey shake. Afterward, I topped it off with an apple and a carrot. For the next few hours, I returned to the gym, leaving no time for any exposés or interviews. If this was going to be a legitimate fight, I needed to be past 100% ready for it - and I trained like it. Wrestlemania was scheduled to start at five and go until the main event, which was tentatively slated for ten that night. I made sure to give myself enough time to grab myself a last minute ticket, again for the area facing the hard camera, and schedule a time to leave for the venue. As a last minute precaution, I went up to my hotel room to retrieve my trusty and signature kendo stick. When I grabbed it, I caught a glimpse of a piece of paper sticking out from my backpack's pocket. It was the letter from my father so long ago, wishing me the best of luck. My hands tensed up just holding onto it, but eventually I set it down, facing the doorway for when I returned.

And with that, I was off to fight the biggest fight of my life.

I arrived at the stadium at just around the 4:15 mark and found my way in through the massive sea of people piling into the entrance gates. A couple of people noticed me, but were somehow composed enough to keep their mouths shut. Even the ticket masters recognized me, visibly stunned at my appearance, but still willing to let me inside without much issue. The further I went into the arena, the more people started to recognize me and point me out. At one point, there was a Siren chant that grew in size to encompass the whole concession stand area; both sides traded back and forth with chants of "Let's go Siren!" and "Let's go Fuego!". Despite the very vocal and passionate support for me from some of the fans, I kept my head down and got my food and drinks before proceeding down to the seating area.

Once I entered the arena to overlook the stadium, I was taken aback by how massive the entire complex was. Compared to the Tokyo Dome in my match against Kenny Omega, this

stadium was leagues bigger, with stands that looked to be about a quarter mile out and up. A sole, gargantuan titantron hung from above the square ring in the middle, with the default Wrestlemania graphics on it. The WWE loved to maintain a sort of cage-like structure to hold it up and this year was no joke; it was crossed in multiple angles at the top, showered in red and blue spotlights to really sell the contrast in colors. Bright lights also lit up the entire entrance ramp, which had its own LED floor to walk on and display graphics on. Everything from the beginning entrance way behind the ramp to mere feet in front of the ring was decked out with flamboyant lights and pods to launch pyro from.

Making my way to my seat took me a whole ten minutes, just to find the row and the specific seat number. The chair itself had a graphic of Carlos, straddling the title to his chest and an old graphic they had of me, grinning and bearing my signature green smile with widened eyes. I took pleasure in landing firmly into my chair right on top of the image of Carlos and getting comfy for the Wrestlemania pre show matches. I whipped my phone out from my hoodie pocket and checked the messages from Victor.

“Everything’s good from backstage.”

“Awesome, just found my seat.”

“Nice, where you at?”

“Row 1, seat 19.”

“I see you.”

“Knock ‘em dead for me, alright?”

“With pleasure.”

When I put my phone away and brought my head up, I instantly eyed the two guys sitting beside me, trying their best not to stare at me for too long.

“What?” I scoffed. *“I’m just here to watch the show.”*

“Alright, alright.” One of the guys to my left said, nodding. He gave a flip of his Undertaker baseball cap and looked on to the ring. *“You looking forward to the match?”*

“Dude, I was BORN for that kind of match.”

“This is so goddamn awesome.” The guy to my right muttered as the other guy nodded again silently.

“Only thing though, I need from you guys...” I held up a finger to them both. *“Don’t make a big deal of me being here. Like, I’m just another fan watching the matches up until my match. No need to hype me up or whatever.”*

The two men again nodded and leaned back, going about their own business. As my eyes wandered around the stadium, I noticed people behind me who also heard my request, some of them giving me a thumbs up or a finger hushing their lips as acknowledgement. I bowed my head to them in response and laid back in wait.

Finally, the pre-show was a-go. First up was Kurt Hawkins vs. Kallisto. Kurt Hawkins came out first with his flamboyant show of egomania, touting himself as, again, one of the best cruiserweights in existence. Before he could even finish his promo, Kallisto came out, launching himself over the top rope and doing his much more impressive flips and tricks. Both men put on a good show for what it was worth, with Kallisto decisively retaining in the end.

Next up was the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal. For years, the match was built to be another avenue for new stars to make a name for themselves, putting them in the public eye of the audience before WWE made a move on bringing them to the main roster or not. A lot

of people who were really low on the “kayfabe totem pole” already made up the bulk of the competitors, but I saw some NXT stars in there too, like Andrade Cien Almas, Velveteen Dream and Drew McIntyre. McIntyre was my favorite for the win, mainly because he was almost as perfectly rounded of a wrestler as Victor was and has proven himself just like Victor. Though, I was shocked to see Kenta in there too, considering he was only recently recovering from a brutal injury. The battle royal itself was a great match, with plenty of spots and action, mainly from the NXT guys.

The final four were Almas, McIntyre, Bo Dallas and Velveteen Dream. Bo Dallas, being the odd one out among the remaining stars, was tossed out easily by McIntyre, who in turn was tossed out by Almas in a surprise motion. Then, like I had anticipated, Velveteen Dream swept Almas in a hyped and brief minute of wrestling, throwing him out and winning the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal. Applause and cheers erupted from the crowd; Velveteen Dream was a huge up and coming star in the WWE - everyone knew it and everyone liked that fact. As the crowd quieted itself after the superstars went backstage, I looked around at the growing, massive sea of people flooding the arena seats. Everywhere I looked, there were at least a hundred heads, some whose chins were parallel with the ground and some pointed to their phones on their laps. Low buzzings of their voices droned on through the air, trapped in by the closed yet glassed off ceiling above.

After long last, the actual spectacle that was Wrestlemania was underway. The theme song for the PPV blared through the arena, sending up people's' arms and personalized signs in excitement. I elected to remain seated, analytical of the WWE's show of shows, the “granddaddy of them all”. Within minutes, the first match was about to start. It was a title match for the United State Championship, of all things; who better than Victor to make his entrance first, then. Something oddly interesting to me about his entrance was how much more energetic

it was. He was a face at this point, but it had a certain “Siren” element to it, with flashing lights and high energy EDM/rock music. His physique was still notably chiseled and he got way better with his charisma. As soon as he entered the ring, he locked eyes with me, bearing a confident smile. Suddenly, he pointed at me, leading everyone’s attention to me. I shrunk in my seat, trying not to think about the millions of eyes that were now looking in my direction. Victor didn’t seem to notice, still going through his entire entrance.

Then came his opponent, Baron Corbin. Just like Victor, his entrance was mainly rock themed, with his presentation being one of “imminent danger” and being a “one man army”. He tossed his title into the ring as he slid in, going face to face with Victor and raising the title above his head in a show of dominance. The crowd showered him in boos, even as he went up to the corner turnbuckle and repeated the spot. Victor, being the opportunist he was, charged at Corbin the second he stepped down and turned to face him. The bell rang three times feverishly. Overall, the match was a constant flurry of offense from Victor with some shots fired back at him. Baron Corbin had pockets of offense but in the end, Victor’s was too extreme leading to his victory. For the majority of the match, all of Victor’s moves were just as crisp and beautiful looking as I had remembered; I couldn’t see a single flaw in his form or his strength as he went.

Before I knew it, Victor had pinned Corbin clean, much faster than I originally anticipated. He flung his hands up in glory, with the US Championship in his clutches. I shot up and applauded him with great fervor, yelling praise and congratulations his way. The crowd echoed my sentiment, showering him in their cheers and appreciation for his performance. Half of me wanted to jump the barricade right then and there and hug him in the ring. Victor gave me a smile as he headed up the ramp, holding his title high above his head in happiness. I continued to applaud his victory, even when he exited to the back.

Honestly, I didn't pay much attention to the filler fights. Most of them comprised of people who were so low on the card that they barely got a reaction out of anybody, including me. The matches themselves got fair enough reactions from the crowd; everybody stood in applause for every single outcome. When I turned my attention back to the ring, the fight in front of me was one that I had anticipated watching live for quite some time: Roman Reigns versus John Cena. Both guys were, at the time, huge names in wrestling, for better or worse. Roman was plagued by a rash of real bad hatred for stomping on a previously hot, rising star in the company; it lasted a good half decade before it got to a stable point. John Cena, though, has coasted on his laurels, taking issue with Roman claiming he was the man of the company now that Cena was out doing other things.

As a part of his coming back and staying back tour, Cena was determined to make sure that Roman knew that John Cena was the name that would be synonymous with the WWE. The match itself reflected that well. Both of them put on a hell of a physical bout with each other, bringing out their entire movesets against each other. Neither of them had ever put out so many moves against each other, in a desperate bid to pin the other. Back and forth, false finish after false finish, they battered each other for what seemed like an hour. Pretty soon, though, Roman came out on top with three of his finisher, the Spear to the gut. Finally, John Cena was no longer the biggest name in wrestling. Unsurprisingly, the crowd reacted just as strongly divisive as they had been for Cena; there were a seemingly equal amount of boos and cheers for the outcome, some getting really emotional with the moment.

Next up, however, was supposedly the biggest match of the night in the WWE's eyes. It was the featured return of the month for the Undertaker and he was up against none other than his greatest rival in the WWE: Kane. The storyline between the two characters was rich in history and nostalgia, with both of them being on each other's good sides and bad sides since

the mid 1990s. Unfortunately, the only big thing that was holding the match back was both of their ages; they were well past 40 and 50 and couldn't move as fast or as thunderous as they once did. Still, they persisted and wanted this match to happen, as it was reported backstage some time ago. When Kane came out, he looked in way better shape than I thought he would ever look for his age, and especially for someone who was well within the political machine of the US. Flames erupted from the entire entrance ramp, just like his old entrance back in the day; there were plenty of playbacks that boosted the nostalgia, including Kane's old rock theme.

Then, the Undertaker came out to his iconic entrance theme, also known as the entrance that the fans voted was his best entrance. Luckily, the WWE polls its audience with random yet clever questionnaires to see how they should do certain things - and this was one of the places where they applied their answers. The Undertaker made his signature stroll to the ring amidst smoke and heavily rock-influenced choruses. When he made it to the ring, the crowd piped up with cheers and chants of "that was awesome!" and it was rightfully awesome; the Undertaker was a master of presentation and appearance. No one could equal him, aside from maybe Finn Balor when he puts on face paint to look like a demon; the Undertaker helped him with that whole set up, too, so that explains that.

The bell rang and the match was on. It was like the WWE to book wrestlers like this to be like massive titans in the ring, making single strong strikes that looked like they could crack a mountain in two. While both of them got exhausted in the later parts of the matches, which came way earlier than I thought it would, they made it seem as though it was the fight of their lives. With each strike, both Undertaker and Kane slowly became their real life counterparts and wrestled like real people, fighting to cement their legacy. By the end of the match, the crowd was 100% on their feet, completely invested in the fight and reacting to every move like it was the end of the world. In the end, the Undertaker won over his brother Kane with one final

Tombstone Piledriver in the middle of the ring. With great pleasure, the referee held up the Undertaker's arm as he stood high and mighty in the ring. Though, the next portion of him walking back up the entrance ramp was cut short by a slightly unexpected arrival.

Before the Undertaker was even halfway up the ramp, Carlos stormed down the entrance ramp, barely giving enough time for the floor graphics to catch up to him. As he came down, I snapped to my phone to check the time: just five minutes past nine. I looked back up to Carlos, rounding the opposite side of the ring and motioning to the referee to give him a microphone. He climbed into the ring, eyes viciously staring a hole into me as the ref slid him a mic across the mat.

"Get your ass in here!" Carlos screamed as he picked up the mic and straightened to glare at me. The crowd responded with a huge uproar, the loudest of the night by far. Both of the guys sitting next to me were now drawing attention to me, holding their arms high and pointing down to me.

"We don't have all day, SIREN! You wanted this fight, so I'm giving it to you! Be thankful and get in this ring right now!" His bellows into the mic resounded throughout the stadium. I stared back at him with furrowed brows, finally opting to stand up in my seat and letting off another wave of excited cheers. Everything in my body pushed me toward the barricade, but not before reaching down into my bag and grabbing my kendo stick. When I came back up, I was shocked to find that Carlos had a chair as a weapon of his own now, almost like lightning struck him and granted him a weapon of his choice to defend himself. The mic he held in his hand had disappeared and he was now goading me into the ring, slamming the steel black chair against the canvas. I crept my leg over the barricade, setting off even more cheers and applause from

the crowd. I looked to the sidelines where I could see referees and security guards on standby; they were eyeing me but remaining passive to allow me entrance.

Soon, I was up on the apron, staring down Carlos with fire in my eyes to meet his. I stood for a good minute like that, letting the gravitas of the moment set in. My heart beat so fast I thought it would pop out of my chest as soon as I went in. Carlos continued screaming at me to get into the ring, plus some more of his backhanded insults. Finally, I had enough of his noise and swung through the rings, kendo stick at the ready. The bell rang the second I stepped in and the fight was on, at long last.

Carlos charged at me with an overhead swing of the chair, and as telegraphed as it was, I dodged out of the way easily. On the rebound, I swung my kendo stick at him, striking him hard in the back and sending him to the mat. He let out a coarse gasp as he fell, instantly trying again to get up, but my strikes were much faster. Crack after crack against his spine sent shockwaves through the crowd, now raucous in energy. Carlos somehow managed to pop to his feet and tackle me midblow to the canvas. He laid his knee against my chest and held my kendo stick down as he laid down merciless punches into my skull. One of them struck my mask and again, I felt a sharp pain shoot through my jaw; something had snapped within me.

I pushed Carlos off after the first five punches and escaped the ring to brief safety, holding my jaw as I went to my knees. Something liquid like spilled into the inside of my mask, sealed off underneath the tight straps. Suddenly, Carlos grabbed my hair and yanked me back against the apron. On instinct, I held my arms up like a professional boxer, letting his blows land with little effect to my psyche. I stumbled a bit as one of his punches rocked me, allowing me to roll away to the corner of the ring. My hands met the discarded microphone on the ground outside the ring and I whipped it behind me, striking Carlos in the forehead. With a sharp cry, he

stumbled backward and onto his back. The crowd was drowning in cheers and noise, unable to withstand the immediate action of the fight. I stood up and looked back at Carlos, his forehead now oozing a steady stream of blood. Without hesitating, I slid back into the ring to grab the kendo stick, standing firm in the ring like a baseball player ready to hit her home run.

For a minute, I felt like I had legit killed Carlos with the microphone with how hard I hit him and how long it took for him to finally stir. As I regained my balance in the ring, Carlos groped his arms around in the air, rolling to all fours and wiping blood from his forehead. He once again locked eyes with me in the ring and slowly crept into the ring, with a newfound hatred of me in his eyes. I returned the gaze, breathing mostly through my mouth at that moment and tasting the rotten taste of iron in my mouth. As soon as he entered the ring, Carlos again charged at me, this time for my legs. I was too weak to dodge out of the way and he made me fall flat on my back. Before he could land a punch, however, I launched my legs up as hard as I could up into his clavicle, almost launching him up into the air.

He landed face first at my legs, the perfect spot to grab hold of him. I wrapped my legs around his neck quickly and grabbed his flailing arms. With a little bit of rough wrestling around, I managed to get over his torso and to his legs, getting him in a perfect sharpshooter. With all of my might, I leaned back deep into the move, putting more and more pressure on his back. His cries of pain gave me much needed fuel to pull even harder. However within seconds, I could feel the liquid building up in my mask and flooding into my mouth, making me taste nothing but iron. My mouth couldn't take it anymore and forced me to stand up and hold my neck; I coughed to give my throat some mercy but the space beneath my mask was flooded too much. Right after, a stream of red leaked out from the side of my mask and onto the canvas.

As my head clouded, Carlos gripped onto my legs, crawling his heavy body toward me. To avoid him, I rolled out of the ring and crumpled to the canvas. Trying to save myself from

Carlos and moving to a better spot, I stumbled around the ring, the steady stream of blood oozing from my mask and onto the ground. Spectators I passed along the way were visibly horrified, knowing my condition on the inside and reacting in turn. I got to the opposite side of the ring and saw Carlos still clawing his way across the area around ringside to get to me; his legs were barely moving, but his face was construed in a crimson mask and violent grimace. To further get away from him, I crawled back into the ring from under the bottom rope, reaching for the straps around my mask to give myself salvation.

As soon as I did, though, the leak broke through, loosening my mask and spilling the small puddle of blood onto the canvas. The crowd gave a loud gasp to the sudden expelling of blood, many of them covering their faces and/or turning away. My mask hung on just barely to my face by one more connected strap, painted a deep red on the inside. I reached my hand up to my face and felt a huge gash in the back of my jawline and under my cheek; it was still leaking an alarming amount of blood, but still didn't feel like I had lost an artery. Fed up with the state of my being, I grabbed hold of the barely connected strap and ripped it off in one big motion, once again lowering my head in pain.

Finally, I was exposed to the world. It was the first time I had ever revealed my face underneath the mask but it still felt like I didn't break any sacred trend. I slowly turned my head all around while on my knees, showing off the immaculate tattoo of my own smile across my face. It had all forms of my previous identities as a professional wrestler on it, from my early days as Siren to my current. I also had images of my indie promotions I wrestled for and the legendary Kenny Omega fight in Japan. Each one filled up a single tooth in the entirety of my tattooed smile. When I looked back to see Carlos coming back into the ring, I stood and faced him without a move of my muscles. Eventually, he got to his feet in front of me, vitriol still blasting through his veins.

"I'm going to make you regret EVER coming back to the WWE." He growled, blood drying up across his forehead. "I should have beat you while you were still in the Performance Center. I should have BEAT you!"

I gulped a bit of my own blood down my throat and cleared it. *"Ironic."*

Suddenly, I lurched forward, giving him a stiff headbutt and opening his wound on his head even more. He fell like a sack of bricks after a second of stumbling, completely out of it before he hit the canvas. The world became fuzzy for me too after the headbutt; I fell backward and onto my back, with the entire crowd around me lighting up at the sight. Hundreds of voices muddily screamed at me to cover him and get up. With one pull upward, I looked across the ring to see Carlos' motionless body face up on the canvas. I disregarded the crowd's words and crawled over to the corner turnbuckle, grabbing each ascending rung with force. As I pulled up, the crowd slowly realized what was going through my head and cheered me on, calling for my signature flying knee strike.

Stabilizing myself on top of the corner turnbuckle, I zeroed in on Carlos just as he was stirring and turned around. I leapt backward off the turnbuckle to the flood of camera lights snapping the picturesque moment, but Carlos managed to roll out of the way. My vision was blurred and my knee struck at a blank, reddened canvas, sending a painful shock through my kneecap. Instinctively, Carlos rolled over me and stood up with me on his shoulders. With a strong spin of my body, Carlos tossed me up and spun me downward in a vicious full body slam to the mat. It took all of the wind out of me as I collided with the mat. I couldn't find any immediate strength to kick out of it and Carlos went for the pin almost immediately.

"1! 2!"

With every fiber of my being, I kicked my legs up and shot my shoulders up, making it feel as though I was throwing half of my organs out of my body just to achieve freedom. The

crowd ignited in glee, happy that the fight they were witnessing would last just a little bit longer. My blood stained Carlos' oiled up skin as he lifted himself from my body.

"Just.... STAY DOWN!" He bellowed into the canvas, just past my legs. I kicked my legs barely toward him in a show of defiance, failing to mutter a reply back to him. With the fight firmly in his favor, he stood up and fumbled around the ring, looking for his chair. When he crawled out of the ring, I slid over onto my chest, swimming around on a search for my own kendo stick. As I went, my blood continued to pour, leaving a horror movie-esque trail from one side of the ring to the other. The canvas, at that point, was a Jackson Pollock painting, with splatters of blood seemingly splashed around at random. I was sure that my mother and Alyssa wouldn't be too pleased to see that kind of sight.

At long last, I found and reached for my kendo stick in the corner of the ring. Suddenly, Carlos' hand slammed down on mine; I heard the crunch of my bone underneath and lurched to my knees, pulling hard on my hand to free it from its clasp. Carlos reach down and snatched the kendo stick from my hand.

"Heh... Man... You made a bad decision coming into this match with No DQs. I love that this match is over because of it."

Just as he was about to lift both weapons above his head and finish me, I looked up and him with pain and agony in my eyes.

"Agreed."

With that, I flung my tightened fist straight up and collided it with his testicles. The sheer force of the punch sent him jumping upwards and holding his groin in pain; his face scrunched up and his grip of the chair and kendo stick loosened, sending them both tumbling to the floor outside. He was forced to grab hold of the ropes around the corner turnbuckle, letting air through his lungs to offset the internal pain. I took the opportunity to roll away from him and

watch the damage unfold for just a second. As he was at his weakest state, I slid behind him and reached up, pulling him back and onto his shoulders. I put all of my force behind keeping him down.

“1! 2!”

Carlos rolled one of his shoulders over just in time, stopping the referee’s count abruptly. Without pausing or hesitating, I raised my foot up and stomped it straight down onto his face, making him go limp immediately. I stood still, letting the reactions of the crowd soar over and to get confirmation that Carlos was down and out. In one final step, I laid my foot on Carlos’ chest and pushed it firmly into his chest.

“1! 2! 3!”

As the referee counted, I raised my head and closed my eyes, blood still dripping consistently onto the canvas. When three hit, the crowd exploded in cheers and celebration. I leaned my head back in satisfaction, but ended up collapsing to the mat and seeing nothing more than the lights of the titantron turning a bright green and blaring my music throughout the arena. The referee came over to me, Intercontinental Championship in hand and held a gentle hand to my shoulder.

“Are you okay, Siren?” He said to me, shaking me a little bit to check if I was still coherent. I barely nodded my head and lifted it toward the title. It’s white, silky smooth leather padding glistened in the bathing of the spotlights, and it’s gold plating that encompassed the image of the entire globe on it shimmered with the reflection of thousands of cheering fans. I held my hand out like I was accepting my first newborn and even cradled the title in my hands. At long last, the title that was once held by Chyna so many years ago was finally in the hands of another woman. I was champion.

I levered myself up, leaning against the bottom rope and still beholding the beauty of the Intercontinental Championship in my arms. Tears welled up in my eyes and mixed with my blood as they streamed down my cheeks. The sheer amount of joy I felt in my bones was indescribable. It was