The Road To Wrestlemania

by storyranger

Summary

Wrestlemania 33, the ultimate thrill ride.
Or it will be, if they can manage to survive till then.

In which Finn and Bayley are clueless, Seth and Sami both need a hug, and Roman is going to be dead by 50 if Dean doesn't grow some self-preservation instincts pretty soon.

Notes

Content warning for non-consensual drug consumption and a murder attempt.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Bayley did not have a crush on Finn Bálor.

He was her friend, and he was awesome, and they liked all the same things, and sometimes when they hugged in the ring their hugs lasted a little longer than was strictly platonic, but absolutely nothing was going on between them.

(If you asked Sasha, that was the whole problem. But no one was asking Sasha.)

They’ve been growing closer all summer, both sensing an imminent move to the main roster. Sami gets brought up in March, so it’s just them left down in NXT, itching for a summons. Technically Bayley debuts a day before him, but when Finn gets called up the next night it’s for real, not for a guest spot in a tag team. He makes sure to text her non-stop so she doesn’t get lonely.

When he gets injured the night before she truly debuts, it feels like the universe is playing some sick prank on her. She’s the first face he sees when he comes backstage after relinquishing his title, and when she pulls him into a gentle hug he can’t hold back the tears any longer.

“I’m ruining your big night,” he whispers into her shoulder.

“Not even close.”

They go drinking later, though neither really knows whether it’s to mourn or to celebrate. Three times she has the wild idea to ask Finn to kiss her, and three times she writes it off as daft and takes another vodka shot. They both get stumbling drunk and wind up passing out in Bayley’s bed. Nothing happens, nothing at all.

(If you ask Sasha, something should have. But no one is asking Sasha.)

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December 29, 2016

Montreal, Quebec

Bayley has no idea why she feels a little jolt of longing go through her every time Finn texts. It’s not like she didn’t miss him before he got injured. They Facetime or Skype at least once a week now, Finn showing her his newest Lego creations or views of the Bray coastline and Bayley talking about her matches and the latest backstage antics.
It’s been almost 4 months now since she’s seen him in person. It feels like 4 years.

They’re not due to Facetime again till the new year, but he calls the Wednesday before that. The rest of the crew is on vacation in Montreal, a “sorry your life sucks right now” present for Sami.

“Finn!” she squeals, excited, shifting her phone so Finn can see the little Yorkie she’s petting.

“Bayley! You get there safe?”

“You know it.”

“I know you’re probably tired but I finished the TIE Fighter today and I really, really wanted to show you.”

“Nah, I’m not tired. Seth drove most of the way. Show me!”

The image on Bayley’s phone shakes and blurs for a minute, before it coalesces into a sleek black-and-grey space ship, with Finn’s thumbs-up next to it for scale.

“That’s really cool, Finn,” says a low voice, and Bayley turns around to a fascinated Seth Rollins looking over her shoulder.

“The Man himself,” Finn says with a smile. “How’s murdering Triple H coming along?”

“Oh, you know. Few minion fights to clear before the final boss.”

“You know, I think I almost miss you, you bastard.”

Seth smirks. “Get back here soon and I’ll save you one of Kevin Owen’s limbs to destroy.”

“Two limbs, and you don’t interfere when I fight Reigns.”

“Deal.”

“Then I’ll see what I can do”.

Seth wanders away to take a shower, and Finn turns his attention back to Bayley.

“How’s Montréal?” he asks her, wistful.

“It’s beautiful,” she sighs, looking out the window as the city stretches out below her, bathed in the soft glow of lights covered by snow. More flakes are falling, sparkling faintly against the night sky. “I wish you were here.”

“Freeze to death, probably.”

“That’s why we invented sweaters, Finn.”

“I miss you.”

“Me too.”

They gaze at each other for a long moment. There’s a strange lump growing in her throat.

“Bayley, I-”
But whatever Finn was going to say is cut off by Sasha bursting through the door with their takeout. The Yorkie yips and jumps off the bed, rushing over to investigate the new arrival.

“Bayley, they were out of Sprite so they sent you Orange Crush, is that okay?” Sasha looks over and realizes she’s interrupting. “Oh hey, Finn!”

“Hey Sasha. Bayley, I’ll call you soon, eh?”

“Yeah. Bye, Finn.”

“Bye,” he says, and the screen goes blank. Bayley stares at her reflection for a moment.

“So, what’s going on with that, huh?” Sasha asks, putting the food down and pulling out her noodles.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Bay. When are you and Finn gonna get your heads outta your asses?”

“It’s not like that, Sasha,” she mumbles, a bright flush beginning to spread across her cheeks.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t have the hots for Finn Bálor.”

“I don’t have a crush on Finn!” Bayley insists, laughing.

Sasha points her fork at Bayley. “Now try that again. With a straight face this time.”

Bayley takes a deep breath, meeting Sasha’s gaze and saying slowly, “I don’t have a crush-”

She breaks down giggling before she can finish, burying her face into a pillow with embarrassment.

Seth chooses this moment to emerge from the shower, surveying the scene briefly and declaring emphatically, “I don’t want to know.” He grabs one of the other containers and digs in.

Bayley regains her composure and shoots him a grateful look.

“This convo is not over,” Sasha warns, but she lets it drop for now.

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February 6, 2017

Portland, Oregon

Elise Thomson: you still at the arena?

Sami Zayn: what’s up?

Elise Thomson: money where your mouth is, Zayn. Coworkers fucked off to go clubbing without me and are probably all high as fuck right now.

Elise Thomson: That’s what people do in Portland, right?
“What the hell, Elise.”

“Oh, this?” she asks, gesturing vaguely at her deeply bruised cheek as she slides into the passenger seat. There’s a small cut along her jawline, and her left eye is bloodshot. “I… got in a bit of a scrape with a car.”

“You got hit by a car?!”

“Technically, I hit him. I slipped on the ice while I was crossing the street and someone in the turning lane couldn’t see me and started moving and I bounced my face off his bumper.”

“Did the cops charge him or something? Are you gonna take him to court, at least?”

Elise laughs, as if Sami’s just told an absolutely hilarious joke instead of asking an important question. “Oh God no. I fled long before the cops could get called. It was basically a reverse hit-and-run.”

“You ran away.” Sami’s mouth is hanging open now, unable to process this sequence of events.

“Didn’t want cops involved. Cops have guns. I’m afraid of guns. ’Specially Americans with guns.”

“You’re afraid of guns? You’re a security guard.”

“Why do you think I’m not a cop?”

“Okay, but some guards have guns.”

“Yep. Brinks made me an offer three times and I turned them down.”

“But… guns?”

“To be fair, I’m afraid of a lot of things.”

Sami raises an eyebrow, skeptical. “I once saw you pull a spider off my car and put it on a bush while making cooing noises at it.”

“I like spiders. Spiders aren’t the only things people can be afraid of. I’m also not afraid of heights. Or clowns.”

They’re at the hotel now, and as they grab their bags Sami notices the knee brace she’s wearing over her skinny jeans.

“You hurt your knee, too?”

“Like, five years ago.”

“Oh.” It looks like he’s going to ask another question, so she cuts him off before he can speak.

“Boring old repetitive strain injury. No cartilage left. I don’t wrap it all the time, and I wrap under my pants if I’m working.” She turns to gaze at him critically, hoping that answers everything, then voices a question of her own. “Sami, did we really just spend an entire car ride discussing how neurotic I am just so you wouldn’t have to talk about Kevin super-kicking you to stop you beating Jericho?”
“I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, I’m pissed. But since when does that make a fucking difference? Jericho’s still US Champion, and he’s gonna throw a Festival of Friendship in Vegas because he’s gonna do whatever the hell he wants; he’s Chris Jericho, he has creative in the palm of his hand. And unless Daddy Trips tells Kevin to drop him, Kevin’s gonna stay in that toxic codependent bromance until Jericho gets bored of him.”

“Sami, I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“So was college, but I’m still bitter about them never letting me take an acting class. Your ex-best friend kicked you in the fucking face, tonight, and cost you a title match. That’s not nothing.”

“Elise, please. I don’t want to talk about it.” I’m not ready to talk about it.

“Okay. But I want it on record that this “manly suppression of emotions” bullshit was something I advised against.” They’ve reached Sami’s floor now. He steps off but sticks an arm in the door to keep talking.

“So noted. D’ya wanna come join the ‘watch TV and ice our faces’ club for a while?”

“There’s a club now?”

“Well, Enzo took a boot to the face from Gallows tonight, and Roman got one to the back of the head from Samoa Joe which isn’t technically the face but…”

“Same general area. Sure, I’ll join your head wounds party.”

“Good, cause Bayley’s coming and Sasha’s away this week and I always feel bad when she’s the only girl.”

“It’s Bayley. She lives for human interaction. Pretty sure you could invite her to be the only girl in a room of a thousand guys and she’d be fine with it as long as none of them were creeps. But thank you. For inviting me. Be good to have someone to watch out in case I have a concussion.”

“There are these things called hospitals.”

“And there’s this country called America that’s dumb and hates taking my OHIP.”

Sami has to cede this one. “Point.”

The elevator beeps very angrily, startling them both.

“I’ll drop my shit off and join you back down here?”

“Oui.”

When Elise returns, Sami is leaning on the door to his room, conveniently located within eye-line of the elevator. (Also, closer to foot-traffic and the subsequent noise, and therefore cheaper. Go management.) He unlocks the door and ushers her in. She almost trips over Roman, stretched out on a pull-out wedged between the closest bed and the washroom, sound asleep with an icepack perched
“Elise, thank God!” squeals Bayley, flopped on the bed nearest the door with multiple bags of ice across her back. “These two wouldn’t stop bickering.”

“I ain’t hurt!” protests Enzo, a little muffled thanks to the ice that Cass is forcibly applying to his mouth.

“Knock it off, ’Zo,” insists Cass. Even from across the room Elise can tell that his lip is awfully swollen. Possibly split, she thinks idly, before tuning back into what Sami’s saying.

“We could make you an ice bath, Bayley. It wouldn’t take that long.”

Bayley pouts. “But then I can’t hang out with everyone. Besides, if I’m out here I can do my nails. It’s boring just sitting.”

Sami shrugs in defeat, and Bayley flashes him a thousand-watt smile.

“I can do yours, too,” she adds, turning her attention to Elise.

Elise considers carefully, before responding with, “yeah, I supposed I could stay up that late. Equipment guys probably won’t leave till 8:30 tomorrow morning.”

Bayley frowns, then lights up again as she offers, “we could take you. You have to be in Seattle for 6, right?”

“Yeah, but I know you guys have better things to do then drive me to Seattle.”

“It’s on our way. We have a house show the next day. Sami, tell her!” Bayley pleads.

Sami gives her a shy smile. “It’s not a bother. You should come with us.”

“Why the fuck would you get up at 8 when you can come with the G’s and leave at 3?” demands Enzo, who has finally given in to Big Cass’s demands and is holding the ice to his face by himself.

Elise shrugs and plops onto the bed next to Bayley. “I can’t fight logic like that.” She turns to thank Bayley for instigating this plan, and Cass finally gets a look at the other side of her face.

“The fuckin’ hell happened to your fuckin’ face, ’Lise?” He sounds a bit like a giant about to go out and wreck whoever did this to their tiny friend.

“Some asshole hits her with his car and she’s the one who flees the scene,” Sami answers for her, with a disapproving shake of his head.

Elise is not down to rehash this. “Less talking, more TV. I was promised ice and TV.”

The wrestlers share a private look of concern before abruptly handing her the ice bucket and a box of Ziploc bags while beginning to bicker over what to watch. They settle on a rerun of Toddlers and Tiaras, because being able to yell at a common enemy feels important right now. Enzo is particularly critical of the parents, remarking multiple times that “my staff at fuckin’ Hooters wore more clothing than some of these children.” Elise doesn’t even pretend to be surprised by this new information; frankly, you could probably tell her Enzo used to be a professional fortune cookie writer before he became a wrestler and she’d probably believe you.

Enzo is like… Gonzo the Great: an enigma wrapped in a conundrum.
Bayley’s expecting Elise to pick clear polish, but to her surprise she picks a rose gold, subtle but unmistakably glittery. “I like sparkly things,” she says shyly, turning her hand this way and that once they’re mostly dry to let the paint catch the light. “They fascinate me.”

“Now do mine!” insists Enzo, and the girls happily oblige.

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February 7, 2017

A highway between Portland and Seattle

Finn Bálor definitely had a crush on Bayley.

He wasn’t even trying terribly hard to hide it at this point. She was the first person he texted when he reached a rehab milestone, the first person he snapchatted when he bought new Lego sets, one of the few people he Facetimed, and the only person he ever took the extra effort to Skype. It was so blatantly obvious that his best friend Sami, who often needed a clue-bat to the face to figure things out, had caught on.

Normally once Sami realizes something like this, he would nag Finn to do something about it, but he holds his tongue. He gets why Finn isn’t making a move; he’s an ocean away and going through enough shit right now without adding relationship drama to the mix.

So he says nothing and lets Finn talk his ear off about the latest funny story Bayley told him (even though he’s already heard most of these from Bayley herself) and how much he misses everyone and pretends he isn’t picking up that Finn definitely doesn’t miss them all equally.

He’s not threatened. He knows Finn isn’t going to abandon him if he does get a girlfriend, and Sami has other people to hang out with. He’s just really, really hoping this doesn’t blow up in Finn’s face because with the way this year’s been going he’s really not down to be a mediator.

Speaking of Finn and the way the year is going, his phone is blowing up with texts from Finn, who has finally gotten home from the gym and finished watching the previous evening’s Raw. Now a good night’s sleep-removed from the match, he’s in a better headspace to deal with talking about it, but it still brings a squirmy, stinging mass of emotions to the surface.

Finn Bálor: I’LL KILL HIM

Sami Zayn: Hey Finn. Guess you watched?

Finn Bálor: YOU SHOULD HAVE TEXTED ME

Sami Zayn: it was like 5am your time. You were asleep.

Finn Bálor: this would have been worth waking me up for
**Finn Bálor**: Seriously, love, are you okay?

**Sami Zayn**: Not really.

**Sami Zayn**: I thought I was over it, you know?

**Sami Zayn**: turns out I’m not

**Sami Zayn**: it sucks.

He starts biting his lip unconsciously, and Bayley, tucked into the backseat beside him, puts her arms around him and squeezes tight. Enzo’s driving, with Cass in the shotgun seat, playing games on his phone with one hand, the other resting lightly on Enzo’s knee. Roman’s asleep in the middle seat, and Elise is sewing something, occasionally pausing to flex her knee stiffly.

“What’s wrong, Sami?” Bayley murmurs, and he has to swallow the lump that’s formed in his throat before he can answer.

“It was supposed to be over. I beat him at Battleground and that was supposed to be it. But it’s not. He’s still in my head. I still…miss him.” He bites out ‘miss’ like it’s a curse word, like he hates himself for even thinking about Kevin Owens.

*If he said sorry tomorrow I’d probably forgive that bastard.*

*Pretty damn big ‘if’, though.*

Bayley just holds him, breathes with him, as if what’s he said is the most natural thing in the world and not the rambling admissions of a pathetic, neurotic fool.

**Finn Bálor**: He’s scum, Sami. Rubbish.

**Sami Zayn**: I miss you, Finn.

**Sami Zayn**: I need my best friend to tell me I’m not crazy.

**Finn Bálor**: You’re not crazy, Sami.

**Finn Bálor**: No more than any of the rest of us.

**Finn Bálor**: I need to get to sleep, but if you need me, TEXT ME. I don’t care if it’s the middle of the night over here.

**Sami Zayn**: okay. ttyl

**Finn Bálor**: ttfn

Sami slips his phone back into his pocket with a sigh, and leans over a bit so Bayley can hug him more comfortably. Her phone beeps politely, but she ignores it, unwilling to break the moment.
It’s just as well.

_Finn Bálor: hug him extra for me, Bayley. He needs it._

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_February 13, 2017_  
_Las Vegas, Nevada_

Something’s missing.

She’s won the Women’s Championship. Her dream has come true.

But something’s not right, and she doesn’t know what, and it’s eating her up because this should be perfect, and yet somehow it’s not, not quite.

So she dives into the WWE Universe and hugs as many people as she can because that’s what 10-year-old Bayley would have wanted, and she knows somewhere in that crowd there’s another 10-year-old who’s day or possibly year could be made by a hug from their favourite star, and who is she to deny them? Eventually, after she loses track of how many people she’s hugged, the nagging feeling is gone.

It only returns after the interviews, the plate changes, the muted after party in her room as they try not to get busted by the hotel manager. It returns as she’s tossing stray bottles into the trash and putting on pyjamas, climbing into bed with the title placed reverently on the side-table next to her, atop her carefully folded jacket.

Something’s missing.

No.

Someone.

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Somehow being right doesn’t make watching the Festival of Friendship any better. His skin feels too small, his chest painfully tight. He doesn’t even _like_ Jericho, but as his head smashes into the television screen Sami flashes back to winning the NXT titles. The hug followed by a choke slam; the sickening thud as his own skull collided with the cold steel of the entrance ramp.

Sami’s not fully himself again until the small hours of the next morning. Happy _fucking_ Valentine’s Day, Las Vegas.
Each day in rehab kinda blurs into the next. Seth’s in three times a day, so pain and exhaustion have basically become part of his personality at this point. Sasha drives down to visit now and then, but he’s too tired to fuck, to do anything besides cuddle and watch the occasional movie. He’s bored, he’s lonely, and the coil of self-doubt he thought he’d banished last year has lodged itself in his ribs again.

So today, just like any other day, he collapses onto the bed that, de facto, has become ‘his’, under the same fucking poster of fucking Triple H, and watches the technician wrap his knee and hook up wires and just tries to enjoy this brief moment of rest before he has to get up and do everything all over again.

“Ní fhaca mé le fada thú,” says a lilting voice from the bed beside him, and he looks over in shock to see Finn, smiling across the aisle at him.

“Finn!”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Seth,” Finn says with wry grin.

Seth chuckles. “You should tweet that.”

“Only if you take a picture for it.”

“Deal.”

Finn pulls out his phone and hands it to the technician, who takes several shots and hands it back with a smile. Finn taps out the caption and posts, then turns back to Seth, grinning.

“So, Champ. Fancy me breaking you out of here?”

Seth shakes his head. “As tempting as that sounds, I have a king to slay.”

“Fair enough. A take-away and a movie, then?”

“You have no idea how good that sounds right now.”

“Think I just might.”

Unlike Roman and Dean, Finn doesn’t judge Seth’s choice of dinner (salad), nor his choice of movies (The Force Awakens). As the familiar strains of the opening crawl begin, Seth’s surprised by how easy this is, how quickly he and Finn have fallen into a friendship when their last in-person interaction featured Seth power-bombing him onto the injured list. For now, he pushes the thought aside and focusses on not falling asleep before the movie ends.

“Space and time, lad,” Finn will say when Seth asks about it later. “Space and time and you getting
your head out of your arse a bit.”

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February 20, 2017

Los Angeles, California

“What the fuck is Samoa Joe’s problem?” asks Elise as Sami limps towards her, a week later. It’s one of the rare nights where she’s been put on backstage roaming duties, so she had the dubious honour of being near enough to a monitor to witness Samoa Joe maul Sami for the second time and hand him to Kevin Owens for an easy pin.

Sami shrugs and leans against the wall, clearly in pain. “He wants to be Triple H’s little bitch and still get respected.”

“Gah. Why is Triple H such a frickin’ skeebag?” Elise grumbles.

Sami sighs, and some of his anger drains away. “I wouldn’t be here without NXT, though. He’s not all bad.”

“Fuck. I hate imagining others complexly.” She glances at her watch. “’Kay, I have to keep roaming. Are you going to be okay or do you want me to send a trainer over?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Suuuuure,” she drawls, rolling her eyes skeptically.

“I’m serious,” he says, more forcefully this time, and gives her a small shove forward. “Go.”

Elise shakes her head in mock exasperation but obeys.

As she wanders down a hallway of dressing rooms a bit later, a door springs open suddenly and a large, heavy-set man barrels out, smacking right into Elise. She stumbles for a moment and then draws herself up to full height, turning to the offending superstar with an icy glare.

It’s Samoa Joe.

Her confidence slips for a fraction of a second, then returns in full force as she cocks her head, clearly signalling an apology is expected. Instead, Samoa Joe takes a step towards her, growling, “Watch where you’re walking next time, drone.”

“Take your own advice next time, fucker.”

“What did you say to me?”

“I said, take your own advice and watch where you’re walking, you ungraceful oaf. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to walk away and keep doing my job before I say something unprofessional that I might regret later.”
And with that, she breezes past him, taking care not to look back or walk any faster than her normal roaming speed. No way in hell was she going to show this bully any sign she was intimidated.

And she was intimidated, just a little. Mostly because Samoa Joe was the COO’s flavour of the month, and even though she knew her manager would quit before he’d be convinced by Trips to fire her, she didn’t want to cause trouble. Not really. But she was pretty fucking sick of this asshole running roughshod over her friends.

She pushes it out of her mind and goes to find her boss so she can finish her shift and start helping the equipment crew load out. If she’s going to start getting into shit with the superstars, her perfect staff record better stay perfect.

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February 21, 2017

Ontario, California

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Rick Dodgeson, Chief of Security, looks up from his phone and motions to Elise to fall into step with him as he begins doing the initial safety walk. “Until further notice, you’re on front of house duty only, and I don’t want you doing equipment load-ins or -outs. Stay away from backstage unless there is a legitimate emergency.”

“Sir, is this about me calling Samoa Joe a fucker last night? Because I know I’m not supposed to curse on shift but I swear I was provoked.”

“Thomson, we both know I don’t actually give a fuck if you curse around the wrestlers. It’s not about anything you did.”

“Then why am I being punished?”

Dodgson signs, and his tone softens a little. “Elise, this isn’t a punishment. It’s just until things blow over a bit. I’m getting some pressure from higher ups to crackdown on “professionalism”, and we all know what that’s really code for.”

“Cut the women?”

“Woman.”

“I don’t need to be coddled!”

“You also don’t need to deliberately put yourself in jeopardy.”

“It’s just… it felt like I was finally getting taken seriously around here.”

“One month. Then I’ll put you in the backstage shift rotation again. Deal?”

“Fine. Deal.”
When you leave the house alone, there are certain rules you follow. Be careful who you talk to. Protect your drinks. Accept no food from strangers. Wear shoes you can run in, if you need to, and avoid clothes that give an attacker easy grappling points. If you can’t run, you sure as hell know how to fight. Identify the exits. Scope the staff, pick out who you can trust, who to avoid.

The problem with rules is that no matter how well you follow them, they can’t keep you safe. The rules aren’t about you, not really. They’re about preventing someone else from harming you.

Nothing stops someone hurting you if they’re truly determined to do it.

So on Thursday night, when Elise leaves her hotel room to catch a concert on a rare night off, she follows the rules. She wears comfy sneakers, her clothes are non-descript and fitted, she does a lap of the venue before she picks her spot. She likes this band, but she’s seen them several times before; she doesn’t need a front row spot. He knee is bothering her so she stays near the back, where there’s chairs and personal space and easy access to a washroom.

The opener is mediocre, but listenable. She spends the intermission playing on her phone, using the miraculously strong wifi to send some snaps and answer stray emails. When the main act takes to the stage, her knee feels solid enough to dance on for a while, so she orders a coke and moves to the fringes of the crowd.

It’s so easy to get lost in their music, when she knows every lyric and the notes crash over and through her likes waves. She doesn’t notice the pair of tall, dark-haired women heading her way until one of them has smacked into her, jostling the drink Elise holds loosely at her side so some of it sloshes onto both their shoes.

“Watch yourself, freak,” one snaps, her voice terse and accented. British maybe? Elise can’t quite be sure.

“Don’t want you getting hurt, now, do we?” sneers the other, from behind her. Australian. Definitely Australian. Something in their tone signals this isn’t advice; it’s a threat. She pivots so they’ll both be in full view, ready for a fight, but the women just grin wolfishly for her at a minute before disappearing into the bathroom.

She shrugs it off and keeps dancing, finishing her coke and discarding the glass in a nearby trashcan. A few songs later she suddenly feels tired, which is annoying, but not unusual; working nights means unexpected drowsiness is a near-constant companion.

When she starts to feel dizzy though, then she gets worried. She’s having trouble focusing, and lying down on the floor starts to seem like a really good idea.
Now she’s scared. The floor is sticking to her shoes. Lying down on it is the last thing she should do. Why does it seem like a viable plan?

She bolts for the door. She can feel herself weaving, but she forces her legs to keep going in as straight a line as possible until she reaches the sidewalk.

She’s rapidly losing her ability to focus on anything, so she sits down on the curb and fumbles her phone, hitting “dial contact” on the last person she texted.

“Elise! How’s the concert?” Sami’s cheerful voice helps her calm down for a moment. She has no idea how much longer she has left conscious, so she concentrates on the info Sami needs to find her. “I’m… at Eberhardshofstraße and Kernstraße,” she gasps out, and the world begins to spin to black.

On the other end of the line, Sami’s been having a relatively normal night, playing NHL2K17 with Baron Corbin while Dean and Roman alternately chirp and cheer them on. He and Roman both lost their matches at the house show, but to their credit neither one has slipped into a funk about it. At the sound of her voice Sami immediately goes into panic mode. Her words are slurred, her speech unsteady as she trips over the unfamiliar German street names. Even the volume fluctuates, like she’s struggling to keep the phone near her mouth.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know… think something happened… I need… help? Help. I need help.”

“No,” says a rough, familiar male voice, and the line clicks dead.

Roman catches the look of horror on Sami’s face. “Sami? What’s wrong?”

“I think she’s been roofied.” He keeps the part about the man on the phone to himself as he frantically looks for his keys. No use inciting even more panic.

“She’s sure as shit trashed on something,” agrees Dean, snatching his jacket off the table, revealing the missing keys and tossing them to Sami.

“How does a security guard let herself get roofied?” Corbin asks.

“How does an adult think it’s okay to drug someone else?” Sami snaps back at him.

“Okay, when you put it like that, I sound like the asshole.”

Dean smacks him on the shoulder as they pile into the elevator. “Cobin, you are an asshole. That’s why we’re friends.”

“What are we sure she’s not just drunk?” Roman asks, gently.

Dean rounds on him. “How drunk did you think she was in Montreal?”

Roman considers it. “Like, a little tipsy. She was sober by the time we got to her apartment.”

“She’d had five shots. She kept stealing Bayley’s to make Bayley slow down.”

“The hell?”
Dean shrugs. “She’s a fucking heavyweight. Sami’s right. Someone slipped her something.”

“Where is she?” Corbin asks, pulling up a map as they pile into the van.

“Eberhardshofstrasse and Kernstrasse?”

“I have an Eberhardshofstraße and Kernstraße?”

“That’ll be it,” says Roman from the shotgun seat, grabbing the offered phone and beginning to fire off directions at Dean, whose propensity for speeding and sketchy overtaking was deemed an asset in this case rather than a flaw.

Sami’s knee is bouncing uncontrollably, and Roman can’t help but think there’s something more going on. “Sami?”

“Yeah?”

“What aren’t you telling us?”

“On the phone. There was someone else.”

“Someone else? Like a friend?”

“It was Samoa Joe.”

“Fucking Christ,” breathes Roman, and Dean bumps his speed up just a little bit more.

They can’t see her from the van when they get to the intersection, so Dean parks illegally and they jump out, scanning the cramped sidewalks for any sign of their friend. She’s not in front of the venue, so they split up to search the alleys on either side.

It’s Roman and Sami who find her, dumped unceremoniously next to the fire escape. She’s unconscious, but she looks unharmed and her clothes are intact. Her phone is laying face-up on the asphalt beside her, and Sami pockets it as Roman scoops her off the ground and heads for the street. Corbin and Dean spot them as they’re coming out of the other alley, and they race back to meet them at the van.

“Hospital?” asks Corbin, and the other three shake their heads. He shrugs. “Someone had to put it out there.”

Roman’s assessment is calm as he puts her down gently. “She’s breathing fine, her pulse is fine. I think she just has to sleep this off.”

Now that Elise is safe in their company, Roman takes the wheel. Sami and Dean have her propped up between them in hopes the cops won’t stop them, and Corbin starts fiddling awkwardly with his phone. Now that the initial crisis is over, he’s pretty extraneous; they don’t need four people to take care of her, and he’s met her once. The others easily pick up on his discomfort and dismiss him to bed as soon as they reach the hotel, lingering in the van once he leaves to make a plan.

“It should be me,” Sami insists. “I got her into this fucking mess, I should be the one to take care of her.”

“Okay,” Roman agrees, “but we’ll stay with you for a while, alright? I don’t want you alone right now.”
Sami blows out a sigh but doesn’t protest. Roman carries her upstairs and Dean turns the TV on with the volume way down so they have something to distract them a little. They stay for two hours, taking turns to check pulse and breathing, before Sami finally insists he’ll be fine on his own and they reluctantly return to their own room.

Even snuggled under an extra blanket and wrapped in each other’s arms, it takes both of them a long, long time to fall asleep.

***

February 24, 2017

Nuremberg, Germany

It’s around 6:00am when Elise awakes with a scream.

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” soothes Sami, perching next to her and wrapping his arms around her shoulders. “You’re safe.”

Elise leans into his shoulder, breathing hard. “What the fuck happened to me?”

“What do you remember?” he asks, gently rubbing her back, trying to calm her.

“There were these girls. Really tall, Australian girls. I thought they were trying to pick a fight.”

“What did they say?”

“Something about being careful. Not a warning. A threat. I got dizzy after they left. I went outside for air and everything got worse. I can’t remember what happened next.” She pulls away to look at Sami, her eyes filled with fear. “Why can’t I remember?”

“I think someone drugged you.”

“I drank half a coke. It never left my hand. The other half ended up on my shoes when…” her voice trails off, as she struggles to put the pieces together into something half-way plausible. “When the Australian smacked into me. Jesus Christ. It was her, wasn’t it?”

She grabs her phone off the side table as if it may hold some hidden clue. She flicks to her photo folder, in case she’d had the foresight to snap a picture of the troublesome Aussies.

“What the fuck?” she asks again, pressing play on a new video she does not remember taking.

Samoa Joe’s face fills the frame and Sami feels his heart stop.

“Not only do you disrespect me, but you teach your friends to disrespect me. So I’m here to teach your little friend a lesson about that happens when you run your mouth. This is your world now, Sami. This is your world.”

The bottom drops out of his stomach as he truly realizes just how far Samoa Joe is willing to take things. Elise’s jaw has gone taut, her teeth clenched. She turns to Sami with murder in her eyes and he braces himself for her to lose it on him, to blame him for getting her involved, to tell him to get out of her life and stay out.
“I’m going to strip his soul from his body with a rusty spork,” she says, and he stares at her for a moment, unable to comprehend. “Full dark, no stars. Samoa Joe will rue the day he met me if it’s the last thing I do.”

“So you’re not… angry with me?”

“Why the fuck would I be angry with you?”

“I got you into this mess. This is all my fault.”

“Sami, no. Nonononono. This is on him, not on you. I got myself mixed up into this shit, and I’ll deal with what comes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” She scoots over so Sami can sit properly on the bed. He picks up on the cue and settles next to her, legs crossed, shoulders slumped. Elise rests her head on his shoulder, finally beginning to feel the giant headache she was too preoccupied to notice when she woke up.

“I was scared,” Sami says quietly. “I thought we wouldn’t find you in time.”

“But you did. I woke up in a bed and not in an alley.”

“Corbin wanted to take you to a hospital, but Dean and Roman and I all said no.”

“Good boys.”

“We need to get you traveller’s insurance.”

“Ughhhhhhh”

“Look, if you’re going to get dragged into our drama, we need to be able to take you to the hospital.”

“I hate hospitals.”

Sami smirks a bit at this. “So does Dean.”

“Figures, we’re the same brand of crazy.” He’s still looking at her, concerned, so she sighs and adds “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

Sami yawns, and Elise notices the bags under his eyes, the ashy tinge to his normally bright face. “Here, let me clear out so you can get some sleep,” she offers, making it to her feet but falling back against the mattress with a groan as dizziness overtakes her almost immediately.

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry about it. Internet says you’ll probably be fucked up for a few more hours at least.”

“Oh goody.”

Sami tilts his head back against the wall, closing his eyes and yawning once more.

Elise nudges him. “You need to sleep.”

“Are you sure you’re okay enough for that?”
“I’m so fine, you can buy me breakfast in a few hours when I’m sure I’m not just gonna vomit it on your shoes.”

“That doesn’t sound fine.”

“It’s as good as we’re gonna get. I’m serious, Sami. Take a nap.”

He’d protest more, but his eyelids are so heavy and the pillows are so soft and he’s sunk down into the mattress and drifted off before he knows it’s happening.

***

Roman and Dean are lazing in bed when Roman gets the text from Sami.

_Sami Zayn: Elise is awake_

_Sami Zayn: She made me take a nap before we got food, so I think she’s okay._

_Sami Zayn: It was Peyton & Billie who drugged her._

Roman tosses the phone to Dean and starts rifling through his bag for clean clothes. Dean scrolls through and lets out a low whistle.

“So it’s definitely Trips, then.”

“I don’t understand it. Why go after Sami?”

Dean holds up a hand and starts ticking off reasons. “He teamed with you and Seth. He called Samoa Joe out for being Trips’ new minion. Mick Foley loves him. He has a moral compass.”

“Is that enough, though?”

Dean gives Roman a _look_. “This is Triple H. The guy who thinks hitting employees in the head with a sledgehammer is appropriate workplace discipline.”

“Touche.”

Dean changes the subject. “We still goin’ down to visit Seth this weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m worried.”

Roman signs. “Me too. He’s going to burn himself out if he’s not careful.”

“I’d do the same thing, though, if it were me.”

“That’s why I worry about you. Constantly.”
“I guess we just have to be there for him.”

“Guess so.”

***

February 27, 2017

Green Bay, Wisconsin

“Seth, are you crazy?”

“I’m going to Wrestlemania, Roman.”

“You can’t go if they don’t clear you.”

“I DON’T GIVE A FLYING FUCK IF THEY CLEAR ME.”

“Seth-” Roman starts, but Seth holds a hand up to cut him off, pushing himself out of his chair to get right up in the Samoan’s space.

“No. Don’t try to talk sense into me, Rome. I’m through with being sensible, with playing his stupid fucking game. I’m going to Wrestlemania. The only question is do you have my back?”

They stand toe-to-toe, eyes searching each other, for a long time. Then Roman sighs, and pulls Seth into a hug.

“I have your back, uce. You have my word.”

And the tears Seth’s been choking back since Graves helped him into the ring begin to flow.

Roman’s grip tightens, rubbing firm circles into Seth’s back as weeks’ worth of frustration and pain flow out of him and onto Roman’s tank top.

“I stabbed you in the back for him, and this is what he does,” Seth says finally, still sniffling.

“Hunter’s a piece of shit.”

“So am I.”

“This wasn’t your fault, Seth.”

Seth breaks the embrace and slowly eases back into the chair. “Sure feels like it was.”

Roman drags a chair over to sit next to him, tossing his tattooed arm over the smaller guy’s shoulders. “I know, brother. I know.”

“I can’t do it. I can’t be on the shelf for Wrestlemania. Not again. It’ll kill me.”

“You’re not alone this time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Seth, we talked about this.”
“Still feel like I need to say it, sometimes.”

“Okay.”

Seth sighs and swipes his face with his sleeve. “Don’t you have a contract to sign tonight?”

“Braun doesn’t need a fucking contract. I’m not going to back out of our match at Fastlane.”

“I’m not going to be responsible for you getting into trouble with Foley.”

“Alright, alright. But I’ve got plenty of time. I can hang out here with you for a while longer.”

“Fuss over me, you mean.”

“Someone’s gotta keep our gang alive, and it sure as hell ain’t gonna be Dean.”

Seth can’t argue with logic like that.

***

Maybe it’s not the most honourable thing in the world, Sami admits to himself, to jump a guy after he’s had a match with the Swiss Superman.

*But goddamnit*, he thinks as he drives forearm after forearm into Samoa Joe, *does it ever feel good.*

***

*March 5, 2017*

*Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

*They lost.*

Enzo doesn’t speak as they shower and change, as they walk to the carpark. He doesn’t speak the whole ride to the hotel. He doesn’t speak as they trudge into the elevator, on the short trip up to their room, as he fumbles with the room key and finally gets the door open.

Cass feels this silence like a physical weight in his gut. Enzo chuck his bag in the corner and slams the bathroom door. The sound reverberates through Cass, burrowing under his skin and into his bones. He hears the shower turn on and flings himself onto the bed with a frustrated roar, the sound coming out harsh and animal as he slams a fist into the mattress beside him before rolling onto his back, utterly spent.

He lies there for a long time, eyes closed, breathing hard. Suddenly he hears a muffled noise from the bathroom, over the sound of running water. At first he thinks he’s imagining things, but then he hears it again, louder this time, and he realises it’s real, and it’s coming from Enzo. Cass is up and moving in a flash.
“Zo?” he calls out gently, knocking on the door and testing the handle. It’s unlocked. There’s no response, so he knocks again and says, “I’m coming in.”

He pulls back the curtain and has to bite back a gasp at the scene. Enzo, covered in fresh welts and bruises, sitting in a heap on the shower floor, sobbing his heart out.

If Cass had taken a second to think, he would have turned the water off, or taken his clothes off, or coaxed Enzo out of the bathroom. But he’s not thinking. Enzo’s crying and his heart is screaming and he just sits down next to Enzo under the water and pulls him close. Enzo presses his face against Cass’s chest and Cass is soaked through and it doesn’t matter, nothing matters except Enzo.

They sit like that, drenched and clinging to each other, until the water turns cold, and then Cass turns off the shower and begins carefully towelling off the still-sniffling Enzo. By the time he gets Enzo into dry clothes and tucked under the covers, the tears have stopped, but Enzo’s still not talking. Cass tosses his t-shirt and jeans over the curtain rod, praying they’ll dry by morning, and throws on some sweatpants before slipping into bed beside him. Enzo’s faced away from him, won’t look him in the eye, so Cass reaches out and tugs him over till they’re spooning.

“Zo. Talk to me. Please.”

“I lost. We had a chance at the titles and I lost it for you. Fucked it all up. You deserve a win, you deserve it so bad, and I lost.”

“Gallows cheated. I saw it, Zo, we all saw it.”

“The Club’s always gonna cheat. Shoulda fought out. Made the tag.”

“Zo-”

Enzo finally rolls over to face him, sitting up as the words tumble from his lips. “Draggin’ you down, Cass. Holding you back. Could be Universal Champ right now if you weren’t shackled to me.”

“Stop it.”

“Tell me I’m wrong, Cass. Just fuckin’ try to tell me that I’m not the one stoppin’ you from makin’ it big.”

Cass puts a hand on either side of Enzo’s face and pulls their heads together “You listen to me, Enzo Amore. I am fuckin’ nothing without you. We do this together, or I don’t do it at all. You hear me?”

Enzo finally meets his gaze, shaking his head a bit. “You’re an idiot, Colin Cassady.”

Cass replies by kissing him, deep and slow, and ghosting his fingers down Enzo’s chest and over his waistband. There’s an immediate response, and Enzo whines low in his throat.

Cass pulls his mouth away and starts nuzzling against Enzo’s neck, his fingers continuing to trace gentle patterns over the front of Enzo’s boxers. “What’s that about idiots?” he whispers, and Enzo moans.

“Don’t go thinkin’ ya can just distract me from m’ point with a handy,” he mumbles, but it’s so hard to focus on his self-loathing when Cass is tugging his boxers down like that and sliding a hand around his- Fuck it.

Fuck tonight, talk tomorrow.
Sami is so fucking sick of losing.

The thing about being in a ring with Dean Ambrose is that he never really has a plan. Winging it is just so much more interesting. He’ll map out a vague sequence of events, but anything more concrete and he gets bored. It’s what makes him so fucking scary as an opponent; there’s no good way to prepare to face a man with no plan. But it can make things a little hairy when you’re trying to stage a stunt fight with a friend.

(Dean would argue that Baron should treat this like a fucking real fight and “just fucking hit me, Corbin,” but Baron’s lost control once before on Dean, at Elimination Chamber, and it’s what got them into this fucking mess in the first place. He wants this feud over and done with before he has a chance to lose control again.)

Baron prefers meticulously planning shit out as much as possible, if they’re going to get weapons and equipment involved. But every time he brings it up Dean calls him a square, so he tries to stop worrying. Focuses on improvising in the moment. It mostly works.

Until the night it really, really doesn’t.

The goal was simple. Spice up their on-screen feud with a really aggressive backstage beatdown that would get the audience invested in the IC title street-fight that Dean was trying to pitch to Daniel Bryan for Wrestlemania. The forklift was actually Baron’s idea, and Dean fucking loved it. Insisted they do it even when Baron started to get cold feet about the whole thing.

You should have shut it down.

Dean could have stopped things at any time.

But you knew he wasn’t going to. It’s Dean. You should have pulled it back.

It didn’t matter now. What matters is that Dean was now coughing up blood on the bed in their shared hotel room and Baron has about three hours to live before a 265lb Samoan will arrive in Indianapolis and strangled him.

(And possibly Dean as well. But we all know who Roman is strangling first, and it’s definitely not his boyfriend.)
Dean insists, through ragged breathing and bloody coughs, that they share the blame for the fuckup. That he’s not mad at Corbin. That it’s going to be fine.

But when Roman calls, Dean makes Baron answer, and it’s every bit as painful as he’s been imagining since the moment he heard that sickening crack when the forklift went too far.

“Roman! Hi. Yeah. Um. Yeah. Okay. Well it wasn’t just… yeah, no, I know.” Baron winces and holds the phone out to Dean. “He wants to talk to you.”

Dean grits his teeth and takes the phone. “Hey, Roman.”

“Uce, what the fuck were you thinking?”

“Don’t like hospitals.”

Roman lets out a low growl. “I’m going to die of a stress-induced aneurism before I’m fifty if you keep pulling shit like this.”

“I’m fine, Ro,” Dean lies, and is immediately betrayed by a fit of horrifically wet-sounding coughing.

“I’m already on the highway, dumbass. Lying to me is only going to make this worse for you.”

“Fuck, Ro. People are gonna get suspicious.”

“People can fuck right off.” Roman’s voice softens as Dean coughs again. “Hang in there, babe. I’ll be there as quick as I can.”

“Better pick up more Advil,” Dean says, and it’s the closest Roman’s going to get to a thank you right now, so he takes it and hangs up.

Roman arrives two hours later, and though Dean may raise an eyebrow at his boyfriend’s unusual choice to speed, he doesn’t say anything. He’s propped up in bed by an obscene amount of pillows (Baron glared at the front desk manager until she gave him everything she had on-hand and a few extra from storage) and his bruise-mottled chest is covered in icepacks. It’s been 4 hours since he could breathe without feeling like he was getting stabbed, and he’s so over this.

“Roman, I’m sorry,” Baron begins, as Roman barrels past him into the room.

If Roman didn’t know better, he’d say Corbin looks about ready to cry. The drive gave him a chance to calm down, so instead of punching Baron he simply says, “I’ll take it from here,” and hands Baron a room key. “It’s a single on the 5th floor. I’ll text you if things get worse and I need extra hands.”

Baron recognizes the dismissal and grabs his phone and sweatpants. Dean gives him a cheeky grin and Baron responds by flipping him off before heading out the door.

“Separate room, booked under my name, gives us some plausible deniability,” Roman says, answering Dean’s unasked question.

“Just couldn’t handle sharing me, could you?” Dean quips, and breaks down into a fit of coughing. Roman’s at his side immediately, gently cradling Dean to his chest and murmuring into his hair. It feels like forever before Dean catches his breath again.

“Hurts,” Dean says, miserably, dropping the pretense.
“What do you need, uce?”

In response, Dean grabs the collar of his shirt and drags his mouth down into a fierce kiss. Roman’s so surprised he forgets himself and responds in kind, hungry and passionate, until a low *hiss* of pain escapes from Dean’s lips and he remembers.

“Shit, Dean. I’m sorry,” he whispers, pulling away.

Dean whines and tries to tug him back. “S’fine. Keep going.”

“Babe, you need rest.” *And drugs, and probably a hospital.*

Dean pouts, but he doesn’t argue. Instead, he tries to get as comfortable as possible, with Roman helping to reposition the pillows so he won’t roll in the night.

Roman’s phone buzzes softly in his pocket, and the ghost of a grin passes across his face as he reads the message preview before opening it.

*Elise Thomson: I had nothing to do with this foolishness. I never would have signed off on something that stupid.*

*Elise Thomson: at the very least I would have narc’d to you*

*Roman Reigns: K. I believe that.*

*Elise Thomson: He okay?*

*Roman Reigns: asking him or me?*

*Elise Thomson: that basically answers my question.*

*Roman Reigns: breathing’s pretty harsh. Trying to get him to sleep.*

*Elise Thomson: want some of my Ventolin? Or naproxen, melatonin… I have a bit of Pulmicort left but that’s steroidal*

*Elise Thomson: might trip the wellness policy.*

*Roman Reigns: Bring the ventolin and the melatonin.*

Roman texts her the room number and sends Sami a quick “got here safe” message before he tosses his phone onto the side table. He takes Dean’s hand in his and rubs his thumb over the back of it. Dean coughs again, and his fingernails dig a bit into Roman’s palm as he hisses curses between each throbbing breath.

“TV take your mind off things?” Roman asks, a hint of desperation clear in his voice. He’s not a doctor, and while he’s done more than his share of patch-ups over the years this is far beyond his paygrade. Dean nods and he flips on some random action movie with lots of cars blowing up that seems to catch Dean’s attention almost immediately. Roman doesn’t pay attention at all, preferring instead to watch the steady rise and fall of Dean’s chest.
There’s a knock on the door, and Roman answers to a dishevelled Elise, dressed in an oversized McGill hoodie and dance shorts. She plops down on the ottoman next to the bed and begins pulling things out of her pocket, talking to Dean with the confident air of someone used to years of treating ailments with only Google, MD to help.

“So this is my spare inhaler. Don’t worry, I washed it out first. It won’t make things hurt less but it’ll relax your airway a bit, keep you from coughing so much.” She hands it over and continues, “I need you to exhale as much as possible, then take as deep a breath as you can while pressing down on the cartridge. Then hold it.”

“For how long?”

“Long as you can.”

Dean follows her orders, grimacing as some of the bitter vapour hits his tongue.

“One more time.”

He flips her off but complies. He hands back the inhaler and she places it carefully on a side table before handing him the next bottle.

“Melatonin. Over the counter. Don’t take more than three. Gotta warn you, it might fuck your dreams up.”

Dean eyes the bottle for a second, then pours three into his hand and dry-swallows them.

“Good boy,” she pronounces, standing up and handing the remaining items to Roman. In a low voice she explains, “naproxen for the swelling. I’ll need it back in approximately 11 days.”

“We have Advil-” Roman begins, but she closes his fingers over the bottle.

“This is better, and I have more then I need right now.”

“Okay.”

“Call me, beep me, if you want to reach me,” she says, a tiny smile on her lips as she saunters out of the room.

Roman’s so focused on the prescription bottle that he only registers the other items in his hands after he hears the door click shut. A pack of *Now and Laters*, two *KitKats*, and a thumb-drive with a hastily-scrawled post-it note stuck to it.

*Heard you liked Andrew Younghusband and DIY. Figured you might want some company for your vigil.*

He pulls his laptop out of his bag and lies back down on the bed. Dean flicks the TV off, letting out a small yawn, and gestures for Roman to come closer. A ramshackle old building in the middle of a snowbank fills the screen, and the aforementioned Younghusband wanders out to introduce *Canada's Worst Handyman*.

“Fuck yes,” Dean exclaims with a grin, but excited as he may be he’s out before the second bad handyman is introduced.
Roman breathes a sigh of relief as Dean’s breathing evens out and the tension leaves his face. He grabs his phone again and finds a string of messages from Seth.

**Roman Reigns: He’s hurt bad.**

**Seth Rollins: can i come up and see him?**

**Roman Reigns: you have rehab**

**Seth Rollins: finn’s flying up to join the tour**

**Seth Rollins: i can grab a ticket on the same flight**

**Seth Rollins: doc’s been on my case to take a rest day**

**Roman Reigns: thanks, Seth.**

**Seth Rollins: :)**

He stays awake for several more episodes, until he’s sure Dean is will sleep through the night. Only then does he toss his jeans off and climb under the covers, surrendering himself to a troubled, dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I couldn’t exactly roofie one of the wrestlers without breaking kayfabe, now, could I? I don’t know who the real WWE Chief of Security is and I couldn’t find it after 30 minutes of googling so idgaf, his name is Rick Dodgson now.
Seth gets to their hotel around two the next day. Roman greets him at the door, quietly asking if Seth minds if he takes a nap for a bit now that someone else is here to keep an eye on Dean. It’s just like all the other times after a bad match, when one of them got seriously hurt and the others had to stitch them back together, except there’s a layer of scar tissue buried in the relationship that wasn’t there back then. It almost makes him question if he deserves to be left in charge of Dean when he’s so vulnerable, but a glimpse at the dark circles around Roman’s eyes is enough to keep his mouth shut.

“Has he slept at all since he got here?” Seth asks Dean, when he’s sure Roman is asleep.

“I think he slept for a few hours last night. He was sleeping when I woke up, at least.” Dean leaves out the part where he coughed so loudly upon waking that Roman was up and fretting almost immediately.

“So what happened exactly? If you’re okay with talking about it.”

“You didn’t see?”

“I sat down on the couch when I got home and woke up to the “breaking news” notification.”

Dean whistles. “You really are busting your ass in rehab,” he says. “I’m impressed.”

“Was. Wilk cleared me yesterday. Unless Dr. Amman disagrees, I’m good to go.”

“Seth, that’s great! You told Roman yet?”

“Nah. Not sure I’m going to.”

“Why not?”

Seth runs a nervous hand through his hair. “I’m only 90, 95% right now. Rome will want me to wait
“Before you go after Triple H?”

“Yeah.”

“Kay. I get it. Secret’s safe with me.”

“Thanks, Dean.” And Seth means it, truly. It’s not a small ask, for Dean to keep secrets from Roman. That he’s willing to trust Seth on this and let him keep control over his path means a lot.

“So whatcha planning?”

“I haven’t got it figured out yet, actually. Step one was fix my knee. Now I gotta decide on a step two.”

“You could always wing it. Works for me.”

“Yeah, works out real well for you,” Seth quips, raising an eyebrow and giving a pointed look to Dean’s mottled chest.

“Ouch, Seth. That cuts deep.”

“Am I wrong?”

“It works out most of the time.”

“So what happened this time?”

“… Baron got spooked by all the trainers showing up so quickly and hit forward instead of back when I called the safe-word.”

“Oh, is that all?” Seth asks, dripping with sarcasm.

“He also went a little too hard with the pipe. That bit was prolly my fault though. Been nagging him to stop pulling punches with me.”

“You really hate people going easy on you, don’t you?”

“I’m here to wrestle, not showboat. Leave the fake catfights to reality TV.” And Dolph Ziggler, he adds in his head.

“How did Corbin handle things?”

“He managed to get himself offscreen and to the hotel before he freaked out. Never seen the poor fucker so upset. I think he thought I was a ghost when I walked through the door.”

“Bet you looked like shit, too.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty.” Dean breaks into a fit of coughing, which Roman mercifully keeps sleeping through. Seth reaches over and grips his hand, allowing Dean to squeeze the circulation out of it as he tries to catch his breath through the pain.

“You alright?” Seth asks, when the coughs subside. No blood this time, thank Christ.

“Feel like fucking death warmed over.”
“Dean, man, I think you need a doctor.”

Dean closes his eyes and blows out a short, frustrated sigh. “’Fraid you might be right, brotha.”

“We can call Dr. Amann, see if he can squeeze in a house call. No hospitals, just how you like it.”

“Wait till Ro wakes up. Don’t want you blowing your cover, don’t wanna do it alone.”

“Okay.” Seth could suggest they just wake Roman up right now. Roman, in fact, would probably prefer that to the alternative of Dean gritting his teeth and bearing the pain till he wakes up on his own. But Seth knows when to pick his battles, so instead he flicks the TV on, hitting “mute” and flipping to a channel with a sport they both don’t hate.

Roman sleeps a few more hours, waking up when they’re in the middle of a Harry Potter fan-edit they abandoned the sports for and which Seth insisted would change Dean’s mind about wizard movies. (Dean’s actually sort of into it, but he’s not going to tell Seth that, no way.)

“I want you to call Dr. Amann,” Dean blurs out.

“Okay.” Roman keeps his tone neutral, but inside he’s freaking out. “I can make that happen.”

Roman sits down on Dean’s other side, weaving their fingers together as he scrolls through his phone to find the doctor’s number and hits the call button.

“Hey, Dr. Amann? It’s Roman. I need your help.”

“Let me guess: you found Ambrose and he’s refusing to go to a hospital.”

“I’m used to taking care of people, Doc, but this shit’s out of my league.”

Dr. Amann lets out a sigh. “Where are you right now?”

Roman lists off their hotel and room number for him.

“Oh, and Roman?”

“Yeah Doc?”

“Keep this quiet, will you? Word gets out and next thing you know the entire locker room is expecting house calls.”

“You got it.” Roman hangs up and turns to the others. “He’s on his way.”

Seth breathes a quiet sigh of relief, and Dean looks a little uneasy, but he’s not fleeing. It’s a good sign.

Dean gently pokes Seth when Roman’s not looking and asks, just a little too loudly, “wasn’t there something you said you had to go do?”
“Right. Yes. I have to… go for a run.”

Roman gives him a weird look but doesn’t press for details.

“Bring back food,” Dean insists, and Seth shakes his head but grabs the $20 Dean struggles to pull from his wallet before making his escape.

Seth’s barely out the door when Dr. Amann arrives. The stocky ginger knocks briskly on the door and brushes past Roman to begin poking and prodding at Dean. After about 15 minutes of examination, he steps back and motions for Roman to follow him into the hallway.

“Two broken ribs and more swelling then I wanted to see. I won’t make him go for an x-ray unless he starts coughing blood again, but he needs rest. A lot of rest. And for that he’s going to need meds.”

“You sure?”

“Trust me, I haven’t forgotten the history. I’m prescribing a low dose of codeine for the first little bit, and a mild sedative for nighttime in case the codeine’s not enough to knock him out. Best case scenario, he sleeps for the next three to four days, give the swelling a chance to go down and get him breathing normally. Last thing we need is him developing pneumonia. At minimum, no physical activity for the next two weeks.”

“He’s not going to like that.”

“Well, ask him how he’ll like it if I refuse to clear him for Wrestlemania. Those are his options.”

“Fair enough, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“You’re a good kid, Roman,” Dr. Amann says, his voice softening as he hands over the prescriptions and starts heading towards the elevator.

“I try.”

The doctor nodds and flashes Roman the tiniest of smiles before disappearing around the corner.

Roman slips back into the room. Dean’s a little jittery, but he manages a grin when Roman leans down to drop a gentle kiss onto his lips.

“What’d the good doc have to say?”

“Rest. Left some prescriptions he wants you to take.”

“How long am I out for?”

“Two weeks no exercise, then we’ll go from there.”

“Fuck.”

“I know, uce. I know.”

“Wrestlemania?”

Roman shrugs. “He didn’t outright say no. When Seth gets back I’m gonna go get these scripts filled, okay?”
“Alright.”

“D’ya want us to go back to Nevada while you recover?”

“Not taking you out with me. Not this close to Wrestlemania. If you want to play nurse, I’m staying right here.”

“Road-life ain’t easy on anybody, even if they aren’t trying to heal up.”

“If I’mma be out, I wanna make the most of it.” Dean tugs gently on his t-shirt, and Roman moves closer but doesn’t kiss him again.

“I don’t want to hurt you, sweetheart.”

“You won’t,” Dean insists, his voice turning husky. “I trust you.”

Roman gives in and closes the gap between them.

They kiss for ages, deep and slow, making up for weeks of time apart. For once Dean doesn’t complain about Roman holding back. Doesn’t try to goad him into being rougher. He just lies there and enjoys the soft feeling of Roman’s full lips against his chapped ones, the weird scritching noise Roman’s beard makes when it rubs against his stubble, the way Roman’s fingers tangle into his hair and keep him steady. They’re still kissing when Seth quietly lets himself into the room, coughing loudly to announce his presence as soon as he spots them. They spring apart, both blushing a little.

“I’m not sure what’s weirder, catching you two going at it, or that catching you two going at it doesn’t feel all that weird.” Seth shrugs and begins to unpack the large bag of groceries he’s brought back with him. A chicken curry for Roman, a milkshake and some tater-tots for Dean, and a quinoa salad and a protein bar for himself. He leaves the rest and puts the bag away, but Roman spots Dean’s favourite breakfast cereal, some foreign chocolate Finn and Sami both like, and a weird pastry he knows Bayley’s fond of.

*Seth’s planned ahead for visitors.* He smiles to himself, gratefully accepting the container of curry Seth holds out to him. The room falls silent for a while as everyone eats.

“I going to go get Dean’s prescriptions filled. You two stay out of trouble, you hear?”

“Yes, Mom,” ribs Dean, but he whispers a “thank you” when Roman bends down to give him the briefest kiss goodbye.

Dean’s not happy when he reads the labels on the bottles Roman brings back.

“Doc thinks you aren’t breathing deep enough, Dean. Says you need to sleep,” Roman reasons with him, as Dean’s jaw begins to twitch and his eyes grow stormy.

“I don’t need shit this strong to sleep.”

“Dean, please. It’s just for a few days.” Roman’s practically begging, and Seth pipes up to help him out.

“Someone will be here round-the-clock, Dean. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Promise.”
Dean lets out a low, frustrated growl, but in the end he takes the drugs. Roman and Seth curl up on either side of him, embracing him gently until he falls asleep.

“What do we do now?” Roman asks, voice tired. Seth gives him a smile, and hands Roman his phone. His browser is open to a Google spreadsheet, with timeslots written out for the next three days. Most of the slots already have names written in next to them.

“You do the mother hen-ing, I take care of the planning.”

“How the fuck did I do this without you, Seth?”

“The same way as every other human: you just do.”

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March 9, 2017

Indianapolis, Indiana

It’s early the next morning when Triple H calls Finn into his trailer.

“Bálor. Great to see you back,” Triples H begins, reaching out his hand.

Finn shakes the offered hand. “Happy to be back, sir. I missed being here.”

“I called you in to catch you up on what’s been going while you’ve been away. I’ve been putting together a stable that’s going to change the face of the WWE. Bring about an… evolution, if you will. A team of elites who will take the WWE Universe by storm and trim the deadweight, so to speak.”

“Deadweight, sir?” he says slowly, immediately suspicious.

“Like Rollins, for example.

Finn’s eyes narrow slightly. “I’ve no quarrel with Rollins.”

Triple H shakes his head. “Seth Rollins ended your title run the moment it began. Seth Rollins put you on the shelf for months. You can’t seriously be telling me you’re not itching to take a crack at him.”

“Accidents happen, sir.”

“Well. Maybe Rollins doesn’t strike your fancy, but there are other underperformers you could help with before the Evolution can truly take hold. Colin Cassady, for example. Cesaro. Or Sami Zayn. And then, once we’ve cut the fat, there will be more room at the top for those who are truly deserving. And rest assured, they will be well rewarded.”

The red flags have merged together into a giant red banner, but Finn doesn’t want to burn bridges if he doesn’t have to. His keeps his tone impeccably polite as he says, “it’s a fascinating idea, but I’m afraid I’m not interested.”

Triple H’s face becomes hard and his voice turns cold. “Do you understand the opportunity you’re
passing up here, Finn Bálor? You have talent, and no shortage of guts, but you’re hardly the top man around here anymore. If you ever want to hold that Universal Title again, you’d be wise to consider more carefully.”

Finn is officially done being polite. “Rest assured, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, that it is my complete understanding of the offer which drives me to decline it.”

“You’ll regret this one day, Bálor.”

“I doubt that, sir.”

“Very well. Get out of my office,” Triple H barks, and Finn wastes no time complying.

***

Roman’s actually amazed by how many people answered Seth’s call and signed up for “babysitting duty”, as Seth joking termed it in the Google Doc. Renee and Becky came by in the morning before hitting the road to the next Smackdown live event so Roman and Seth and the rest of the guys could go work out. Dean slept through most of it, but he remembers Becky telling him some hilarious story about canned pineapple, and ribbing Renee about her reaction to Dean’s injury on Talking Smack.

“I was going for stoic!” she insists, and Becky giggles.

“Stoic? More like stiff as a statue,” Becky teases, and Renee smacks her gently before eventually breaking into laughter with the other two.

“Like, I was worried, I swear! It just got so awkward when they kept pushing the “but as his GIRLFRIEND, how do you feeeeeeeeeel” angle and I panicked.”

“I can’t wait for Becks to go down and you have to pretend you don’t care anymore than any other girl wrestler,” Dean says, a little slurred from the pain meds.

“Oh God, I’m going to twitch so bad they’ll think I’m having a stroke,” Renee says, still laughing.

Becky grins at her, eyes full of affection. “And I’m going to laugh my fucking arse off at you from whatever hospital they ship me too, love.”

Sami, Bayley, and Elise take the afternoon shift. Bayley brings her laptop, and Dean’s lucid enough for them to at least try to find something to watch the whole group can agree on.

They’ve been scrolling for at least five minutes when Elise exclaims, “Bon Cop Bad Cop is on Netflix? I can finally watch it again!”

“Can’t you just stream it?” Bayley asks, confused.

Elise shakes her head. “Nah, man, the illegal versions never have the right subtitles.”

“Why do you need subtitles?”

Sami chuckles. “She doesn’t speak French, she’d miss like half the movie.”
“Why are you so excited about a movie you can’t understand?” asks Dean. He’s never been one for subtitles. How Seth and Sasha get so worked up over anime is something he’ll never understand.

“Are you kidding me? It’s a masterpiece of Canadian cinema. Rick Mercer plays Don Cherry better then Don Cherry does. There’s a five minute monologue about how to correctly conjugate joul-French curse words. A cop has to escape a burning marijuana farm in a bathtub. Did I mention Rick fucking Mercer?!”

Dean looks at her like she’s grown a second head. “Who the hell is Rick Mercer?”

It’s Elise’s turn to gawp. “So we’re watching Bon Cop Bad Cop, and then we’re watching like a season and a half worth of Rick Mercer Report re-runs.”

“Don’t worry, Dean,” Sami stage whispers with a grin, “I’ll read you the subtitles for the French parts.”

Dean ends up enjoying the movie, though he has to take another dose of drugs halfway through and is practically high by the end of it. Sami quietly explains some of the jokes as well as reading the subtitles, and he even gets to feel slightly superior to Bayley, who knows nothing about hockey and does not understand at all why the other three insist “Commissioner Buttman” is a genius character name. He falls asleep before Elise can make good on her promise to force more Rick Mercer upon him, and has strange dreams about him and Roman as cops.

He wakes up to Roman and Seth getting ready for bed, quietly discussing their travel plans. His head’s too foggy to understand much of what they say, but he’s conscious enough to grab at Roman possessively, and loopy enough not to mind Seth being there to see. Roman makes him take his nighttime meds, and he’s out again before he can blink. Roman’s asleep mere minutes later, but Seth lies awake for a long time, turning the last few months over in his mind, trying to formulate a plan. Even when he does manage to sleep, his dreams are troubled, the guilt over hiding things from Roman gnawing at his subconscious like it’s a chew toy.

The next few days smear into a blur, and truth be told Dean can never quite be sure if he watched the cop film before or after the Storage Wars marathon or the weird Irish murder show Finn made him watch. But it’s kind of nice, in a weird way. To see all his friends, after being stuck by himself on Smackdown for so long.

Almost like a vacation.

A painful, hazy, drugged-up vacation.

But still, a vacation.

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March 10, 2017

Buffalo, New York
Finn’s back.

And Bayley has no idea what to do about it.

She settles on watching the match on the monitor backstage, and she can’t hold back a whoop when Sami and Finn win. (Well, technically Jericho wins too, but she’s still not sold on him yet, to be honest.) Her heart melts as she watches Sami give Finn the biggest welcome back hug possible, and the crowd is so happy, and she’s so happy, and she begins walking towards the hastily-improvised gorilla area. She’s not quite sure what she has in mind, but she knows she needs to talk to Finn.

This is about when everything begins to break down.

Finn and Sami emerge from behind the curtain. Sami has one arm slung around Finn’s shoulder, rambling excitedly while Finn nods and grins, and Sami spots Bayley and waves to her happily. Big Cass, still riding his high from beating Jinder Mahal, pulls Sami away to talk to him about something, leaving Finn and Bayley relatively alone in the hallway. Without Sami as a buffer, she’s beginning to get nervous, though she can’t figure out why. It’s just Finn. A few crew members wander in and around as they start doing tear-down, but it feels like they’re the only two people on the planet. Her skin feels electric, like there’s a charge running right through it.

Then Dana Brooke flounces past her and grabs Finn’s face, kissing him sloppily on the mouth. It’s a second that lasts forever, and Bayley feels like she’s been run through by a sword. She can’t think, can’t process, so she turns around and runs.

Bayley did have a crush on Finn Bálor.

Shit.

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March 14, 2017
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

It’s about an hour before Smackdown goes live, when the little call incoming icon pops up on Baron’s phone.

“Dean?” he answers, surprised. He’s not entirely sure where they stand after the whole near-death thing.

“Dude, you gotta call me out tonight.”

“And if they don’t clear you and we can’t have the match at ’Mania?”

“That’s Bryan’s problem, not ours. You call me out tonight, get the idea in the fan’s heads, put some real pressure on the suits to make the match.”

“Daniel Bryan doesn’t wear suits.”

“Nitpicky asshat.”
“You just want Dr. Amman to clear you early.”

“Hey, if he feels some pressure and caves a little sooner then he planned, that’s what we call a nice side effect.”

“You’re gonna push it too far one of these days.”

“Eh, I roll with Samoans. I’ll be fine.”

“What do I even say?”

“I dunno, kid. Make something up. How are you gonna survive your next feud if you need me to tell you what to say?”

“The way I always used to. Hiting them in the face and talking about it afterwards with Renee. She always makes me look good.”

“So what you’re telling me is Renee’s your promo crutch? Cause I can make her stop and force you to practise. I’m fake-dating her. I have that power.”

“Making me look good is her fucking job. Pretty sure that her fake boyfriend can’t keep her from doing it. ’Specially when I make it so easy for her.”

“Oh, with your mumbling and your receding hairline?”

Baron growls a little. “You are just begging for me to take that title, you know that?”

“Yes,” Dean replies with a grin. “Now go cut a promo!”

Baron slams the laptop closed in frustration. He’s pretty sure Dean’s now laughing at him because of it, but at least he manages to channel his feeling into a passably decent promo.

It isn’t until he’s falling asleep that he realises this probably means he and Dean are still friends.

He’s not sure whether he feels relief or dread, and sleep takes him before he makes up his mind.

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March 20, 2017
Brooklyn, New York

It’s Elise’s first shift backstage after “The Samoa Joe Incident”, as she’s termed it in her mind, and it’s been fairly quiet, from a security standpoint. It’s been a fucking gongshow in all other respects, with Mick Foley getting fired at the top of the show and Sami getting strangled again by Joe, but at least Enzo and Cass got a few shots in on Anderson and Gallows. Small victories.

Shame about Foley, really. Elise rarely interacted with him, but he was always pleasant to her when they did speak.
The shift is wrapping up, and she can hear Roman’s music hit (god, she’s still not used to that being a solo theme), signifying the main event is kicking off. By now anyone trying to find a way to sneak through the back will have given up and gone home, and while Elise still does her regular rounds, she’s not really expecting trouble.

She certainly isn’t expecting a pair of spandex-clad arms to circle around her from behind and begin to crush the breath from her lungs.

Elise wastes a precious second trying to scream before remembering her radio and scrambling to hit the panic button. Before she can reach it, though, it’s ripped from her waist and tossed hard against the concrete wall with a laugh.

There goes $700 Elise winces, as she watches the radio break in two.

“No one’s coming for you, little girl. A brawl started in the concession lines. And the merch table line. Two brawls at once. How… suspicious,” a voice from behind her sneers.

Nia.

“Stop,” Elise manages to spit out.

“You’re just like every other little girl, thinking that having a man’s job that makes them tough. Not so tough now, are we?”

“You’re… wrong,” Elise gasps out, her vision swimming. She fumbles in her pocket, her hand closing around something cold and familiar. Feels a sharp pain across her palm as she pulls it out and opens it. The pain somehow brings clarity.

And Nia feels a prick in her neck as the blade of a knife appears against her throat.

“What the hell are you doing, you little shrimp?”

“Let her go, Nia.”

Sami steps into view, and Elise feels relief mixed with horror flood through her. If there’s anyone Elise didn’t want watching her when she killed someone, it was sweet, innocent Sami.

“Scared I’m gonna hurt your little friend?”

“Let her go. She’s not fucking around with that knife.”

The knife digs in a little deeper, beginning to draw blood. Listen to him.

“You BITCH!” Nia screeches, releasing her grip on Elise as her hands fly to her neck to check the damage.

“Drama queen,” Elise mutters under her breath, booking it across the room. It’s a surface scratch, probably won’t even scar. Sami grabs her arm and pulls her beside him, both of them squaring up for the fight that now seems inevitable. Elise is still brandishing the knife, her blood and Nia’s mixing on the handle as she tightens and loosens her grip.

“You’re right, Nia, I am like most girls. When I walk alone at night, I carry a weapon.”

“You’ll pay for your meddling, you shrimpy little freak!” Nia snarls, turning on her heels and storming out of the hallway.
“Holy fuck,” Elise breathes, collapsing against the wall in a heap.

“You’re bleeding,” Sami says, kneeling next to her.

“I nicked myself trying to get the stupid thing open.” She opens her hand, revealing an inch-long gash across her palm.

“Sure. And hell is just a sauna.”

“It’s fine.” She rolls her eyes as Sami pulls his shirt off and begins wrapping it around her hand.

“There,” he says, sitting back on his heels. “Just promise to wash it before you give it back.”

Elise doesn’t respond, and Sami frowns. She normally at least gives his quips a courtesy-giggle.

“Hey,” he says closely, inching a little closer and putting a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

“I threated a WWE superstar. I pulled a fucking knife on a superstar. I’m dead. I’m fired. I’m worse then fired. Jesus Christ on a motorcycle, I pulled a knife.” She’s starting to shake.

“She was strangling you. You defended yourself.”

Elise shakes her head, letting herself lean into Sami for support. “She wasn’t serious. I should have de-escalated. What the fuck am I going to do?”

Sami thinks about it for a while before the lightbulb goes off. “Rapport d’incident. You have those, right? The piece of paper for when shit happens on shift?”

“Incident reports? There’s a form for it. I think I’ve filled out maybe, like, two, ever. What the fuck do incident reports have to do with me getting fired tomorrow?”

“Fill out an incident report. Exactly what happened, no details spared. Put me in as a witness. If Nia goes to Trips and tries to report on you, your boss has a record of exactly what happened and why you did what you did.”

Elise shakes her head. “It’s my word against hers.”

“It’s the word of a well-known bully against a reliable staff member.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“That’s a tomorrow problem, ma chère.”

Elise sighs and finds her way to her feet.

“Fine. It’s not like I have anything to lose.”

Sami insists on staying with her for moral support as she fills out the paperwork. She falls asleep wrapped around her laptop, barely remembering to press “send” on the email to Dodgson with her report attached before she passes out, spent from the effort of relieving the night’s events. Sami gently extracts the laptop and copies the report template to a USB before tucking Elise’s sheets around her and heading back to his room. He submits his own version of events to the head of security before crawling into bed. If she’s getting caught up in their shit, he’s sure as hell gonna throw his weight around to get her out of trouble.
Elise wakes up early the next morning to a text that sends her stomach into knots.

_Rick Dodgson: My office. 8:30am sharp._

She tosses on her cleanest work pants and a dark dress shirt and books it to the security truck.

“Thompson,” Dodgson says, looking up from a file of printouts as she walks in. “I think you know why you’re here.” His face is stony. Elise braces herself for the death knell of her career.

_Just don’t cry._

“Yes sir.”

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“No sir,” she bites out, fighting against every instinct she has to defend herself, to make excuses.

“Triple H is breathing down my neck to fire you. What you did was reckless and I thought I’d trained you better.”

“Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

“So as of now, you are on fully paid vacation until Wrestlemania is over, and the next time someone is strangling you from behind and you have access to a weapon, you better fucking stab first and ask fucking questions later.”

“I… don’t think I understand, sir.”

“I read the reports, Thompson. Yours and Mr. Zayn’s. She could have killed you. You were well within your rights to escalate force to a weapon.”

“I’m not allowed to have weapons on shift, sir.”

“I believe if you read the handbook closely, the rules only prohibit the use of weapons on shift, not the carrying. And their use is only prohibited on patrons, and Miss Jax, obviously, is not a patron.”

“With all due respect, Dodgson, I don’t need a vacation. I need this job.”

“And I need you. Alive. I don’t know what the fuck is going on backstage right now or how you managed to get mixed up in it but the only way I can guarantee your safety is to pull you completely
until it either blows over or blows up.”

“Im not worth this, sir. If Triple H wants me gone this bad, maybe you should just fire me.”

“Nonsense. You need this job. And I need to piss Triple H off.”

Elise stares at him, surprised.

“Unless you’d rather leave. I can make a call, get you a shift supervisor position at Club Soda. Better hours, your own little staff team to boss around. Just say the word.”

“No, sir. I’m perfectly happy here, sir.”

“Good. Enjoy your vacation, Thompson.”

Sami swings by her room around lunchtime, bouncing a little more than usual.

“I’m not fired-” she begins, and he whoops and whirls her up into a hug. “Thank you,” she adds, when he sets her back on the ground. “You took a risk, throwing your lot in with mine.”

“I owed you one. More than one. Come on. Food’s on me.”

Elise grabs a battered leather jacket that might once have been tan and follows him towards the elevator. “What are we getting?”

“Middle Eastern, if you’re okay with that. No one else appreciates lentil soup like you do.” And I’m homesick.

“But does this place do kanafah?”

“Is the Pope a Catholic?”

“I’m Anglican and you’re Muslim, we’re hardly the authorities on the topic.”

Sami goes to gently smack her, but she’s already racing ahead to the car, laughing. He grins and tilts his head back, letting the sunlight soak into him as he ambles across the parking lot.

Over lunch he’ll get serious, discuss safety plans and try to convince her to accept protection, just till Wrestlemania, and she’ll grumble and gripe but eventually cave. Over lunch texts will be sent to Bayley, bringing her in on the plan, and to Dean, giving him a heads up that he’ll need to find a new way around security for the time being. But for now, there’s sun and a breeze and the intoxicating vibe of New York, and goddamnit he’s going to take a moment just to bask in the joy of being alive.

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March 21, 2017

Montville, Connecticut

“Where the fuck did you find a forklift?” Baron asks as he plops down on the table in Dean’s
dressing room, putting his feet up on a chair and trying to rub the knots out of his neck.

“It’s an arena, dude. There’s always a forklift somewhere. Thought it would get the crowd excited. Fans love a callback.”

“Dirty Deeds was kinda overkill after the RKO, wasn’t it?”

“You broke my ribs. Figured you owed me.”

Baron’s stomach sinks. “Dean, I’m sorry.”

“Chill, brother. Fuckups happen. I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard.”

Baron sighs. “I hate this.”

“Feuding? Better get used to it, kid.”

“I… I don’t have a lot of friends, Dean.”

“Oh, and I’m Mr. Popular.”

“Look. You’re my only friend.”

“I’m not following.”

“It didn’t matter, if I hurt someone in the ring. I didn’t care. Because none of them meant anything to me.”

“No one else should matter in the ring. Only thing that matters is you win.”

“You don’t get it, Ambrose. I hurt people. Sometimes I don’t even know I’m doing it. I’m… not there. The Wolf comes out and I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. Didn’t used to matter, when I had no one to care about. Management didn’t hire me to play nice.”

“Awwwwwwe. You saying you care about me?”

“Can’t believe I’m admitting this, but yeah, you dumb fuck. I care.”

“Cool.”

Baron stares at him, shocked. “Cool? I spill my guts to you and all you have to say is cool?!”

“Eh, what else is there to say? You care, and I think that’s cool. Oh, and you’re not actually trying to kill me for real. That’s all I need to know, isn’t it?”

“How are you being so calm about this? I’m telling you I’m crazy, and you’re acting like I just said I like cheese on crackers.”

“You already told me you’ve got issues, Baron. You told me months ago. When I drove you to the liquor store and you got super drunk after Kalisto fucked up your knee, remember?”

“No. I don’t remember. I was blackout drunk. Wait…you knew, and you still poked me?” Baron’s mouth is agape, disbelieving.

Dean shrugs. “Sometimes I like a challenge.”

“You’ve been trying to get me to lose it?!”
“The fans love how you fight when the Wolf comes out. You throwing me through the glass at Elimination Chamber? The way the electrical panel sparked that time you slammed me through it? It looked so cool, man. Fans fucking love that shit.”

“You could have died.”

“Yeah, and Seth had a mock funeral for me on live TV after he almost broke my neck and I still forgave him, eventually. You’re a good wrestler, Corbin. But so am I. You don’t need to hold back. I can take it.”

“You’re an actual lunatic.”

“Hey man, we talked about that word.”

“Right, sorry,” says Baron, quickly.

Dean nods, accepting the apology. His voice softens as he asks, “you wanna have some secret signal for when you’re about to hulk-out? Get me to back off?”

Baron thinks about it for a long moment. Takes a few deep breaths. Something seems to settle, and when he looks back up at Dean there’s shades of that same cocky smugness he wears in the ring.

“Nah. You want the Wolf, you’re gonna get the Wolf. But you gotta promise to keep Roman away from me if this shit goes south again.”

“You have yourself a deal, dude.” Dean glances at the mirror, tugs his shirt once more before standing up and pulling on his jacket. “How do I look?”

“You look like a puppy without a home. Have you ever heard of a haircut?”

“Oh, like you’re one to talk.”

“Hey, I have metal cred to maintain. You’re just a lazy fuck.”

“Whatever. Renee will tell me I’m beautiful.”

“Let’s hope Becky doesn’t get jealous again and kick your ass from here to Dublin.”

“Hey, you better hope she does. It’s the only chance you have of taking this belt off me.”

Baron chuckles and shakes his head. “Dream on, Dean. Dream on.”

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March 23, 2017
Montreal, Quebec

“I’m worried,” begins Elise, as they’re swimming in the pool at her apartment complex. The gym they’d all been working out in that afternoon had been an ungodly temperature, and Elise almost needs the swim just to breathe properly again. Goddamn asthma.

“About what?” Bayley asks, her face scrunched up in concentration as she tries to balance on a
“Almost everything, all the time. But right now, specifically? Sami.”
“He’s just in a slump. He’ll be okay. Needs to get a few wins under his belt again.”

“That’s what I’m worried about, though. Look, I’m not a wrestler, I know, but if Steph keeps putting him in the same match over and over, isn’t that just going to make whatever block he has with Samoa Joe worse?”

Bayley sighs, and lets the flutter board rocket out from beneath her, splashing them both dramatically. “You’re not wrong.”

“And I know what it’s like, to have someone get inside your head like that. I know too fucking well. The shape the gang’s in, this close to Wrestlemania? Joe’s almost got his permanent residents’ card for Sami’s head, Triple H has Seth killing himself to fix his knee on time, Roman’s so focused on Dean that he’s making stupid mistakes.”

“And Charlotte and Nia have me questioning everything about myself and my career and my best friend.”

“Bayley, you deserve this championship reign.”

“I didn’t win clean, though. Or defend clean. I’m no better than Kevin Owens.”

“Bayley. You are not even comparable to Kevin Owens. You are loyal and kind and so full of love, Bayley. The fans love you, and right now, the way the world is, having their hero win and love them back? That’s important.”

“It’s my job.”

“Bayley, you’ve seen my knife right? The pretty one?”

“It’s meant to look like some kind of rock, right?”

“Bismuth, yeah. Now, ask me why I bought a knife that looks like bismuth.”

“… why did you buy a knife that looks like bismuth?”

“Because useful things can be beautiful. Art isn’t just something to put on the shelf, to be looked at and possessed. It’s meant to be used, touched and felt and wondered at. Just because something’s your job doesn’t mean it can’t be important. What Kevin Owens does in the ring, that’s just a man fulfilling a contract. He goes out there and he hits people and he goes home. But what you do? Bayley, that’s art. You take risks and you are so fucking passionate and it shows. You know, I’m so fucking relieved Seth’s made up with the others because Jesus fucking Christ it’s hard to hate someone who can make art like that. What he does, what you do, what Sami and Dean and fucking all of you all do in that fucking ring? It’s beautiful.”

Bayley leans over until she’s floating on her back. She lies like that for a bit, before asking the real question. The one she’s lain awake at night worrying over.

“What if Charlotte’s right though? About Sasha just using me.”

“Bayley, I’m gonna tell you what I told anyone who’d listen in college, what I tell my coworkers anytime they complain about someone else, what I tell my freaking baby cousin anytime she gets mad at her twin brother. Use. Your. Words.”
“It’s not that simple.”

“It is, though. It’s terrifying, sure, but it’s not actually hard.”

“But what if it’s true?” Bayley asks, a few stray tears beginning to leak.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.” Elise would try to hug her, but a herd of children here for a swimming lesson choose that moment to stampede into the room and begin cannon-balling into the pool as their beleaguered instructor tries to regain control. Bayley’s grin returns in a flash, and suddenly she’s ten years old, splashing at Elise like it’s the funniest thing in the world. Elise begins to splash her back, breaking down into a fit of giggles.

And for one shimmering moment, everything was completely fine.

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March 24, 2017

Montreal, Quebec

It’s been a while since he’s won a match. A long, painful while. So to beat his arch-rival, in his hometown, no-holds-barred? It doesn’t get much better than this.

Someone hands him a mic, and this is his moment, to rub the victory in Kevin’s face, right here in front of the adoring Bell Centre crowd.

Instead, Sami shocks everyone, including himself, with a lengthy speech on how proud everyone should be that for the last nine months their Universal Champion, the most important man in the wrestling world, had been Quebecois. How much he respected Kevin for that. How tonight was his Wrestlemania.

“Esti que j’t’haïs” Kevin spits at him, before storming out, and he didn’t expect much more than that, frankly. But something about how Kevin had to say it through tears makes Sami wonder if the old Kevin is still in there somewhere. A small sprout of hope blooms. For once, Sami lets it.

They go out drinking that night, to a dive bar that Finn found on Yelp, and it’s the perfect mix of great and terrible and they all pool their cash to get Sami absolutely wasted. Management had severely over-crowded the hotel rooms this leg of the tour, so they’d ceded their bookings to some of the poor cruiserweights who’d been assigned 6 men to a room in favour of crashing at Sami and Elise’s places. Sami can barely stand by the time they decide to call it a night, and Finn playfully insists on giving him a piggyback ride, which prompts Enzo to demand one from Cass. They certainly get some stares as Cass tries to get on the Metro train without knocking Enzo off his back. (He can’t, it turns out. Enzo very nearly gets left behind on the platform but manages to dive in just as the doors are closing.)

Bayley, Sasha, and Elise get off a few stops before the rest, but eventually they too must leave the glittering embrace of the metro and ascend to the streets, where the crew of Anglophone foreigners
try and find an apartment that some of them have never even been to at night. Meanwhile, the owner of said apartment is cheerfully babbling Finn’s ear off about the six best shawarma places in his neighbourhood in order of how good he judges their sauce options to be. Roman considers it a minor miracle that they eventually manage to reach their destination.

This time Roman and Dean have the guest bedroom and Enzo and Cass take the living room floor, while Finn exerts his privilege as the best friend to crash in Sami’s bed with him. Sami, generally a cuddly person even when not plastered, curls up cat-like against Finn’s more angular frame. He tilts his head up and looks at Finn quizzically, struggling to articulate something important.

“Penny for your thoughts, mo chara?” Finn asks, feeling indulgent.

“Death to pennies!” Sami exclaims with a lazy grin, tossing his fist in the air. He drops his hand and furrows his brow as he asks in his most serious voice, “Finn, why aren’t you with Bayley yet?”

“What makes you ask-”

“You like her. She’s great. You’re attractive as hell. Figured it would have happened by now.”

“It’s not that simple, love.”

“Bullshit, sadayqaa,” Sami insists, shaking his head. “Why not?”

“I… I messed up.”

“Whadiddya do?”

“Remember when we came backstage after our match in Buffalo?”

“Bayley … waiting for us. I had to talk to Cass an’ she left before I got back,” he slurs.

“I was going to say something. But… Dana Brook showed up.”

“Don’t get it.”

“She kissed me. Bayley ran away before I could make Dana stop.”

“Oh, mon cher.”

“I’ve been trying to explain, trying to tell her I’m sorry, but every time she sees me she flees like she’s seen the hounds of hell.”

“M’be you should take the Demon paint off first,” Sami says wryly, and Finn manages a small smile, ruffling Sami’s hair.

“She hasn’t texted me back in days. I just… I miss my friend.”

“Know what that’s like.” Sami nods, sagely.

Finn sighs and puts his arms around Sami. “I’m sorry I was gone so long.”

“Not your fault.”

“I know. Rubbing off on me, you are, cara. You’re always apologizing for things that aren’t your
fault."

“I’m Canadian.”

“What am I going to do, Sami?”

“M’ too drunk to think.”

“Then sleep, friend. You can help me in the morning.”

Sami nods, and goes to say something more but passes out before the words leave his lips. Finn chuckles a little and repositions Sami so he can’t choke in the night before drifting off to sleep himself.

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March 26, 2017

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The last thing Roman’s expecting when he opens the door to an unexpected knock on Sunday night is a bedraggled Seth leaning heavily on his tour suitcase.

“Seth, what are you doing here?” Roman begins, slow and wary.

“You know exactly why I’m here,” Seth snaps, pushing past him into the room and tossing his suitcase in the corner.

“Seth, you can’t do this.”

“I have to. Don’t you get it, Roman? Someone has to stop him.”

“But why does it have to be you?!” Roman asks, desperately.

“Because I’m the one he wants.”

There’s a tense silence, before he adds, “maybe this is my destiny.”

“Seth-”

“I helped them get here. I helped tighten The Authority’s grip on us all. So I have to be the one to stop them, and fuck the cost.”

“Seth, this isn’t one of your Tolkien novels. It’s one match in your career, a career, I might add, that will be long and memorable as long as you take fucking care of yourself. And you’re acting like there are lives at stake.”

“Maybe there are, Ro,” Dean says quietly from the corner, and the temperature drops ten degrees as the gravity of the situation starts to sink in.

Seth’s voice drops almost to a whisper. “You heard what he’s threatened. He wants to end my career, by any means necessary. Steph wants Sami fired and Bayley disgraced. He’ll keep picking us
off, one by one, until we quit or they have an excuse to fire us or worse.’’

Roman crosses his arms. “He’s in your head, man. You just need to take a step back. Things are not that serious.”

“Not for you, they’re not,” Seth spits out, his nose flaring as something primal flashes across his face before returning to his previous level of anger.

“What the fuck are you saying, Seth?” Roman demands, drawing himself to full height and stepping closer.

Dean shakes his head, stepping between his brothers and putting a hand on each of their chests, trying to calm them down a smidge. “He’s right. You’re untouchable because you sell t-shirts, Roman. He’s not coming for you.”

Roman sits down heavily, the mattress bucking under his weight. He puts his head in his hands, his shoulders beginning to shake.

“I came here to wrestle. I didn’t come here for trouble, I just wanted to get paid to do something I loved.”

Seth sits next to him, trying to calm down. “None of us came for trouble. Well, maybe Dean did.”

Dean shakes his head again. “I was promised this would be less dangerous then CZW.” He sits down on the other side, so the two of them flank Roman.

“How the fuck did I let things get so out of control?” Roman whispers.

Seth looks at him with a start. “Wow. No. Hell no. This is not you, Rome. It is not your job to fix all of our shit and keep track of your own.”

“I’m the oldest. The biggest. I’m supposed to be protecting you guys.”

Dean rubs his hand across Roman’s shoulders, trying to soothe him. “You have our backs, sure. Don’t have to have our fronts, sides, and overheads too.”

Roman finally looks up. “Who else?”

“What?” Seth asks, confused.

“Who else is Trips going to come for?”

Dean sighs, puts a hand up and starts ticking people off on his fingers. “Anyone who traces back to the three of us. Or who’s questioned his motives. Anyone Mick supported. Sami, obviously. Enzo and Cass. Sasha. Cesaro. Sheamus. TJ and Gallagher. Your cousins and Naomi should be safe as long as they’re on Smackdown, but if the draft changes things, who knows? And, well…” Dean trails off, looking guilty.

“Oh, fucking hell,” Roman hisses, closing his eyes. “Not Elise, too. You said she was taking time off for a knee injury.”

Dean shrugs. “I lied. Knee thing’s permanent. But Sami thought it was the most believable story, since you’d seen the brace.”

“Sami knew?! Did you know, too?” he asks, rounding on Seth.
Seth shakes his head. “No idea, I swear.”

“Relax, Rome. Sami knows because he was there. He broke things up before someone really got hurt.”

“What do you mean, someone got hurt? Who else besides Elise was getting hurt in this situation?”

“Well, Nia wasn’t expecting Elise to be armed when she started strangling her…”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Trips sent Nia after her? NIA, against a pocket-sized crew member who he’s probably never even met?”

“Hey now, that fun-sized security guard almost slit your cousin’s throat.”

“Nia would have deserved it.”

They all fall quiet for a second as they finally, fully understand what they’re up against. After a while Seth breaks the silence. “Finn’s probably on that list, too.”

“Finn’s been back for like, a month,” Dean says, surprised. “How the fuck could he have a target on his back this quick?”

“Trips offered him a spot in his new stable and Finn rejected him.”

Roman groans. “Trips has a new stable?”

“I don’t know how official it is, but it sure sounds like he’s putting a new Evolution together.”

“Fuck,” breathes Dean.

Seth interrupts their solemn contemplation with a gigantic sneeze.

“Bedtime, now,” Roman declares, firmly. “You’re sick and you’re hell-bent on self-destruction and I can only work on fixing one of those things right now.”

Seth tries to protest, but all that comes out is a second huge sneeze, and Dean shoves him towards the bathroom, insisting he should take a shower to warm up. Seth would make a snarky remark about the mother-henning being contagious, but everything hurts and warm water would feel so nice right now and honestly he’s just happy they’re both finally taking him seriously about Trips, so he closes his mouth and does as he’s told.

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March 27, 2017

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Hunter is talking to him like he’s a little kid, and it rankles everything inside him to follow that man’s orders, but Seth gives in and sits down. Anything you have to do to get the contract signed he tells himself, forcing himself to breathe deeply and try to calm down.

Hunter’s going on and on, spouting legalise like any of it actually matters, like Seth would bother
showing up tonight to sign this thing if he could possibly be persuaded not to take the match after all. Finally he can’t take it anymore.

“I liked myself, before I met you. I gave up everything to stand next to you - every friendship I ever had - everything that made me who I was, I gave that up to stand next to you. This isn’t about fame or fortune or money or power. It’s not even about one match at WrestleMania. This is about redemption. I gave up everything to stand next to you, and for what?”

He says more, and so does Triple H, digging at each other until he can get the pen opened and the contract signed. Trips, of course, takes advantage of the paperwork before the ink is even dry, shoving the metal table right into Seth’s injured knee. He picks up the crutch again, ready to deliver another beating, but this time Seth’s ready.

“Fuck you,” he whispers softly, as he lands the enziguri, with his bad leg no less.

“Fuck you,” he repeats, louder this time, as he tosses Triple H over the top rope and onto the concrete.

Triple H begins to retreat, but Seth’s mind is already racing ahead, planning how often he’ll ice his knee tonight, deciding how early to go for a run tomorrow morning, mapping out a training schedule in his head for week.

No time to dwell on the present. He has a king to slay.

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March 30, 2017

Orlando, Florida

Elise has become well and truly stir-crazy from the pseudo house-arrest when Seth miraculously manages to provide her with a suitable distraction. It starts with a knock on the door of the hotel room she’s sharing with Sami, which she opens (after carefully looking through the peephole, yes goddamnit Sami I’ll check before I just open the door to anyone, Jesus fucking Christ I’m not made of glass but also thank you for having my back) to find Seth looking uncharacteristically unsure of himself, clutching a manila envelope to his chest. She waves him inside.

“So… you can sew, right?” Seth begins.

“Depends who’s asking.”

“I need help.”

“Let me guess. Wardrobe’s not allowed to make you any new shit because this match doesn’t officially exist?”

“Basically.”
“What’s your concept?”

Seth pulls out a sketch. The figure looks like a cross between a medieval knight and the Greek god Hermes. Elise lets out a low whistle.

“Seth, Wrestlemania is in three days. You’re talking about massively detailed work here.”

“It’s fine. I knew it was a long shot. I’ll just wear my old stuff.”

Elise has already tugged the envelope from his grip and begun spreading the rest of the pages out on the desk. “Oh no, I’ll do it. My fingers might start bleeding by the end of it, but I’ll do it. But I’m charging you an extra 20% for the rush job, and you provide the materials. And if I tell you we need leather and spandex, coming back with vinyl and jersey is NOT going to fly.”

Seth sighs with relief. “Deal.”

Elise is still studying the drawings. “Can you get the base pieces premade? I can make the shirt from scratch if I absolutely have to but leggings as skin-tight as you normally wear is a tall order in three days with no sewing machine.”

“Where exactly does one buy gold tights?”

“This is Orlando. There’s gotta be a few dancewear stores or a costume shop somewhere around here. Google is your friend, bro.”

Google is, indeed, Seth’s friend, and he manages to find multiple stores in the vicinity that might serve his needs. Elise all but begs for him to take her on this shopping run, and he’s only too happy to oblige, truth be told. He has a basic understanding of what will work in the ring and what looks good on his body, but he has no idea what’s going to be best in terms of the massive alterations that need to be done. After visiting three dance stores and a FabricWorld they miraculously manage to find everything they could possible need, and if a few extra pairs of cool leggings in Elise’s size manage to find their way into Seth’s bags and eventually are discovered by Elise in her suitcase the next week, well, Seth probably couldn’t tell you how that happened, honest.

Elise finishes at 4:00am the morning of Wrestlemania, sewing on the last of the scales in the bathroom so Bayley and Sami can sleep without the light disturbing them. It’s not her best work ever, but given the circumstances she’s damn proud. The other two wake up to find her passed out in the room’s armchair, each hand immersed in a bowl of what might have at one point been ice. Sami clucks and leaves a box of bandages on the ottoman next to her feet and texts Seth he can come pick his gear up.

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April 2, 2017

Orlando, Florida

When Bayley hears a knock on her dressing room door less than an hour before her call time, she’s expecting Sasha or Sami, here to wish her good luck before her big moment. She’s certainly not
expecting the visitor to be *blond*.

“Dana?”

“Can we talk? Please?”

Bayley frowns, but motions Dana into her dressing room.

“I need to apologize. For what happened with Finn.”

“What you and Finn do in your spare time is your business,” Bayley choked out, her heart squeezing painfully.

“Bayley, you don’t understand—”

Something inside Bayley just *snaps*. “What is there to understand? Why are you even here, Dana? If you want my permission to date Finn, that’s not mine to give. If you feel bad because you think I liked him and you kissed him anyway, well, tough shit. And now I think I’d like you to leave.”

“It was Charlotte’s idea.”

“What?”

“Finn didn’t want to kiss me. And I didn’t like him. Charlotte wanted to throw you off your game, so she sent me out to set up a situation that would. I saw the opportunity and I went for it. I know it was wrong. I just… I wanted Charlotte to be proud of me.”

“You did all that, and she still turned on you.”

“Yeah.” Dana looks so broken and empty, and all the anger that’s managed to coil itself up inside Bayley evaporates.

“You poor thing,” she murmurs, enveloping Dana in a hug. Dana seizes up for a moment, like she’s expecting a trap, but soon she’s a sobbing mess in Bayley’s arms. Bayley’s crying too, tears of relief, though she doesn’t quite realize it yet, and her makeup’s ruined with 30 minutes to go before her match but she doesn’t care.

“Oh god, I’ve wrecked your makeup,” Dana sniffles, pulling back and taking a long look at Bayley’s face. “I should have waited. I’ve fucking gone and psyched you out now, haven’t I? I’m the worst.”

Bayley shakes her head. “It’s fine. I mean it. I’m glad you told me.”

“Then at least let me fix your face for you.”

“I’ll be fine, they put too much on anyways.”

“Please, Bayley. It’s the least I can do.”

“Okay.”

It’s not perfect by match time, but it’s still damn cute. And really, who cares what her face looks like when she wins and hoists the Women’s Title above her head?
His knee is burning and every muscle in his body is angry at him, but inside Seth is at peace. Roman and Dean may have forgiven him a while ago now, but in this moment, finally, he’s forgiven himself.

Dean and Roman are backstage to greet him after the win, Roman all but carrying him to the trainer’s office to get his knee looked at. Dean stays with him, Intercontinental Title slung over one shoulder, as the trainers unwrap the layers of tape from his knee and cluck over the swelling and work his leg back into the brace for him. They watch the end of Wrestlemania together on the monitor, wincing at some results, whooping at others.

And then Roman beats The Undertaker.

They watch in stunned silence as Taker gets back up, begins stripping off his ring gear. They knew Taker didn’t have many matches left in him, but they never dreamed this would be the end. The crowd is deafening, they can hear them through the walls, and they’re spellbound until Taker puts his fist in the air and begins his final descent.

Enchantment suddenly lifted, Dean takes off running. Seth waves off the poor trainer, just trying to get Seth to stay till Dr. Amman can check him over, and grabs his crutch, following Dean as quickly as he can.

Dean stops when he reaches the backstage proper. Takes a second to survey the scene. Roman, slumped in folding chair, looking for all the world like he’s the one who lost the match. The crowd still chanting Thank You Taker.

“Holy fuck,” says Seth, coming up from behind and almost smacking into Dean.

Dean approaches Roman slowly. “Did you know?”

Roman barely acknowledges them. “Trips told me right before he went out for his own match. Tried not to think about it.”

“Slimy bastard,” Seth spits out.

“I did what I had to do. He should have just stayed down. Why didn’t he stay down?”

“Would you have?” Seth asks gently, and Roman shakes his head.

“Well then. There ya go,” says Dean. “Don’t go gentle into the good night, or whatever the fuck they say.”

“They already hated me. Is there an emotion stronger then hate they can feel for me now?”

Seth raises an eyebrow. “Since when has The Guy cared what the fans think of him?”

“I’m here because I love wrestling. Sometimes I just wish the fans would notice that, you know. A little… appreciation.”

“Ro, screw the fans,” Dean says firmly, kneeling down and putting his forehead to Roman’s. “We
love you. *We* see you."

Seth claps a firm hand on Roman’s shoulder. “Come on, Big Dog. You have a yard to run.”

Roman stands at last, tugging both of them into a crushing hug. All three of them are thinking the same thing.

*We made it.*

Whatever else is next, they have each other. And at last, that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to the wardrobe department for Seth’s amazing new set of ring gear, but to nitpicky old me those scales looked a bit like someone sewed them on in a panic three hours before Comic-Con started.

Chapter Three will have a little epilogue bit about the Raw After Mania, and then we’re plowing ahead to new fics now that the Superstar Shakeup has us all shook.
Wrestlemania wasn’t all puppies and roses. For starters, Finn Bálor didn’t even have a match.

He doesn’t even have a match for Raw the night after ‘Mania, which stings a little, but luckily he chose to show up and hang backstage with Sami anyways, because Kurt Angle sticks his head in breathlessly a little while before the main event and his face floods with relief.

“Bálor. Thank god you’re here.”

“Hey, Mr. Angle. Congrats on the new position-”

“Yeah yeah, it’s Kurt, and we can do pleasant bullshit later. I have a main event in 10 minutes and no partner for Seth Rollins. I know it’s a bit awkward but-”

“No, it isn’t.” Finn insists, with a decisive shake of his head. “Just give me a second to change, sir.”

Kurt grins and closes the door, and minutes later is whisking Finn off to the ring, muttering a bit along the way about how he’s never seen a locker room full of drama queens like this and if he’d known what Vince was getting him into… Finn decides he likes Kurt Angle.

Their friendship is still fairly fresh and they’ve never tagged like this before, so Finn’s not surprised when Seth stays in too long and gets picked apart slowly by Joe and Kevin for his trouble. Finn brings it to an end as fast as he can, hitting Kevin with a Coup de Grâce powered by nearly a year’s worth of pent up rage on Sami’s behalf. The fans go apeshit.

Seth makes room for him, makes it clear to the crowd that this is Finn’s moment. As he opens his arms to soak up the adoration for a minute, he knows he made the right choice when he told Triple H no. He’ll take one Seth Rollins and one Sami Zayn over a thousand Samoa Joes.

Seth is whisked away by the trainers the minute they get backstage, and Finn wanders to “his” dressing room alone. This week’s version is big, enough space for a couch, even. He pushes open the door and almost slams into Bayley, who’s hovering nervously just inside.

“Hey-” she starts, and Finn’s breath hitches a bit as he cuts her off and a month of feelings pours out.
“I needed so badly to talk to you that night. And then I get backstage and Dana got involved and I didn’t want her to kiss me, Bayley, but she did and I know how it must have looked and I’m sorry, acushla. The last thing I ever wanted was for you to get hurt.”

“I know.”

“You… know?”

“Dana told me what she did. And why. It was mean, but I get how she felt like she didn’t have a choice.” She shrugs and sticks out her arms for a hug Finn is only too glad to accept.

“I missed my friend. I missed you so badly,” he mumbles, and her grip tightens.

“I’m sorry I ignored you like that. It was childish. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“You had every right to be upset,” Finn whispers into her hair, breathing in the fruity scent of her conditioner, memorizing it like he’ll be tested later.

“Why? It’s not like you knew I had this dumb crush on you.” She blushes a little, embarrassed by the admission.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to believe you did, though.”

She pulls back, eyes searching his face, willing this to mean what she hopes it does.

“Finn?” she whispers, reaching her face up towards his, putting her hands back around his waist, gauging if he’s okay with it. He shows no signs he wants her to stop. In fact, he moves one hand to her shoulder, drawing her closer, steadying her.

There’s a long, charged moment. Noses practically touching, breathing synced and pulses racing, as each waits for the other to back out. And then, in unison, they dive off the cliff and their lips meet.

It’s like fire blooming between them, and they tumble down onto the couch in seconds. Hand are everywhere and this want that’s been building for months and months threatens to swallow them whole.

“I thought about kissing you every day I was gone,” he murmurs against her cheek when he finally comes up for air, “how I’d had the chance so many times and chickened out and what a fool I was.”

“I didn’t realise it until you came back. I think I’ve liked you for a really long time but I was just totally oblivious. And then when Dana…” she trails off, unwilling to go further down that path while it’s still sore. “Well, it kinda hit me like a train.”

He kisses her again, less frantic this time but with no less fervour, and she can feel pressure against her hip that wasn’t there a second ago. Finn’s ring gear is little more than glorified underwear, and the skimpy trunks are doing nothing to hide the swelling beneath.

Bayley gives a shy smile and starts tugging at his waistband. He reaches out and catches her wrist gently, stopping her from going further, a low moan escaping his lips.

“Not here, love. Not backstage, on a grimy couch. Not for our first.”

She lets out a small grumbling sound but doesn’t argue, moving her hands back up to roam the angles of his chest. He reaches up and tugs her face back down, kissing her over and over again until both their lips are starting to get swollen from the effort.
They’re so engrossed in making out that they forget the passage of time, until the door swings open to reveal a flustered Sami and a haggard Elise.

“We did knock,” Elise deadpans as they spring apart, looking rather like teenagers getting caught by their parents. Both are in the process of turning deep shades of red.

“Praise to Allah,” Sami says with a grin. “About damn time.”

Elise is a little less encouraging. “Look, I’m all for love and whatever, but we have about five minutes before the underground carpark locks for the night so could y’all make out in the van, please?”

There’s a sheepish hustle to grab their gear and they definitely end up with each other’s jackets in their rush, and oh god oh god they were never gonna live this down and yet, as Sami breaks the speed limit twice over to get them out of the parking lot seconds before the doors bolt shut on them, neither of them can wipe the ear-splitting grin off their face. They hold hands the whole way to the hotel, sneaking looks at each other when they think Sami and Elise aren’t looking. The other two, for their part, are doing their level best to keep from going on gleeful “we knew it” rants.

When they finally get to the hotel Elise makes a beeline for front desk, chatting briefly with the receptionist before returning to the group with a fresh room key, which she tosses to Bayley.

“Try not to break the bed, eh?” she says with a wink.

Bayley blushes again and Finn gives Elise a bewildered look.

“Did you just sweet talk a free room?”

“Fuck no, I ain’t that smooth. I’m back on staff rotation, so corporate is back on the hook for my room bookings.”

“Are you sure?” Bayley manages to choke out, still crimson, and Elise nods.

“Way too fucking lazy to move my stuff tonight anyways. My hands are still fucked,” she adds, displaying her bandaged fingers with a masochistic sort of pride.

“I hope whatever Seth paid you is worth all that, chérie,” Sami clucks as they head off towards the elevator, leaving a blushing Bayley and a bemused Finn standing in the lobby, staring after them.

“I’m telling you, I charged him way too much. And he insisted on tipping. TIPPING. Who the fuck ever heard of tipping your goddamn seamstress?”

Sami keeps his mouth shut. In the war to get Elise to accept the money she was worth, sometimes it was better to pick his battles. He doesn’t realise how quiet he’s become until they reach their hallway and Elise asks softly, “you okay, Sami?”

“What? Oh… yeah. Just. You know. People start dating and they don’t have so much time.”

“If a tenth of what you’ve told me about Finn is true, Finn will always have time for you, Sami. You just need to ask.”

He slings an arm around her at this, the comfortable routine of two affection-craving humans content to get their touch from platonic sources if that’s what’s there.

“If Bayley got embarrassed about the furniture quip, she’s going to die when she opens her gym
“I slipped in a bunch of condoms when she wasn’t looking while we were waiting for you downstairs.”

“Sami, you devil,” Elise scolds playfully, eyes shining. “She’ll think it was me.”

“Oh, I left a note, too. She’ll know.”

Bayley finds Sami’s thoughtful present when she’s looking for a hair tie before she goes to bed. Finn’s already sleeping, and for once Bayley’s too euphoric about what just happened to be embarrassed. She reads the note and lets out a peel of laughter much louder then she intended. Finn raises his head blearily to see what’s going on. Bayley ties her hair up in a loose bun and slips under the covers next to him, a wave of happiness coursing through her as Finn immediately wraps her into a warm embrace.

“What’s so funny, acushla?” he asks her in that beautiful lilting voice, and Bayley doesn’t think she’ll ever get used to the way the Irish endearment rolls so easily off his tongue.

“Just Sami. Wants to make sure we stay safe. So he helpfully stuffed 5 different types of condoms into my bag.”

“Good. I only had the one,” Finn mumbles against her neck, shifting so they’re both as comfortable as possible. “Sleep well, love.”

“You too, Finn. You too.”

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April 4, 2017

Orlando, Florida

It’s a beautiful day in Orlando, and there’s no time like the present to cross an item off Bayley’s bucket list and go to Disney World.

“I’m not a damn charity case,” Elise squawks, waving off Roman’s offer to cover her entry and shoving her credit card toward the Magic Kingdom ticket girl.

“You gotta be a bit more sneaky with her,” says Dean, squeezing his hand briefly as he notices the slightly-hurt look passing over Roman’s face. “She’s got more pride then Cass about this sorta shit.”

“Speaking of Cass, where are those two?” asks Seth, coming up from behind and craning his neck around in search of the G’s.

Dean pulls out his phone and scrolls to check his last text from Cass. “Running a bit late. Cass says Enzo took their last two losses real hard and woke up hungover as fuck this morning.”
“Guess I know who not to sit next on the teacups then,” Finn says cheerfully, as he joins their group with Sasha and (a very out of place) Baron Corbin in tow. Bayley and Elise are in the square already, taking pictures of each other in outrageous poses with the castle in the background.

“Elise, Bayley, you two want funnel cake? I’m buying!” calls Sami brightly as he finally makes it though the entrance gates. The other two nod and skip over to Sami, giggling. Sasha and Finn have replaced them in front of the castle, Finn a patient photographer as Sasha makes him take shots of at least 20 different poses just so she can be sure there’s one in there with perfect angles.

“See, Ro,” whispers Dean, fondly. “Sneaky.”

“Oh, I just slip shit in her bag when she’s not looking,” says Seth quietly, catching on to what they must have been talking about before.

Roman turns to him, surprised. “And that works?”

“I mean, she’s wearing the space leggings, isn’t she?” Seth gestures towards the group in the food line. Sure enough, Elise has paired a loose black tank top advertising some band they’ve never heard of with a bold new pair of galaxy leggings.

“I used to do that for Bayley, except with makeup,” Sasha adds, joining the conversation and putting an arm around Seth’s waist. “Or sometimes I’d just tell her it was something I bought that turned out to be the wrong shade. Though she started seeing through that once we started going to Sephora together.”

“Are we waiting for Skyscraper and Scrappy, or can we go now?” Baron asks grumpily. He’s not actually as pissed as he looks to be at a Disney Park, not now that there’s Star Wars shit. But it’s way too early in the morning for him to be dealing with so many people this cheerful and the children, oh god the screaming children.

Roman thinks for a second then offers, “maybe we all do our own thing and then meet up for lunch at like eleven?” The others nod, and begin wandering in other directions, leaving Dean and Roman alone.

“One cheesy picture?” Roman asks, looking hopeful. And well, Dean’s never been good at saying no to Roman.

“You send that pic to anyone and you’re lucky if I ever fuck you again, you hear?” Dean hisses, and a parent nearby gives him a disapproving look.

“Sorry m’am,” Roman says, keeping a perfectly straight face. “Filthy mouth on this one. Can’t take him anywhere.”

“Fuck you, Ro,” he says when the indignant lady has pushed her stroller out of earshot from them.


“So explain to me for a second why you’ve been living with Sami for a month?” Finn begins, as they’re all sitting around in a café eating stupidly overpriced park sandwiches.

Elise smiles at him. “Ah, and he finally gets around to asking me who the hell I am.”

“That’s not exactly how I meant it.”
“I got put on paid vacation because of... an incident and Sami graciously offered to put me under house arrest until I went back to work.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were safe!”

“Sami, it’s a joke,” Elise is quick to assure him with a grin. “Here, let me try again. Nia Jax decided, with obvious encouragement from Triple H, that she had an issue with my choice of occupation and tried to fix the problem. And then I didn’t have a ride because my boss put me on vacation and I usually ride with the equipment guys in exchange for helping them do teardown, so Sami let me tag along with him so he could watch my back.”

“Better,” pronounces Sami with a sage nod.

Dean pipes up then to add, “you left out the bit where Peyton and Billie drugged you in Germany and Samoa Joe filmed a manifesto to Sami on your phone.”

“Jesus Christ, Sami, why didn’t you-”

“Finn, you were in Ireland. It’s not like you could have done anything. I didn’t want you to worry.”

“So, anyways, Elise Thompson, late twenties, engineering drop-out, security guard, can’t drive, reasonably good at sewing, apparently cool enough to run with this crew.” She sticks out her hand with a grin and Finn decides to run with her clear bid to lighten the mood and change the subject.

“Finn Bálor, professional wrestler. And a passionate fan of Lego.”

“Oh, can we go around the table and everyone has to pick what career they’d do if they weren’t doing this?” Bayley asks, eyes lighting up. Enzo gives her a nod behind his dark shades.

“Sure, Bay, I’m in, I’ll start. If I wasn’t a wrestler, then I’d own my own bar.” His voice is a thin rasp, and Roman makes a note to pull Cass aside later and ask just how fucking hard Enzo is taking things.

“I’d probably be a doctor,” Cass offers.

Baron, Sami, Roman, and Seth all pick careers in other professional sports. Dean went to find a bathroom before they got to him, and Sasha choses rap star.

“It’s predictable, but I would one hundred percent be a Master Builder for the Lego Company,” Finn says, and Bayley grins at him for a moment like he’s the only person in the room.

“I’d own an ice cream truck, but like a cool ice cream truck” she decides, and everyone laughs at this. It’s just so perfectly Bayley. “Elise, your turn. What would you do if you weren’t a security guard?”

“Honestly?” she asks, uncharacteristically timid, aware that everyone’s eyes are on her. She’s a bit unused to this much attention from people she still regards as her superiors, and she’s not sure how they’ll react to the most truthful answer that pops into her mind. She decides to risk it. “I always wanted… I think I’d be a dancer.”

The table is split between people nodding like this is the most natural thing for her to say, and those gobsmacked that the aggressive tomboy they’ve adopted into the group would have a dream career that involved massive amounts of hairspray and eyeliner. The pause only lasts a second, though, as everyone starts bickering over who’s paying the cheque and who owes who for food from last month. Roman quietly slips away from them, first to find the waiter to pay for the table before
anyone can stop him, then to the washroom to check on Dean.

“Hey,” he says quietly, as he opens the door to find Dean in front of the mirror, knuckles white as he grips the edges of the sink.

“M’fine,” Dean mumbles, looking up at Roman through the mirror’s reflection.

“Bullshit, uce. Talk to me.”

“Just… if I wasn’t a wrestler, I’d probably be dealing drugs or whoring myself or, most likely, dead.”

Roman wraps his arms around Dean’s waist from behind and sighs. “The game’s about picking a fantasy career, not what you’d actually be,” he whispers against Dean’s cheek.

“I know. Brain shorted out on me a bit. I’m fine, Ro, I promise.” Dean splashes his face and takes a deep breath, straightening up to look at Roman with a weak smile.

“Let’s go do the craziest motherfucking rollercoaster Seth can find us, alright?”

“Mhm.” Dean leans over and steals a brief kiss. “I like the sound of that.”

“I wanted to say sorry,” Baron says stiffly, as they walk towards the parking lot after lunch for the short hop over to Disney’s Hollywood Studios. Enzo and Cass had decided to go to Animal Kingdom, and the rest of the guys just barely fit into the second van to hit the waterparks. Sasha and Bayley were staying behind so Bayley could finish taking pictures with every single princess, so Baron awkwardly had offered Elise a spot in his vehicle so she could meet Darth Vader.

“Why, because your fuckbuddy tried to kill me?” Elise asks, far too casually. “It’s fine. I’m sure she has other redeeming… assets.”

“Not that. Though, I broke up with her, for the record. She cheated on me.”

“Can you cheat on a fuckbuddy? Isn’t that the point?”

“Apparently you can if you don’t tell Braun Strowman you’re fucking other people and he tries to break my wrist backstage after Wrestlemania. Anyways, that wasn’t my point.”

“What is your point?”

“I haven’t been that nice to you. Sorry about that.”

“You’re not that nice to anyone.”

“Yeah.”

“S’okay. So where’s your car?”

“Um. I didn’t exactly rent a car,” Baron says, as they come upon a sleek black motorcycle.

“Oh my god, it’s fucking beautiful,” Elise exclaims, rushing forward to run her hands reverently over the machine. “You seriously rented a bike?”

“We were gonna be here a few days. Figured it was worth the splurge.” He tosses her a helmet, pulling on his own and settling himself on the bike. Elise sits behind him carefully and puts on the
Elise gets to meet Darth Vader and Chewbacca, and she’s pretty damn pleased. She insists on buying him ice cream as payback for the ride, and she has to hold back a giggle at the contrast of Baron’s dark jeans and death metal tank with the bright multi-coloured cone he’s now consuming.

“Wanna meet the others at the waterpark?”

“Can’t go swimming, just got my leg tattooed.”

“Sucky.”

They wander for a while in silence, passing through the Indiana Jones area and stopping a few times to take pictures. Truthfully they’re each beginning to feel bored, and kinda antsy to leave; both of them have to work tonight and were more excited for the Universal Studios plan tomorrow then the Disney trip.

Unsurprisingly, Baron snaps first.

“Okay, I’m done.”

“It’s too early to head back to the arena, but I am so with you on the getting out of here bit.”

He give a quick nod of acknowledgement, then thinks for a second.

“D’ya wanna just drive around?”

“Yeah, actually,” she answers, a grin spreading across her face, “I do.”

“Zo, how you doin’?”

“I’m fine, Cass. Jesus, stop your fussing.” Enzo is glaring into the tiger enclosure like one of them stole his favourite sneakers. Cass rolls his eyes in frustration.

“Bullshit. We’re at the happiest place on earth, and you’ve been a massive grump all day.”

“I’m just hungover.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Look, I’ll cut back on the drinkin’. Happy?”

“Zo, this ain’t about the drinkin’ an’ you know it. I can’t fix it for you if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Can’t fix it, Cass.”

“Try me.”

“Sick of losing, okay? Week after week an’ all I can manage to do is lose. I’m fed up with it.”
“You’re not the only one losing, Zo. We’re a team here, ’case you forgot.”

“It don’t bother you, though.”

“Bothers me plenty. ’Specially when it’s losing to that pasty Irish hoagie with a stick up his ass. Bothers me more when I see you beatin’ yourself up like this.”

“I dunno how to shake this funk, big guy.”

“Let’s start with the tamarins, and the best Cuban sandwich we can find, and we’ll go from there, a’ight?”

Enzo nods, leaning against Cass for the first time all day. The knot of worry in Cass’s stomach loosens just a bit as he puts his arm around his partner’s shoulders.

“You good to go?” he asks, glancing down at Enzo. Enzo looks up at him and nods.

“Tamarins and sandwiches and whatever comes next. Sounds pretty good.”

And with that, they leave behind the tigers to face the future together.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this one was quite a ride. Stay tuned for the next escapades of your favourite gang!

End Notes

Complaints about medical inaccuracies can be directed elsewhere. (Surprise, surprise, I don’t have a medical degree.)

Comments literally make my day <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!