

The harsh *kip-kip-kip* call of the Western Kingbird attracted Xander's eyes to the powerlines crossing the avenue. A trio of the yellow-bellied birds sat in a row. The Kingbird was usually a solitary creature, yet in late summer, it joins small flocks in preparation for a larger migration in the colder months. Xander resonated with the bird. He was once a territorial loner in the early years of his life. Now? He sought his flock.

The harsh summer sun shined fully this day. His bruises still radiated with that annoying soreness. His stitches itched. Xander wished he had the luxury of going straight home to Fort Collins. There, he could indulge in some rest and relaxation. Xander gripped his fists, knowing that was a fantasy given his circumstances. Turmoil waited for him at home. His family aimed to place him on trial. The worst part? Xander was guilty as charged.

A placard listed the businesses that occupied the small office building. On the third floor, Xander would find the headquarters of Mercer Private Security. He sighed. McGowan suggested the personal protection firm. Xander assumed this was another one of someone that McGowan happened to become acquainted with in his line of business. Xander realized that despite their insistence on parting ways, he kept falling back on McGowan for these recommendations and introductions. His lawyer proved to be resourceful.

Xander chose the stairwell. He circled up steps without much effort until he reached the top floor of the building. Unlike Mathis Robertson's corporate offices, a few city blocks away in the city's financial district, with their sleek contemporary stylings, Dane Mercer's business seemed mundane, almost sleepy. The only detail that popped was the crimson red that filled the minimalist spartan helmet logo. A 'm' cutout rested in the center of the logo. The decal stretched across the frosted glass door that led into the company's offices.

Steel blue eyes breached Xander. Immediately, two alpha males came face to face in the confines of a small reception area. Dane Mercer boasted a well-groomed beard accompanied by a crew cut. He rolled up his white dress shirt to expose tattoo sleeves featuring neo-American designs. As if a switch flipped, Mercer's rugged exterior melted. His probing grimace transformed into a salesman's smile.

"Xander Valentine, I presume." **Mercer extended his hand.**

**Xander accepted. Mercer's firm shake impressed Xander.**

"Don't judge the scale of my business. We're only starting. My only receptionist is part-time—my niece. She has college classes in the morning. I assure you that if you contact us, you'll have direct access to my personal cell," **Mercer said.**

"You're a new company?"

"Brand new operation. We've done a few minor jobs. Celebrities passing through Colorado. But trust me, I've got the experience to ensure your safety."

"McGowan spoke highly of you."

"McGowan's a good man," **Mercer said. Xander choked. McGowan was a lawyer; by default, he was a rat bastard in Xander's book. He guessed he might be too harsh to the man since Xander had received a lot of assistance over the years, but Xander ensured McGowan was paid well for any services rendered.**

**The former military man waved Xander on through to a narrow back hall. The corner office welcomed the sun's light without the unforgiving summer heat. A black leather couch stood sentry before a glass coffee table. The sofa faced a glass desk hoisted up by cast iron legs. Mercer motioned Xander to take a seat on the couch. Xander obliged. Then he noticed the manilla folders spread across the table.**

"How much did McGowan tell you about my situation?" **Xander asked.**

"Not much, to be honest. You're a celebrity. You live out in the woods. And you require personal protection."

"For my family."

"The more the merrier."

"The situation is very volatile, to say the least. Naturally, I would stay home with my shotgun and protect them; however, I have professional obligations. I don't have the luxury of boarding up my home and waiting him out," **Xander explained. Mercer leaned against his desk. He crossed his arms as he processed Xander's enigmatic *elucidation*.**

"Care to elaborate? I understand that a man of your stature cherishes privacy; however, I can't fully grasp your circumstances if you don't dispense with details. I assure you that my company operates discretely," **Mercer said.**

"It's my son."

"The murderer."

"You are aware?"

"I did my research."

"Then you know that Connor is currently a fugitive. His whereabouts are unknown. And I suspect that he's going to target my family. The other day, he made an attempt on my life. Before that, Connor attacked my pregnant fiancée and my daughter," **Xander said. He knew that Hunter wasn't his fiancée anymore. Xander frowned at the thought that he might never be engaged to Hunter again after the idiocy he pulled at Redwood Creek with Lindsey. He pushed that matter out of his head for the time being. He needed to ensure security for his family. Enlisting a security firm should have been his first step.**

"Shot a cop from what the news article said," **Mercer added.**

"He's dangerous."

"Sounds like it. That's why people like me exist. We're here to protect men--- and their families--- from dangerous people."

"I admit, I'm concerned about your credentials. What track record proves you can handle this threat to my family?"

"We all have to start somewhere. I'm an ex-Navy Seal. I hire ex-military. All my men have the license to carry. After my service, I spent a few years learning the trade from one of the world's premier security firms. I can give you all this in a nice dossier if you wish," **Mercer said. The man didn't flinch at the question. Mercer circled with his hands shoved into black slacks as he wandered over to the table.**

"I understand that you want the best for your family. You're a man, after all. And I want to build a profile—a portfolio. I am not saying I'll do this pro bono; however, I'm willing to give a heavy discount to allow you to trust me with your needs," **Mercer stated.**

"I don't want bargain bin deals when shopping for my family's safety. I want quality."

"You will get quality results."

"Then sell me."

**Mercer spun around to face Xander directly.**

"What would convince you that Mercer Private Security is a fit? We can snag some of my men and swing by the gun range. You'll be awestruck when all their shots hit the kill zone. Or would you let me review the infrastructure I plan to install to monitor the premises? Or would you want to see my planned schedule to ensure your loved ones will never be alone? I've prepared every detail. You see, you can trust my people to handle this important," **Mercer said.**

**Xander eyed him. He didn't question Mercer's confidence in the matter. Mercer strolled to the coffee table and handed Xander the manilla folders. The contents backed Mercer's**

**assertion of his preparedness to tackle Xander's needs. The sample camera and security systems were detailed. The files included profiles of the guards, including their military background.**

"Sold?" **Mercer asked.**

"Sold."

"Are there any other concerns that you might have?"

"There is one."

"I'm sure I can address your concern to your satisfaction."

"I'm not quite sure how my family is going to take this intrusion into their lives. Honestly, I'm on the rocks with my fiancée, and my daughter isn't pleased with me either," **Xander said. He cringed, thinking about how Hunter and Trinity would react when they found out he contracted Mercer's group without consulting them first. But what choice did he have? Connor and Lindsey were at large, and they proved willing to kill.**

"We strive to let our clients enjoy their lives to the fullest. We aren't doing our job well if we fail to let you and your family rest easy during these troubled times."

"You say that."

"If you expect me to pretend, we'll be completely invisible. I can't say we can. Especially given that there is an active threat to your security."

"I'm not asking that."

"We'll do our best to stay out of the way." **Mercer lowered his head, still showcasing that used car salesman grin. Xander guessed he would have to bite the bullet. He did with the fallout for making a unilateral decision. After all, this would only be the latest. However, after Xander returned home, it might be his last.**

"And if my son and his bitch show up?"

"We'll assess the situation."

"They seek to kill."

"And if that is the case, we will neutralize them. No hesitation."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. For who take up the sword---"

"--- will die by the sword," **Xander finished the saying. He understood the gist of Mercer's saying. Xander reminded himself that he had spoken to a soldier. They readied themselves to perish on the battlefield; in the same breath, they steeled themselves to take the life of another. The romanticized war only imagined deaths between warriors--- those who took up the sword.**

"Is that a problem? Because I will be honest with you. My men will defend themselves. Of course, only killing when necessary."

"Connor and I don't share your usual father-son relationship."

"Sons normally don't try to kill their father."

"There was a time I'd protect my son. But Connor has crossed a line, and I no longer care about preventing grave consequences from befalling him. If he beckons death to his doorstep, he must pay the ferryman," **Xander said. His baritone voice possessed bitterness. Xander stopped Avery a long time ago from pursuing Connor. He dragged a decomposed corpse across the goddamn Mojave to save him from the death sentence. Xander lowered his head in shame for experiencing such resentment.**

"You don't need to explain."

"Good. I didn't plan on elaborating any further."

"All we care about is doing our job. Nothing more. Again, we pride ourselves in being discrete."

"What are the next steps?"

"I'll visit your home with my team to scope your needs. We'll customize the security system to maximize our presence. I'll send you the proposal and a quote. Then you can sign with us immediately or shop around. Your call," **Mercer said.**

"How soon can your people be in place? This isn't a question of how much."

"Boots on the ground? Tomorrow. The surveillance system will take longer. I can prioritize it to be done within two weeks."

"One week."

"I'll see what I can do---"

"Money's not an option for my family's safety, Mercer. I am trusting you to deliver on my promise. I might not be an ex-Navy seal, but I'm a dangerous man myself," **Xander warned.** **The thinly-veiled threat goaded a chuckle out of the veteran. His smile didn't fade. Just as their first moment, two dogs bore their teeth. Beneath the salesman's facade, Xander knew a killer existed.**

"So you're in?" **Mercer moved towards Xander. Xander stood. Mercer offered his hand again.**

**Xander accepted the handshake.**

"I'll see you tomorrow then," **Mercer said.**

**Xander grunted approvingly. They didn't dispense another word as Mercer guided him to the exit. Walking back outside into the hot summer air gave Xander the opposite reaction he expected. Instead of being oppressed by the heat, Xander experienced relief. Finally, Xander felt he had accomplished something in his pursuit of protecting his family. Soon, silent sentries will stand watch until they catch Connor and Lindsey. Xander reached into his pocket and rubbed his thumb over the fangs of Hunter's serpentine engagement ring.**

**Xander glanced at his phone. He winced at the time. Xander promised Trinity he would head straight home and explain everything. While he was on the first flight to Colorado, he changed his plans to meet Mercer. With each passing minute, Xander dreaded the confrontation more. He planned on honesty; however, how often would they believe him? Xander knew he had tested their faith. He put himself in this position. This was ultimately his doing. His stupidity.**

**Xander dialed Trinity's number.**

**The buzzing went on and on, ending with a lady stating that Trinity's voicemail inbox hadn't been set up.**

**Xander groaned. If Trinity refused to accept his calls, would Hunter? No, Xander wanted his first words with Hunter to be face-to-face. Regardless of how much guilt he harbored for his mistakes, he had to force himself to look her in the eyes and confess the extent of his betrayal. He would get down on a bent knee and beg her forgiveness. And if Hunter refused him, then what? What would he do if he was no longer welcomed by his family? Where would he go?**

**He said he was willing to sacrifice it all to be their shield; however, now that he had tossed it all away in a risky bid, Xander found himself utterly alone. He clenched his fists as he hanged his head. The scathing *kip-kip-kip* bore a hole in his head. For years, he had been alone and was fine. Now? His knees buckled. The thought of losing his family forever scared him. Xander found his tribe, and now they might exile him into the wild.**

**Worst of all? He didn't blame them.**

**Xander deserved this outcome.**

---

*Konrad Raab.*

*Can you smell the smoke?*

*Is the aroma sweet to you?*

*Feel the silky ash drop upon your skin. Rub it between your thumb and finger. That's the remnants of the last guy that stepped up to me. Waylon Creek is everything they billed him as, except for one thing: invincible. And the inevitable did happen; I won. With the world as my witness, I ended this narrative that my successor has arrived. Xander f'ing Valentine is still the SCW World Champion and king of the mountain. The Executioner hasn't lost his touch. His axe is sharper than ever.*

*But you knew that already.*

*Go ahead, rub your neck where I squeezed the life out of you in your home country.*

*Do you remember me, Raab?*

*I remember you.*

*The scar tissue on my foot still itches from where you tried to set me aflame. I'm not big enough of a person to forgive. Why should I? You never atoned for the disrespect you've shown me. To this day, you carry not a single shred of remorse. You lack a conscience. Trust me; I once was a beast that stalked the earth without that necessary burden. I proudly displayed my depravity as a badge of honor.*

*I considered myself a free man.*

*Unshackled.*

*But I learned that my heart gives my blows strength. I understood that responsibility drives me to move forward. I found my moral code and strapped into this suit of humanity. Now, my honor--- and my code might not be as level as the most righteous man, but at least I uphold myself to a standard. That standard keeps me honest. That standard keeps me humble. That gold standard makes me stronger.*

*Do you ever question your misfortune?*

*Do you ever wonder why you're losing to the likes of great men like myself or Josh Hudson?*

*You're a soldier without a cause--- a rebel without reason. You swing fists, but all you do is flail into the wind. You hit nothing. I used to pity you, Konrad. For you're a ship mastless, lost at sea. Your moral compass is broken. You're stuck. Hell, you're taking water! It's only about time you sink into the black abyss.*

*And I'm priming another cannon, ready to help accelerate the process.*

*I've taken the charitable act of forcing you to realize your folly. Months ago, when I tossed this championship belt over my shoulder again, you targeted me. You thought yourself worthy of taking a shot at the very best in this business. You thought I was one of those mountains you can climb. You deemed our rivalry as just another race to complete. And that is where you went wrong.*

*I'm no big game to hunt. I am the hunter.*

*I'm an unscalable peak. You can't ever see the top.*

*You tried to build your Tower of Babel; however, I denied your entry into heavy, obliterating your dream of bringing the title to your people in Germany. And I enjoyed every moment of my revenge. Why? Because more than the attacks and harassment you showed me for weeks, it's the audacity that you thought you could claim this SCW World Championship as yours when you're busy driving, taking left-hand turns every Saturday. Go ahead, drive around circles on the weekends, Raab. As a result, I will wrestle circles around you every time we step into a ring together.*

*This Breakdown is just another rendition.*

*You profess your undying love for violence. But every step of the way, I meet you with that hostility you claim to embrace. Whenever we clash, I hit you with brutality you can't comprehend. Why is it? Because I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing. Beneath this human skin, I'm still the monster that has dominated this spot for twenty years. When that bell rings, I unleash the dragon and scorch the earth before me. I blacken the fields. You're the victim. And that is the role I will always cast you in.*

*I should respect your tenacity. I watch you, week in and week out. You pick yourself up after every brutal hit. You dust yourself off. You never give up your wrestling boots. You never shy away from a challenge, even though you're often outmatched. Your perseverance is remarkable. Most people would have called it a career. Your nonchalance when staring down the barrel of the gun is awestriking, to say the least. But old man, I think it's time to take you to pasture. Let me grant you that mercy since you don't know when to say die.*



*Have I struck a nerve yet, Konrad?*

*My blood is still flowing from my fight with Waylon. He made me feel alive. It's been a long time since I had such a fight. If you are the savage you contend to be, why not show me the carnage you claim to conjure with your capable fists? Isn't it an affront to you that I call myself the Paragon of Violence? Fight me, Raab. Fight me like you really are the bastard you swear to be. I sense this feeling to be fleeting; come be its savior, you dark messiah.*

*Breakdown might not have any title on the line. But it better be a battle. I can't let rust form on this axe, so I'll use you as a sharpening block. I will repay you for the disrespect you showed this past winter. Josh Hudson won't distract me. The brunt of all my anger will be levied against you. You will finally have my entire focus. And that spells disaster for you, Raab. There's not going to be a yellow flag to slow the action. It will be a freight train coming your way, and by the time you realize what has hit you, you'll be staring at the blinding light at the end of your tunnel.*

***Fade to Black.***