



DOWN FOR THE 3!

PART X

STORY BY TETSU & KOKOJI

ART BY TETSU



"SARAH!" CALLING INTO THE HOUSE, I ROLLED MY SUITCASE THROUGH THE DOOR. "I'M BACK!" TWO WEEKS HAD FELT LIKE SO MUCH LONGER. WE'D BEEN TALKING ON THE PHONE IN ANY SPARE TIME WE HAD BUT THAT HADN'T CHANGED THE GLACIAL TICKING OF THE CLOCK. WHICH IS WHY I WAS SURPRISED BY THE LACK OF RESPONSE TO MY RETURN. "SARAH?" I TRIED AGAIN, SLIGHTLY LOUDER. HER THUNDERING FOOTSTEPS NEVER CAME THOUGH.

CONSIDERING HOW EXCITED SHE WAS ABOUT ME COMING BACK I WAS SURPRISED. AND MAYBE A TAD SAD. AFTER ALL, SHE WASN'T THE ONLY ONE COUNTING DOWN THE MINUTES TO OUR REUNION. I OPENED UP MY PHONE TO CHECK OUR MESSAGES, MAKING SURE I HADN'T GIVEN HER THE WRONG TIME. NOPE. I'D BEEN RIGHT AND HERE I WAS WITHIN 15 MINUTES OF THE TIME I'D GIVEN. "WHERE THE HELL IS SHE?" I SIGHED TO MYSELF, POCKETING MY PHONE AND STROLLING INTO THE APARTMENT. IT TOOK ME BARELY TWO STEPS TO HAVE SOMETHING CATCH MY EYE.



ON THE COFFEE TABLE WAS A NOTE. A HAND-WRITTEN, PAPER NOTE. I SCOFFED AS I FOUND IT, PICKING IT UP TO READ WHAT IT SAID. WHAT YEAR WAS SHE LIVING IN? WHY HADN'T SHE JUST TEXTED ME? BUT AS I READ, I UNDERSTOOD WHY SHE'D LEFT A NOTE RATHER THAN MESSAGING ME NORMALLY.

SARAH HAD GONE TO THE GYM FOR SOME WRESTLING PRACTICE. SHE WANTED ME TO MEET HER THERE, TO PICK HER UP WHEN SHE WAS DONE. THAT ALONE WAS ENOUGH TO GET MY SPIDER SENSE TINGLING, BUT IT WAS THE ONE LINE WRITTEN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE NOTE THAT HAD ALARM BELLS RINGING IN MY BRAIN.

"OH, I WENT SHOPPING BY THE WAY! MY SHOES WERE FEELING A LITTLE TIGHT." MY JAW TIGHTENED. TIGHT WAS WRITTEN AT A SLANT, ITALICISED TO REALLY EMPHASISE IT. THERE WAS A MESSAGE IN A MESSAGE HERE AND SHE WANTED ME TO READ IT NOW, STOOD IN THE HOUSE FOR A REASON.

MY HEAD TURNED THE WAY A RUSTY GATE OPENS. SLOW AND GRINDING. BACK OVER TO WHERE WE KEPT OUR SHOES NEAR THE OPENING OF THE APARTMENT CORRIDOR. "WHAT THE FUCK." I WHISPERED TO MYSELF, DROPPING THE PAPER



HEADING OVER, ENTRANCED, I WALKED STRAIGHT TO THE SHOES I KNEW SHE'D JUST BOUGHT. I COULD TELL WHICH ONES THEY WERE FROM A MILE AWAY, THEIR BRIGHT, CLEAN SURFACE SHINING LIKE GEMS IN THE ROUGH. THEY LOOKED... BIG. AND UP CLOSE, I KNEW MY EYES WEREN'T DECEIVING ME.

SQUATTING DOWN AND PICKING UP THE SHOE, I TURNED IT OVER IN MY HANDS, TILTING IT, EXAMINING IT. JESUS, THIS THING LOOKED LIKE I COULD FIT IN IT. HAD HER FEET REALLY GOTTEN THAT MUCH BIGGER? I DIDN'T HAVE TO ASK THE QUESTION, INSTEAD ANSWERING IT MYSELF WITH A COMPARISON. I REACHED FOR AN OLDER PAIR OF HER SHOES, A PAIR THAT SHE'D WORN WHEN WE FIRST STARTED DATING. "WHOA..." IT WAS A STARK COMPARISON. THE DIFFERENCE IN SIZE WAS OBVIOUS WITH THE NEWER SHOE CLEARLY LONGER AND WIDER BY A BIG MARGIN. WERE THESE NEW SHOES EXTRA WIDE? PUTTING THEM BOTH DOWN I CONTINUED MARVELLING AT THEM AND STOOD.

AFTER A MOMENT OF CONTEMPLATION, I COULDN'T HELP THE LAUGH THAT ABRUPTLY BURST OUT OF ME. "I FUCKING KNEW IT." SHE HAD BEEN TALLER BEFORE I'D LEFT. SARAH HAD BEEN STARTING ANOTHER GROWTH SPURT AND THESE SHOES WERE THE PROOF.... AND SHE WANTED ME TO KNOW IT... SHE WANTED TO BUILD SUSPENSE BEFORE ANOTHER SURPRISE.

FRANTICALLY CHECKING I STILL HAD MY KEYS, I HURRIED TO THE DOOR. I HAD TO GET TO THE GYM. FAST.



"COME ON, KURT!" I HEARD SAVANNAH SHOUT THROUGH THE DOOR. "DON'T LOCK UP, YOU CAN'T OVER POWER - NO! SHIT..."

OPENING THE DOOR I STEPPED INTO THE GYM, EXPECTING KURT AND DARREN TO BE ON THE MATS, BOTH GRAPPLING, CLUTCHED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER. THAT WASN'T THE CASE. A MOUNTAIN WAS WRESTLING WITH KURT, DARREN AND SAVANNAH WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES. IT TOOK MY BRAIN A FEW SECONDS TO STUTTER THROUGH PROCESSING WHAT I WAS ACTUALLY LOOKING AT. THE MOUNTAIN THAT WAS TIED UP WITH KURT WAS SARAH. THE MOUNTAIN WAS SARAH...

AND FROM THE LOOKS OF THINGS THIS MATCH WAS EVEN MORE CONTESTED THAN THE ONE I'D SEEN LAST. BREAKING OUT OF MY AWED TRANCE I GLANCED TO DARREN AND SAVANNAH WHO SEEMED TO BE JUST AS AMAZED AS ME, BOTH GAPING.

A GRUNT RIPPLED OUT OF KURT THEN AND MY ATTENTION WAS RIPPED BACK TO THE SKIRMISH UNFOLDING BEFORE US.



KURT WAS TRYING TO MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN, BRINGING HIMSELF LOWER AND HUGGING HIS BODY IN CLOSER TO SARAH'S. HIS FACE AND SHOULDERS MASHED SARAH'S CHEST, AN ENVY INDUCING AMOUNT OF TIT SQUISHING AGAINST HIM. BUT I WASN'T ENVIOUS. I KNEW HOW RESPECTFUL KURT WAS. I'D SEEN HIM WRESTLE WITH OTHER WOMEN AND PURPOSEFULLY AVOID ANYTHING THAT COULD BE DEEMED INAPPROPRIATE. AND THAT TOLD ME EXACTLY HOW DIFFICULT A TIME HE WAS HAVING IN THIS MATCH. THIS MIGHT NOT BE A STALEMATE AT ALL, BUT A SLOW, CREEPING DEFEAT FOR ONE OF THE BEST WRESTLERS I KNEW.

THEIR STRUGGLING WENT ON, MUSCLE GRINDING AGAINST MUSCLE. I LOOKED TO SARAH, KNOWING SOMETHING HAD TO GIVE SOON. WITH HER BACK TO ME, I COULDN'T SEE HER EXPRESSION, BUT FROM HER BODY LANGUAGE I COULD TELL SHE WAS THINKING. PLANNING. SHE HAD A SERIOUSLY GOOD MIND FOR WRESTLING TACTICS AND NOW WITH HER SIZE AND POWER... I HAD A FEELING THAT WHATEVER WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN, IT WAS GOING TO BE BIG. HER HAND RESTED ON KURT'S SHOULDER FOR JUST A MOMENT BEFORE IT HAPPENED.



A SHUFFLE OF FEET. A SWITCH OF FOOTING THAT WAS ALMOST TOO FAST TO SEE. SARAH PUT ONE FOOT DOWN ALONG THE OUTER EDGE OF KURT'S FOOT AND THEN EVERYTHING HAPPENED ALL AT ONCE. SHIFTING HER WEIGHT, SHE PUSHED DOWN ON KURT, MAKING HIM SWAY FORWARDS. THEN THE EXPLOSIVE POTENTIAL READY AND WAITING IN HER LEGS BOOMED HER MASSIVE FRAME AROUND, SWINGING HER FORM IN AN ARC AROUND KURT. HE WAS STILL TRYING TO REGAIN HIS BALANCE WHEN SHE LANDED BEHIND HIM, ARMS CINCHING AROUND HIS MIDDLE.

THERE WAS PURE TERROR IN HIS FACE AS SARAH ONCE AGAIN MOVED IN A BURST OF STRENGTH THAT NORMAL PEOPLE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SUMMON. SHE'D GONE FROM LOW TO HIGH IN A HEARTBEAT, STANDING UP AND ROCKETING HERSELF AND KURT UP. HER GRUNT WAS SO LOUD THAT KURT'S SURPRISED YELL WAS ALMOST DROWNED OUT, HIS BODY FLUNG UP INTO THE AIR AT A SPEED THAT MUST HAVE GENERATED SOME SERIOUS G-FORCE.

HE FLAILED FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE AN ELONGATED FEW MICROSECONDS OF TIME BEFORE THE PARABOLIC LINE HE WAS ON SHIFTED DOWNWARDS. FOLLOWING THE MOMENTUM SHE TWISTED HER BODY AND TOOK BOTH KURT AND HERSELF DOWN TO THE MATS, THE IMPACT SLAMMING HARD, SENDING VIBRATIONS THROUGH THE SOLES OF MY SHOES.



KURT LOOKED LIKE ROADKILL UNDER SARAH, FLATTENED TO THE MAT. HE HARDLY HAD A CHANCE TO STRUGGLE AS SHE ENSNARED HIS ARM WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT, WRENCHING IT BACKWARDS TO SLAM BETWEEN HER LEGS; WHICH MEANT THAT ARM WAS NEVER ESCAPING. KURT STARTED TO STRUGGLE TOO LATE, HER ARMS QUICKLY WRAPPING AROUND HIS HEAD BEFORE HE COULD DEFEND HIMSELF PROPERLY. CLAMPING HER FINGERS TOGETHER, SHE PULLED BACK, ONE MUSCLED FOREARM SMEARING ACROSS KURT'S FACE AND FORCING HIS HEAD UP, TORQUING WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN AN EXCRUCIATING AMOUNT OF TENSION INTO HIS JAW AND NECK.

IT WAS ONLY FOR A FEW SECONDS BUT THE MUFFLED, PAINED NOISES AND THE SCREWED UP MASK OF PAIN THAT HIS FACE BECAME - I GENUINELY THOUGHT SARAH MIGHT POP KURT'S HEAD OFF OF HIS SHOULDERS BEFORE HE GOT A CHANCE TO TAP. UNTIL I SAW HER EYES FLICKER IN MY DIRECTION. EYE LEVEL LOW, SHE MUST HAVE SEEN MY SHOES AND JEANS, REGISTERING THAT THEY DIDN'T FIT THE SURROUNDINGS. I HAVE TO ASSUME SHE IMMEDIATELY KNEW IT WAS ME BECAUSE THERE WAS AN INSTANT EXCITEMENT IN HER FEATURES, HER EYES SNAPPING UP TO MEET MINE. "OH MY GOD, ELIAS!" THE SERIOUSNESS OF COMPETITION DISAPPEARED, EVAPORATING AS JOY REPLACED IT. HER GRIP ON KURT WENT SLACK AND HE GAVE A YELP, SUDDENLY RELEASED TO SLAP, PRONE AGAINST THE MAT.



SARAH LEAPT TO HER FEET, SPRINGING OFF OF THE FLOOR WITH A FELINE GRACE. THOSE SAME MOVEMENTS MORPHED AS SHE CHANGED COURSE AND IN LESS THAN A SECOND SHE WAS COMING AT ME IN A RHINO CHARGE. HER SPEED MEANT IT WAS DIFFICULT TO GAUGE HER NEW SIZE BUT AS SHE BARRELLED TOWARDS ME IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THIS LAST GROWTH SPURT HAD BEEN A PARTICULARLY LARGE ONE. "WHOA, SLOW DOWN." I MANAGED TO SAY BEFORE SHE REACHED ME, HALF RAISING AN ARM TO STOP HER.

BUT SHE WAS STILL CLEARLY IN A WRESTLING MINDSET. HER OWN HAND WOUND AROUND MY OUTSTRETCHED LIMB, REELING ME INTO HER AS HER OTHER ARM WRAPPED AROUND MY NECK. I COULDN'T HELP BUT LAUGH AS I WAS SMOTHERED WITH LOVE, OUR BODIES MELDING INTO ONE SHAPE. "I MISSED YOU SO MUCH!" SHE SQUEALED, HAPPILY BOUNCING ON HER TOES, ROCKING MY TO AND FRO AS HER CHEST UNULATED AGAINST ME.

I HUGGED HER BACK, HER PERFUME AND HER SCENT COUPLED WITH HER WARMTH AGAINST ME HAD ME SWOONING. I FORGOT ABOUT HER GROWTH SPURT AND THE DOZENS OF QUESTIONS THAT LINGERED. I JUST ENJOYED BEING CLOSE TO HER AGAIN, SQUEEZING HER BACK. "I MISSED YOU TOO."

WE STAYED EMBRACED FOR A BIT UNTIL A FAMILIAR VOICE BROKE US UP. "HOLD ON, I THINK I MIGHT PUKE... IT'S TOO SWEET... I CAN'T -" SAVANNAH MADE VOMITING NOISES.

"HEY! SHUT UP, I REALLY MISSED HIM!" SARAH LAUGHED, BREAKING AWAY FROM ME.



"I GET THAT BUT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE WRESTLING! TICK TOCK, GIGANTOR!" SAVANNAH TAPPED HER WRIST.

WHILE THEY WERE MOCK BICKERING, I ZONED THEM OUT, ATTENTION DRAWN TO SOMETHING MUCH MORE IMPORTANT. STEPPING AWAY FROM SARAH, I LOOKED HER UP AND DOWN, FINALLY GETTING A GOOD LOOK AT HER WHEN SHE WASN'T ON THE FLOOR OR RAMPAGING TOWARDS ME. I STRAIGHTENED UP AS MUCH AS I COULD, EYES WIDENING AS A WARM FLUSH RAN THROUGH ME. "HOOOOLY SHIT." I SAID LOUDER THAN I'D INTENDED, RUNNING MY FINGERS ALONG MY TEMPLES AND MY HANDS UP THROUGH MY HAIR, I HELD MY HEAD. SARAH AND SAVANNAH WERE SILENCED AS THEY BOTH LOOKED TO ME, SHOCKED BY THE OUTBURST. QUICKLY, SARAH'S CONCERNED EXPRESSION CRACKED, A HUGE GRIN SPREADING ACROSS HER FACE AS SHE REGISTERED WHAT WAS GOING ON. "SARAH, YOU'RE - YOU'RE FUCKING HUGE!" I LAUGHED, AMAZED, SHELLSHOCKED. HIPS WIDER THAN MY SHOULDERS, THIGHS THAT WERE THICKER THAN MY WAIST - I COULDN'T EVEN BEGIN TO DESCRIBE THE SHEER AMOUNT OF BOSOM ON DISPLAY. WATERMELONS WOULD BE EMBARRASSED NEXT TO THEM. AND TO TOP IT ALL OFF, I WAS LOOKING RIGHT INTO HER CHIN EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS BAREFOOT.

PUTTING HER HANDS ON HER HIPS SHE SOAKED IN THE REACTION, A FACETIOUS EMBARRASSMENT ON HER FACE. "OH, SORRY! I GUESS I FORGOT TO TELL YOU ABOUT ALL THE GROWING I'VE BEEN DOING." SHE WAS POSITIVELY GLOWING, BEAMING DOWN AT ME FROM SO HIGH UP.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW MUCH BIGGER SHE WAS.



"WAIT, REALLY? SARAH, YOU SERIOUSLY DIDN'T TELL HIM?!" SAVANNAH SEEMED BEWILDERED BY THE FACT, ALMOST ADMONISHING A SHEEPISH LOOKING SARAH. TURNING TO ME SHE GAVE A SURPRISED CHUCKLE, THROWING HER HANDS UP IN EXASPERATION. "IT'S LITERALLY ALL SHE'S BEEN TALKING ABOUT SINCE YOU LEFT. SHE'S BEEN TALKING ABOUT SHOWING YOU FOR DAYS - I'M SURPRISED HER HEAD DIDN'T EXPLODE FROM KEEPING THE SECRET." SIGHING, SHE TOOK A BEAT AND, SHAKING HER HEAD, MOTIONED WITH A FINGER FOR ME TO TURN AROUND. "C'MON, TURN AROUND."

"WHAT?" NOW I WAS THE ONE BEWILDERED.

"WELL, WE'RE CLEARLY NOT GONNA BE WRESTLING UNTIL WE GET THROUGH THIS. SO GO BACK TO BACK, LET'S SEE HOW MUCH TALLER THAN YOU SHE IS NOW." I COULDN'T DENY MY CURIOSITY AND, APPARENTLY, NEITHER COULD SARAH.

"LET'S DO IT." SHE SAID, MISCHIEVOUS AS ALWAYS. HER FINGERS SLIPPED BETWEEN MINE, NOTICEABLY LONGER AND THICKER THAN BEFORE I'D LEFT FOR MY WORK TRIP. TWIRLING US AROUND SHE BUMPED HER BUTT INTO MINE AND I COULDN'T HELP REGISTER NOT ONLY HOW WIDE HER HIPS WERE BUT HOW HIGH UP THEY WERE AGAINST MINE. THERE WAS SILENCE FOR A MOMENT BEFORE SARAH PRODDED SOME COMMENTS FROM THE GROUP. "WELL?"

"DAMN, SHE'S, LIKE, HALF A HEAD TALLER THAN YOU AT LEAST." DARREN SAID.

SAVANNAH APPROACHED ME. "IT'S OFFICIAL, YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO TIP TOE FOR A KISS NOW."



I SCOFFED OUT A LAUGH AND TURNED TO FACE SARAH. "CAN'T SAY I MIND THAT." ROCKING UP ONTO MY TOES I DID AS SAVANNAH PROPHESED, KISSING HER WITH A QUICK PECK ON THE LIPS. THE LOOK IN HER EYES - THE SPARK IN HER IRISES - LET ME KNOW SHE WAS HUNGRY FOR A LOT MORE THAN A KISS. BUT THEN THAT WOULD HAVE TO WAIT.

"YOU TWO SHOULD HAVE A REMATCH!" THE STATEMENT FROM KURT CAUGHT EVERYONE IN THE ROOM OFF GUARD.

"OH, THAT'S A GREAT IDEA!" SAVANNAH CHIRPED.

"I DUNNO GUYS..." SARAH SOUNDED NERVOUS. "ELIAS HASN'T REALLY PRACTISED IN A LONG WHILE." I FELT MYSELF BRISTLE SLIGHTLY. "I DON'T THINK HE'D WANT TO WRESTLE ON THE MATS STRAIGHT AWAY."

"AW, IS GIGANTOR SCARED SHE'S GONNA SQUASH HER BOYFRIEND?" SAVANNAH TEASED HER, TRYING TO CHIP AWAY AT HER CONVICTION TO PROTECT ME. IT DIDN'T WORK... ON SARAH AT LEAST.

"I'M DOWN." I SAID TO OOH'SAND AHH'S FROM THE OTHER WRESTLERS. SARAH SHOT ME A CONCERNED LOOK BUT I DOUBLED DOWN. "IT'LL BE FINE. I'LL WRESTLE." I SAID NOT EVEN THINKING ABOUT OUR LAST ENCOUNTER AND HOW I'D BEEN MANHANDLED. I KNEW SARAH WAS TRYING TO HELP ME SAVE FACE BUT IN FRONT OF EVERYONE, WITH ALL THEIR EYES ON ME, I DIDN'T WANT TO SEEM SCARED.



PUTTING ON A LEOTARD AFTER SO LONG FELT WEIRD. I'D LEFT ONE OF MINE HERE A LONG TIME AGO, EARLY ON IN OUR RELATIONSHIP. BACK THEN I'D EXPECTED TO BE HERE A LOT WITH SARAH, TRAINING TOGETHER. THAT WASN'T HOW THINGS HAD GONE THOUGH. HOWEVER, NOW I HAD A CHANCE TO HONOUR MY GYM AND WEAR THE RED AGAIN. DESPITE IT BEING TIGHT, I COULD FEEL HOW THE ELASTIC IN THE MATERIAL DIDN'T HAVE TO STRETCH AS MUCH, HUGGING MY DIMINISHED PHYSIQUE IN A DIFFERENT WAY TO HOW IT DID BEFORE.

THERE WAS A RIPPLE OF SOUND FROM THE GROUP AS I STEPPED OUT OF THE CHANGING ROOM. I COULD ONLY ASSUME IT WAS THE COLOUR I WAS WEARING. SUDDENLY I FELT LIKE A RIVAL IN ENEMY TERRITORY. IT WAS A FAMILIAR FEELING - ONE THAT PUT AN UNSUPPRESSABLE SMILE ON MY FACE, FIRING ME UP EVEN MORE.

SARAH WAS WAITING FOR ME ON THE MATS, BODY LANGUAGE DRAWN INWARD SHYLY, SO CONTRASTED AGAINST HER BEHAVIOUR WHEN WE WERE WRESTLING AT HOME. "YOU READY FOR THIS?" I ASKED, JOINING HER ON THE SOFT, PADDED SQUARE.

"AS READY AS I'LL EVER BE." SHE REPLIED, STILL HAVING A RELUCTANT EDGE TO HER VOICE.



BOUNCING ON MY FEET, I STRETCHED A LITTLE, ROLLING MY SHOULDERS, LOOSENING UP MUSCLES AND WARMING UP JOINTS. "WHAT, ARE YOU SCARED YOU'RE GONNA LOSE?" I TEASED, KNOWING HOW TO GET HER OUT OF THE SHELL SHE'D CLAMED UP IN. ALL I HAD TO DO WAS PROD AT THAT MONSTROUS COMPETITIVENESS I KNEW SHE HAD.

IT WORKED FLAWLESSLY. I SAW HER SMILE AND BREATHE OUT A CHUCKLE, EYES LIGHTING UP. "OH, IS THAT WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN?" SHE ASKED, PUTTING HER HANDS ON HER HIPS, STANCE BEGINNING TO EXUDE THE CONFIDENCE I KNEW SHE HAD. "I SEEM TO REMEMBER OUR LAST MATCH ENDING A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY."

LAUGHING BACK, I TRIED NOT TO LET THE TRUTH PHASE ME. "OH? WEIRD, I CAN'T REMEMBER. MAYBE I WAS GOING EASY ON YOU."

SAVANNAH AND DARREN SNICKERED. "ELIAS, DON'T PISS OFF GIGANTOR. SHE REALLY MIGHT SQUISH YOU FLAT."

KURT SEEMED MORE RESERVED WITH HIS COMMENTS. "HONESTLY, I DON'T THINK SHE KNOWS HER OWN STRENGTH."

"YES I DO!" HUFFED SARAH, FROWNING AT KURT. HE THREW UP HIS HANDS, PALMS FACING HER AND LAUGHED, TAKING A STEP BACK. I COULDN'T TELL IF HIS RESPONSE WAS FEARFUL OR APOLOGETIC.



"ALRIGHT, THEN LET'S PUT THAT TO THE TEST." I SAID, STRUTTING INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE MAT AND PUTTING A HAND UP LIKE A PRO WRESTLER - A SIGNAL TO LOCK UP.

DARREN WHISTLED. "I CAN'T TELL IF THAT'S BRAVE OR STUPID."

"STUPID. DEFINITELY STUPID. BUT ENTERTAINING AT LEAST." SAVANNAH CHIMED IN RIGHT AS SARAH'S FINGERS SLIPPED INTO MINE. QUICKLY MY SECOND HAND WOVE TOGETHER WITH HER AND IT BECAME OBVIOUS THAT SAVANNAH WAS CLEARLY RIGHT. THE BATTLE FOR SUPERIORITY STARTED. I Poured EVERYTHING I HAD INTO PUSHING AND PULLING AGAINST HER, TRYING TO DESTABILISE HER. EVERY MOVEMENT WAS COUNTERED, GROUND TO A HALT WITH PURE POWER. EVEN TWISTING MY HANDS WASN'T POSSIBLE, HER IRON GRIP SHUTTING THAT DOWN TOO.

LOOKING UP INTO HER FACE, GRIMACING, I FELT A COLD ROLL DOWN MY SPINE. SARAH LOOKED COMPLETELY STOIC, NOT REACTING AT ALL AS I THREW THE KITCHEN SINK AT HER. SHE SEEMED TO WATCHED ME, EXAMINING HOW HARD I WAS TRYING WHILE SHE SIMPLY DIDN'T NEED TO. I GRUNTED, RIPPING MY HANDS AWAY. I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN I WAS ONLY ABLE TO BECAUSE SHE LET ME THOUGH. SHE'D UNDERSTOOD THAT I WAS GIVING UP ON THE BATTLE OF STRENGTH, DEFEATED.

I REFUSED TO LET MY SHORT RETREAT BE THE END OF THE MATCH THOUGH. BEFORE SHE HAD A CHANCE TO GET TOO COMFORTABLE, I DARTED TO THE SIDE, SHOOTING FOR A SINGLE LEG TAKEDOWN AS FAST AS I COULD.



NOT EVEN A FLICKER OF WORRY ON HER FACE, SARAH SOAKED THE IMPACT OF MY TACKLE IN. SHE DIDN'T SPRAWL, SHE ONLY SLIGHTLY SHIFTED HER WEIGHT TO COUNTER ME, LEANING INTO MY ATTACK - GOD, SHE HARDLY FLINCHED. HER ARMS MOVED UP IN A MOVEMENT OF JOVIAL SURPRISE, SHOCKED THAT I'D DO SOMETHING ELSE SO BRAVE AFTER WHAT HAD JUST HAPPENED.

TO ME IT WAS MORE LIKE A CAR CRASH THOUGH - ONE WHERE THE CAR BARRELS STRAIGHT INTO A BRICK WALL. THE AIR WAS PUSHED OUT OF ME AS MY SOFTER BODY MOULDED AROUND HER SOLID FORM. WRAPPING MY ARMS AROUND ONE OF THE WARM, THICK, MARBLE SCULPTED PILLARS SHE CALLED A LEG, I MUSHED MYSELF AGAINST HER, DRIVING MY SHOULDER UP INTO HER MIDDLE. SHE WAS TALL WHICH MEANT THAT HER CENTRE OF GRAVITY WAS AT LEAST HIGH. SO I PUSHED UPWARDS, LESS POWERING MY TORSO AGAINST HERS, THE WEIGHT OF ONE BREAST SPREADING OVER THE BACK OF MY HEAD. I TRIED NOT TO FOCUS ON THAT, INSTEAD SOLELY RESOLVED ON TRYING TO GET HER OFF BALANCE.

THE OUTCOME WASN'T FAVOURABLE. WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME BOWLING HER OVER WAS ANOTHER STAND STILL. SHE WAS IMMOVABLE. I'D TRIED LIFTING SARAH BEFORE AND HAD FAILED BUT NEVER IN A POSITION LIKE THIS. I'D PRACTISED THIS TAKE DOWN FOR COUNTLESS HOURS, TAKING PEOPLE MUCH HEAVIER THAN ME DOWN WITH IT HUNDREDS OF TIMES. AND YET EVEN AS MUSCLE FLEXED AND STRAINED, EVEN AS I GRUNTED AND GROWLED, SHE WASN'T NUDGED. IT FELT LIKE SARAH WAS MADE OF LEAD, CEMENTED INTO THE GROUND, THOSE TRUNK LIKE THIGHS ACTUAL TREES WITH A DEEP, STRONG NETWORK OF ROOTS KEEPING HER GROUNDED.

AFTER STRUGGLING FOR A HALF A DOZEN SECONDS I FELT HER FINGERS GRIP MY SHOULDER.



HER TIMING WAS PERFECT AND, RIGHT IN THE LULL OF MY ATTACK, EFFORTLESSLY, SHE WRENCHED MY SHOULDER UP, PULLING ON ME AS SHE YANKED HER LEG BACK. THE BURST OF MOVEMENT CAUGHT ME OFF GUARD - THE EXPLOSIVENESS OF IT BREAKING MY GRIP AROUND HER THIGH. OFF BALANCE BUT STILL AS DETERMINED AS EVER, I MOVED TO DOUBLE DOWN, TO DIVE BACK IN AND PRESS MY FUTILE ASSAULT. PULL TRANSITIONING INTO A PUSH, SHE THWARTED THAT ATTEMPT BEFORE IT COULD START. STILL, REFLEXES KICKED IN AND, MOVING LIKE FLOWING WATER, I TOOK THE MOMENTUM IN STRIDE, SPINNING WITH HER PUSH AND SHUFFLING MY FEET.

PIROUETTING, I SWUNG MY BODY AROUND AND DARTED FORWARD AGAIN, THIS TIME GOING FOR HER WAIST. ARMS ENCIRCLING AROUND HER, I GRIPPED ON TIGHT, WINDING MYSELF AROUND HER OAKEN SHAPE AGAIN, A DESPERATE VINE TRYING TO CLING ONTO THE REDWOOD THAT DOMINATED THE FOREST.

I MADE IT THOUGH. I'D GOTTEN IN CLOSE AGAIN, DESPERATELY HOLDING MY POSITION.



"OH WOW! HE GOT HER BACK!" SAVANNAH POPPED ALIVE, EXCITED BY THE DEVELOPMENT, VOICE CUTTING THROUGH THE GRUNTING AND SOUNDS OF MY STRUGGLES.

"I GUESS HE HASN'T COMPLETELY LOST HIS TOUCH." LAUGHED KURT. GETTING BEHIND SOMEONE IN WRESTLING WAS USUALLY A GOOD THING IT WAS A POSITION THAT YOU COULD USE TO CONTROL MOVEMENT AND SET UP FOR BIG THINGS.

YET, RIGHT NOW I STILL FELT POWERLESS. I'D MOVE, I'D PUSH AND PULL AND TRY TO GET A LEG OVER HERS TO GET HER OFF BALANCE BUT NOTHING WORKED. I COULDN'T EVEN FATHOM HOW STRONG SHE WAS NOW. I COULDN'T BUDGE HER IN ANY DIRECTION - NONE OF THE TECHNIQUES THAT I'D USED BEFORE DOING ANYTHING. SARAH WAS COMPLETELY SOLID, A CARVED BLOCK OF TUNGSTEN THAT I WAS WRAPPED AROUND.

THERE WAS NO POINT IN TRYING TO ENSNARE HER WITH MY LEG - TO TRY AND TRICK HER WITH SOMETHING SNEAKY. SHE WAS TOO GOOD, KNEW TOO MUCH AND THE GAP BETWEEN OUR WEIGHTS TOO LARGE. I NEEDED TO USE AS MUCH STRENGTH AS POSSIBLE, BOTH FEET PLANTED ON THE GROUND. MY POSITION BEHIND HER MEANT THERE WAS ONE GAMBIT I COULD USE, TRIPPING HER OVER MY LEG AND HAULING HER WEIGHT BACKWARDS, DOWN ONTO ME AND TO THE SIDE TO SPIN HER OVER.

SO I SLAMMED MY FOOT DOWN, LOWERING MY STANCE, DRAWING MYSELF BACK, LEVERAGING MY STRENGTH BACK AND TO THE SIDE, HOPING TO FELL THE REDWOOD.

TO MY SURPRISE - AND RELIEF - I FELT SARAH SHIFT. MOVING BACKWARDS, SHE FINALLY SEEMED TO BE OFF BALANCE, HOPE BLOOMING IN MY CHEST. ALL I HAD TO DO WAS KEEP HER MOVING A LITTLE MORE BEFORE I TWISTED AND PUSHED MY KNEE INTO THE NOOK AT THE BACK OF HERS. MY SUDDEN HOPE SOON TURNED TO TERROR THOUGH.



"HOLY SHIT, HE'S GOING FOR A SUPLEX?!" I HEARD DARREN BARK OUT THE WORDS. I HADN'T BEEN, NOT AT ALL - KNOWING I COULDN'T DO IT EVEN IF I TRIED.

"OH MY GOD, HE'S DOING IT!" SAVANNAH JOINED IN. I REALLY WASN'T THOUGH, BUT I KNEW THAT BEFORE THEY DID.

HER WEIGHT MOVED AGAINST ME, IN A DIRECTION FOREIGN TO MY EFFORTS. THE UPSWELL OF PRIDE AND ANTICIPATION IN MY CHEST DEFLATED. SARAH WAS PUSHING HERSELF BACKWARDS - MY ATTEMPTS TO GET HER DOWN AS FUTILE AS A FAN AGAINST A HURRICANE. UP AND BACK, SHIFTING HER WEIGHT OVER ME, TIPTOEING. "OOOOPS." SHE COOED TO ME, FINALLY GIVING THAT LAST LITTLE PUSH OFF OF HER TOES AND HOPPING ONTO ME. THIS HAD HAPPENED BEFORE, BACK AT HER PLACE, BUT NOW THERE WAS MUCH, MUCH MORE OF HER. BEFORE I'D THOUGHT IT WAS LIKE AN AVALANCHE. THIS TIME IT WAS THE METEORITE THAT KILLED THE DINOSAURS. FALLING INTO ME, HER ASS PUSHED INTO MY WAIST, WEIGHT MAKING MY KNEES SHAKE. MY STANCE DIDN'T MAKE THINGS EASIER AND UNDER HER, I COLLAPSED LIKE A HOUSE OF CARDS, THE GROUND SUCKING ME DOWN.

TIME SLOWED AND I HEARD THE SHOCK IN THE GROUP TURN TO DISAPPOINTMENT. I COULDN'T KEEP HER UP AND I COULDN'T STOP MY DESCENT. THE FLOOR KISSED MY BACK A HALF SECOND BEFORE SARAH LANDED ON ME. I SOUNDED AND FELT LIKE AN ACCORDION - ONE BEING SANDWICHED FLAT BETWEEN THE PALMS OF A GORILLA - MY DIAPHRAGM CRUSHED, ALL OF THE AIR IN MY LUNGS EVACUATING WITH AN OFF TUNE WHINE.



"OH NO, I SEEM TO HAVE LOST MY BALANCE." SARAH SAID, IN A DRAMATICALLY MONOTONE SARCASTIC DRAWL. SHE CHUCKLED AND LOOKED OVER TO SAVANNAH. "DOES THAT COUNT AS A TAKEDOWN?"

GIGGLING, TITTERING, STIFLED LAUGHTER FILTERED OUT. BURIED UNDER SARAH, HELPLESSLY SQUASHED AND PINNED, I COULDN'T STOP THE WARMTH OF EMBARRASSMENT IN MY CHEEKS. I BET ANY NUMBER OF PEOPLE WOULD BE JEALOUS OF ME RIGHT NOW. THE POSITION ITSELF WASN'T BAD AT ALL AND THE CHANCE TO WRESTLE WITH MY BOMBSHELL, GORGEOUS GIRLFRIEND WAS DEFINITELY A BLESSING. BUT MY PRIDE WAS STILL BRUISED, MY COMPLETELY ONE SIDED LOSS AND THE HUMILIATION OF BEING PANCAKED UNDER AN ASS (NO MATTER HOW AMAZING IT WAS) A LITTLE TOO MUCH TO IGNORE.

I FLEXED MY CORE AND TOOK AS DEEP A BREATH AS I COULD. "C-COULD YOU GET UP NOW?"

CLARITY SNAPPED TO SARAH'S FACE AS SHE REALISED HOW MUCH WEIGHT WAS RESTING ON ME. "OH! YEAH, OF COURSE!" SHE JUMPED UP QUICKLY, THE ROCKING MOTION MEANING SHE WAS LIKE A ROLLING PIN, FLATTENING THE AIR BACK OUT OF ME BEFORE SHE ROSE.

I STAYED GROUNDED FOR A MOMENT, TRYING TO WHEEZE OXYGEN BACK INTO ALVEOLI THAT HAD BEEN COMPRESSED INTO PAPER.



SARAH, LOOKING A LITTLE GUILTY, OFFERED ME A HAND. REACHING OUT, I TOOK IT, ONLY SEMI-SHOCKED BY THE STRENGTH WITH WHICH SHE YANKED MY UPPER BODY OFF THE GROUND. "THANKS." I WHEEZED, CLAMBERING UP.

"DAMN GIGANTOR, IF YOU'D ACTUALLY BEEN WRESTLING YOU MIGHT HAVE PANCAKED HIM COMPLETELY."

THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A FLICKER OF EMOTION ON MY FACE AS SUDDENLY SARAH REPLIED VEHEMENTLY. "HEY, I WAS WRESTLING!"

"SARAH... YOU FELL ON HIM." SAVANNAH LOOKED BEFUDDLED. "IT'S NOT LIKE THAT'S ONE OF OUR DRILLS."

TENSION ROSE IN SARAH'S SHOULDERS, HER EXPRESSION BECOMING TORN AS I KNEW SHE COULDN'T DISAGREE BUT WANTED TO. "IT'S NOT LIKE WE WEREN'T WRESTLING THOUGH!" NOW THEY WERE GOING BACK AND FORTH, DARREN AND KURT MAKING JOKES TO RELAX THE ROOM.

SHE HADN'T BEEN GIVING IT HER ALL. SHE WAS GOING EASY ON ME. BUT I KNEW SHE WAS DOING IT FOR ME. EITHER TO SAVE MY PRIDE OR TO STOP ME GETTING HURT, IT WAS HER TRYING TO PROTECT ME. I COULDN'T BE MAD AT THAT BUT, EQUALLY, THAT WASN'T WHAT I WANTED. IF WE WERE DOING THIS - AND WE WERE DOING THIS - I WANTED IT THE RIGHT WAY.

"SAVANNAH'S RIGHT." I SAID. IT WAS LIKE A GONG HAD SOUNDED IN THE ROOM, ALL EYES MOVING TO ME, ALL THE CHATTER GOING QUIET.



"WHAT?" SARAH'S RESPONSE TO ME WAS MUCH SOFTER THAN IT HAD BEEN TO SAVANNAH.

"SHE'S RIGHT. YOU'RE... LOOK, I GET IT." I SIGHED. "YOU'RE GOING EASY ON ME BECAUSE I'M RUSTY. YOU THINK I'M GONNA GET HURT, RIGHT?"

"WELL... YEAH." SHEEPISHLY, SADLY, SHE AGREED.

"YOU WEREN'T SCARED OF HURTING KURT?" I ASKED, ARMS OUT, TONE INDIGNANT.

"WHOA, DON'T GET ME INVOLVED IN THIS!" HE SAID, WAVING HIS HANDS AT ME.

SARAH STAMMERED HER WAY THROUGH HALF AN ARGUMENT BEFORE I TOOK HER HAND IN MINE. THE ARGUMENT RAMBLLED TO AN END, HER EYES SHIMMERING DOWN AT ME. "I DON'T CARE IF I LOSE. I DON'T EVEN CARE IF I GET HURT. BUT I WANT TO LOSE TO YOU WHEN YOU'RE NOT HOLDING BACK." I FROWNEED, STILL SEEING HOW SCARED SHE WAS BY THE IDEA. "I'M REALLY PROUD OF YOU, YOU KNOW." DROPPING THAT IN ALMOST RANDOMLY CONFUSED HER. "I'M REALLY PROUD OF HOW GOOD YOU'VE GOTTEN." EMOTIONS RAN ACROSS SARAH'S FACE LIKE A SPEEDING TRAIN PASSING. "COME ON, LEMME SEE HOW GOOD YOU ARE FIRST HAND." I SMILED, SQUEEZING HER HAND SLIGHTLY.

HER HESITATION LINGERED BUT I SAW THE LOOK IN HER EYES CHANGE.



HER JAW TIGHTENED, RESOLVE MAKING HER EXPRESSION STERN. "OKAY. ONE ROUND. ALL IN." WALKING AWAY, SHE GOT ONTO THE MATS AND, THIS TIME, GOT INTO A POSITION THAT LOOKED FAR MORE SERIOUS THAN THE ONE SHE'D BEEN IN BEFORE. FEET SHOULDER WIDTH APART, KNEES BENT, SARAH LEANED FORWARDS AND PUT HER HANDS ON HER KNEES. STRETCHING, HER BUST THREATENED TO POP FREE FROM HER LEOTARD, A THOUSAND METERS OF CLEAVAGE STRAINING THE ELASTIC. "COME ON, ELIAS. LET'S DO THIS." I COULDN'T TELL IF THERE WAS A GRIM FINALITY IN HER VOICE OR IF IT WAS MY IMAGINATION.

ALL I KNOW IS, THE ATMOSPHERE GOT HEAVY AS SOON AS SHE GOT INTO THAT STANCE, STATIC IN THE AIR HUMMING WITH ENERGY. I COULD FEEL THE PRESSURE PUSHING IN ON ME OPPRESSIVELY. A PART OF ME QUESTIONED IF I'D MADE A MISTAKE ASKING FOR THIS - ASKING A LION TO MAUL ME WITHOUT HOLDING BACK.

BREATHING IN A LONG BREATH, I WALKED ALONG THE GALLOWS TO MY POSITION OPPOSITE HER. A RIGIDITY IN MY MUSCLES, I TOO TRIED TO STRETCH, TO SHAKE THE FEELING OUT OF MY BONES. LOOKING AT HER ACROSS THE MAT, I GOT INTO MY OWN STANCE, A TIGHTNESS REFUSING TO LEAVE MY LEGS THAT MADE THEM QUIVER INVOLUNTARILY. I FELT LIKE I WAS STARING DOWN THE BARREL OF A GUN WHILE LOOKING AT HER, A HORRID TIGHTNESS CINCHING TIGHTER IN MY CHEST.



"CAN ONE OF YOU GUYS RING THE BELL?" SARAH ASKED, NOT TAKING HER EYES OFF OF ME, RAISING HER HANDS UP IN A GUARD. SHE HADN'T ASKED FOR THE BELL LAST TIME...

I MIRRORED HER, RAISING UP MY OWN GUARD, STOMACH GOING ON A ROLLERCOASTER RIDE IN MY GUTS AS I DID. SWEAT BEADED ON MY BROW AS TIME SEEMED TO STRETCH. EYES FLICKERING UP AND DOWN HER FORM, I SOAKED IN THE VIEW. EXAMINING. ASSESSING. SHE WAS LEANED FORWARDS, LOW, LEGS WOUND TIGHT UNDER HER. EVEN FROM THE FRONT I COULD SEE THE MUSCLE IN THEM, SWOLLEN AND TAUT AND READY. POTENTIAL ENERGY HUMMED IN THEM LIKE A V8 ENGINE IDLING. SHE WAS GOING TO COME STRAIGHT AT ME, NO PREAMBLE, NO PLAYING AROUND. I COULD FEEL IT IN MY BONES.

WAITING FOR THE BELL TOOK A LIFETIME, MY HEART BEATING IN MY CHEST SO HARD THAT MY TOES VIBRATED. GOD WHAT WAS TAKING THEM SO -

THE METALLIC CLANG RANG. TIME SNAPPED BACK TO NORMAL. SARAH'S STALLION POWER IN HER LOWER HALF KICKED OUT, LEGS LENGTHENING AND FLEXING, SENDING HER HURLING TOWARDS ME. FAST. TOO FAST FOR SOMEONE OF HER SIZE - TOO FAST FOR ANYONE OF ANY SIZE. BLUE BLURRED AS MY EYES BULGED AND MY JAW SLACKENED AT THE EXPLOSION OF MOVEMENT. I TRIED TO SHIFT, TO MUSTER UP SOME DEFENSE OF ANY KIND. MY ONLY THOUGHT WAS TO MOVE INTO HER, TO TRY AND FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE AND SOFTEN THE BLOW THAT THE HAMMER WAS GOING TO DEAL ME. BUT MY LIMBS MOVED AS IF THEY WERE DRENCHED IN MOLASSES, SYNAPSES GRINDING TOO SLOW TO BE EFFECTIVE.



I MOVED INTO THE ARROW OF DESTRUCTION RUSHING TOWARDS ME AND I CAN SAY THAT IF IT DID SOFTEN THE BLOW, IT WASN'T BY MUCH. THE HEAT SEEKING MISSILE THAT WAS SARAH TORPEDOED INTO ME, HER STANCE SO LOW AND TO THE GROUND THAT IT CAME IN JUST ABOVE MY HIPS, RIGHT ABOVE MY CENTRE OF GRAVITY.

THE FREIGHT TRAIN IMPACT SMASHED ME, BENDING MY RIBS, RESHAPING MY ORGANS, TURNING ME INSIDE OUT. I'M SURPRISED I DIDN'T SHATTER INTO A 1000 PIECES ON CONTACT. INSTEAD, MY FEET LEFT THE FLOOR, MY LIMBS FLUNG FORWARDS, ALL WHILE MY MIDDLE WAS SNATCHED INTO ANOTHER DIMENSION FROM THE FORCE OF THE COLLISION. I WAS A KITE IN A HURRICANE, RIPPED UP AND WHIRLED AWAY, HER SHOULDER CARRYING ME WITH HER FAR MORE POWERFUL MOMENTUM.

BARELY ABLE TO RASP OUT A WHIMPER, MY SURROUNDINGS STREAKED, SAVANNAH AND DARREN AND KURT ALL BECOMING SHARDS OF BLUE IN THE STREAKING COLOURS OF OUR SURROUNDINGS. THEIR VOICES, THEIR REACTIONS - REALITY EVEN - STRETCHED THIN AS I ROCKETED AWAY, DRONES FROM A DISTANT TIME AND SPACE, BARELY ECHOES IN MY EARS.



SARAH'S CHARGE STOPPED BUT ALL THAT POWER AND FORCE HAD ALREADY BEEN TRANSFERRED TO ME. AS HER SHOULDER CAME AWAY FROM MY ABDOMEN, I CONTINUED ON, AIRBORNE, SOARING AWAY. I COULDN'T BELIEVE SHE WAS STRONG ENOUGH TO FLING ME OFF MY FEET BUT I WAS LITERALLY FLYING.

BESIDES THE PAIN IN MY GUTS RADIATING OUT ACROSS MY TORSO, IT WAS ALMOST PEACEFUL AS I HUNG THERE, SAILING AWAY ON THE AIR. SAILING ON AIR. THAT IS, UNTIL I HIT THE GROUND. YOU ALREADY KNOW THIS IF YOU WERE PAYING ATTENTION, BUT MY FLIGHT TOOK ME ALL THE WAY PAST THE EDGE OF THE MATS, ALL THE WAY TO THE HARDWOOD FLOOR. I FOLDED IN HALF AS I LANDED, LEGS COMING DOWN ON TOP OF MY CHEST, AS IF I WASN'T WINDED ENOUGH FROM THE LANDING.

FLOPPING FLAT, LEGS COMING BACK DOWN TO EARTH, I LAID OUT, A STAR FISH ON THE GROUND. I DIDN'T KNOW IF ANY BONES WERE BROKEN OR NOT, BUT I FELT LIKE I'D BEEN SMASHED BY A WRECKING BALL. THE ROOM SWAM IN AND OUT OF FOCUS AS STATIC BURNED AT THE EDGES OF MY VISION. I COULDN'T TELL OVER THE RINGING IN MY SKULL BUT THE ROOM WAS SILENT AS I STAYED PRONE AND UNMOVING. UNTIL A GROAN WHINED OUT OF MY FLATTENED FORM.



"OH MY GOD, ELIAS!" SARAH'S VOICE WAS THE LOUDEST IN THE RABBLE OF SOUND THAT THE ROOM BURST BACK INTO. THERE WAS CHATTER FROM ALL OVER BUT IT WAS HER VOICE THAT CUT THROUGH IT ALL.

THE ROOM FELT LIKE IT WAS SPINNING AROUND ME AS I LAY ON THE FLOOR. MY WHOLE BODY ACHED, THE PAIN IN MY ABDOMEN SO INTENSE THAT I FELT CLOSE TO PASSING OUT OR THROWING UP. NEITHER CAME THOUGH AS ARTILLERY FIRE APPROACHED ME AT A FRIGHTENING SPEED. IT WAS SARAH, HER THUNDEROUS FOOTSTEPS VIBRATING THE GROUND BENEATH ME AS SHE STAMPEDED OVER.

SKIDDING TO A STOP NEXT TO ME, SHE WAS ALREADY ON ONE KNEE WHEN SHE ARRIVED, HER FACE FILLING MY VISION, THE SAPPHIRE EYES LOOKING DOWN AT ME FILLED WITH WORRY. "ELIAS?!" SHE SAID AT A VOLUME THAT WAS TOO LOUD. "ARE YOU OKAY?" SHE SEEMED ALMOST FRIGHTENED TO TOUCH ME, SCARED I WAS TOO BROKEN TO BE HANDLED.

IT WAS ONLY NOW THAT THE OTHER VOICES FROM AROUND US BECAME CLEARER.

"SHIT, CALL AN AMBULANCE."

"I'LL GET MY PHONE, IT'S IN THE CHANGING ROOM."

I HACKED A COUGH AND GROANED.



"YOU GUYS ARE BEING WAY TOO DRAMATIC." I SAID MORE WEAKLY THAN I WOULD HAVE LIKED. TRYING TO SIT UP, THE PAIN IN MY MIDDLE FLARED, NERVES SPARKING, LIGHTNING RUNNING THROUGH ME. HEARING ME GRUNT, SEEING MY EXPRESSION SCRUNCH, SARAH QUICKLY SLIPPED A HAND UNDER MY HEAD TO SUPPORT ME.

THE CHAOS IN THE ROOM EASED WITH ME CLEARLY CONSCIOUS AND MOVING. BUT SARAH STILL LOOKED DISTRAUGHT. "ARE YOU SURE WE SHOULDN'T CALL AN AMBULANCE?"

I SHOOK MY HEAD EMPHATICALLY. IT WASN'T JUST THAT I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS NECESSARY, I COULDN'T HANDLE THAT LOOK ON HER FACE - HER THINKING SHE'D HURT ME. I LAUGHED, FIGHTING OFF A WINCE AS I DID. "C'MON, YOU HIT HARD BUT NOT THAT HARD." I TEASED. "NOTHING'S BROKEN, I'M JUST A LITTLE BANGED UP." BUT, WHEN I TRIED TO GET UP AGAIN, I ACTUALLY BEGAN TREMBLING AS THE PAIN STABBED AT THE MUSCLES TRYING TO WORK.



HER HAND ON MY CHEST STOPPED ME MOVING. "IT'S FINE. DON'T MOVE." SHE TOOK MY ARM, LOOPING IT OVER HER HEAD. "PUT YOUR ARM AROUND ME."

I DUBIOUSLY DID, HOOKING THE CROOK OF MY ELBOW AROUND HER NECK. "SARAH, WHAT ARE YOU -"

WHILE I TALKED SHE SLIPPED HER ARM UNDER MY BENT LEGS, SECURELY TAKING HOLD OF ME. WITH HARDLY ANY EFFORT AT ALL SHE PUT BOTH FEET FLAT ON THE GROUND AND STOOD, LIFTING ME UP WITH HER. I LET OUT A SURPRISED YELP AS SHE DID, FEELING SUDDENLY COMPLETELY WEIGHTLESS UNTIL SHE SETTLED INTO A COMFORTABLE POSITION. "IS THIS OKAY?"

"Y-YEAH, IT'S FINE." THE DUMB SMILE ON MY FACE MUST HAVE CONTRASTED WITH HER STILL CONCERNED EXPRESSION. "I JUST... WOW." I TRIED NOT TO SWOON TOO HARD BUT WAS MOST LIKELY FAILING TERRIBLY. IT'S HARD NOT TO BE ENTRANCED WHEN YOUR AMAZONIAN GIRLFRIEND PICKS YOU UP AND CRADLES YOU AGAINST HER WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT, OKAY?

"SARAH, YOU CAN'T CARRY HIM ALL THE WAY HOME LIKE THAT." SAVANNAH SAID, APPROACHING US. I COULD SEE SARAH ABOUT TO PROTEST BUT SHE QUICKLY ADDED, "I'LL CALL AN UBER, OKAY? YOU GUYS GET CHANGED, I'LL DEAL WITH IT."

"THANKS, SAV." SARAH SAID, STILL SOUNDING DEJECTED AND GUILTY. I'D HAVE TO CONVINCHE HER THAT NONE OF THIS WAS HER FAULT ON THE RIDE HOME.