Tap. Tap. Sweat dripped from Xander's broad forehead, striking the tile floor of the locker room. The heat of labor hadn't left his bulk; instead, his chest felt heavy underneath his breathing. Adrenaline kept his heart racing; the blood lust hadn't slipped into its post-match slumber just yet. He wrapped and unwrapped the yellow stain tape from his hands as he battled to ward off his animalistic disappointment that he didn't land the kill. He had hurt Chris Durmont.

Showed the entire world that the young buck was still short in the antler department; however, that didn't penetrate past the hard casing of the ego Durmont carried. Xander wanted to strip away that security blanket, humble him, and set him on a path towards either the exit or redemption. But the look in Durmont's eyes showed defiance, not a broken spirit. A lack of recognition for a loss for what it was.

St. Anger's eyes snapped open. Took every fiber in Xander's being to walk away after the timekeeper sounded the bell, knowing that there were bigger fish to fly. Let the loudmouth be loud. With no legacy to speak of, Durmont will make his way to irrelevancy. Unless he changed, the upstart would end up just a blip on the radar of his sport. Nothing more. Nothing less.

So when Xander overheard the commotion, he barely registered the excitement. Nothing struck until he heard someone mention that the Trios participants and their respective teams were to be announced at that moment. That awoke the angry giant. He barrelled out into the hallway to the monitor.

Fists clenched. Red flooded. His heart sank when he saw who he was paired with. At least, he found the opportunity to mold Nicole and Gavin into a winning combination on his first winning team. Last go, he had the silver lining of Amelia to counterbalance Billy Heaven Junior.

This year? What was he going to do with the slop fed to him this year? Derek Adonis had been a grifter, unworthy of employment, for years now. And Kemal Yilmaz came up from Konrad's pack of rabid dogs. There was no silver lining. No potential for some chemistry. Just a shit sandwich slapped down in front of Xander. They expected him to grin and take a bite.

That was why Xander found himself making a beeline to Alex's office. He wasn't the only one trying to get a word in with the boss. Some were just as unhappy with their partners as he was. Others sounded upset they weren't included in the reindeer game. Xander tried to cut to the front of the line, but Hiro Tanaka slid in, arms stretched out, doing his best imitation of a traffic cop.

"Move."

"I see the look in your eyes. You're going to go in there hot. Going to say some things you'd regret. We both know that man is not one to take intimidation lightly,**" Hiro warned as his eyes darted to the closed door. Muffled yelling resonated through the metal door of the makeshift office.**

Xander grunted. "This is bullshit."

"It's random. Blind process. No one has control of who they have been saddled up with.**" Hiro shrugged.**

Xander eyed the others in the area and pulled Tanaka aside.

"How is that fair?**" He spoke in a low hum. His anger lapped against the brim of his patience, threatening to spill out.**

"You haven't complained in the past about your member selection."

"This is the worst selection yet."

"Is that all? I feel like we're beating around the bush."

"You damn know well how this company treats me. I'm---"

"You sound desperate to me**." Hiro didn't blink. He didn't shy away from Xander's cold stare. He faced the fire straight on, unafraid of the flames. The door slammed as someone made an angry exit from the room. Xander caught a glimpse of someone pushing past Dillusion to enter the room.**

Xander scoffed. "You know how the company treats me. I have to force their hand with every shot."

"Usually, you wear that fact with a badge of honor."

"I'm not getting any younger. Selena is circling Cid Turner, readying for another attack. I'm damn if she gets a shot before I do. Amelia earned her moment tonight, but she had to use her Trios to secure it,**" Xander explained. He paused here and there to grunt his disapproval as he vigorously rubbed his short, prickly head.** "The only way I can force his arm is by winning Trios or that damn battle royal. I've never---**"**

"Let me push back on that. You were handed a shot last fall."

"The first in how many years?"

"You think we should hand out world title opportunities like candy?"

"That isn't what I am saying." **Xander groaned, his fists rattling at his side. The way Hiro made him out to be reminded him of the same impression that Syren gave out these days. Entitled. Whiny. That didn't sit well, and he began to reconsider his entire mindset.**

"Sure, sounds like it. Yeah, I get it. You're desperate, but you're starting to sound like Adam with all this whining and self-victimization."

"Don't you dare compare me to that son of a bitch."

"Just making an observation. Hoping you'll reconsider this attitude."

"What do you want me to do? Sit back and not fight for myself? Squeaky wheel gets the fucking grease or something like that, yeah?**" Xander shot back, but then his shoulders drooped. His eyes landed on the floor, and he shook his head. "**I never was one to bitch.**"**

"You're tired. You're on the back end of your career. You're starting to feel the pressure. I get it, but man, I wish I were in your position, still cleared to wrestle,**" Hiro responded, flattening his business suit. Xander shied away from Hiro, concealing his guilt. The big man didn't want to admit it, but he empathized with Hiro's situation. Hell, Xander feared that injury would reduce him to a role. A glorified observer. An administrator. A non-combatant, a civilian.**

"It's not like complaining is going to change anything. The teams are set."

"The teams are set in stone."

"Fuck,**" Xander spat in dismay. He made eye contact. "**There is really nothing I can do but try to perform a miracle with the shit pieces I was given, huh?"

"I know we don't have much in common. We may not have always seen eye to eye. Our only bond is that the same asshole trained us before screwing us over, but I do know one thing about you, Xander. It's not like you to back away from a challenge,**" Hiro observed. His tone was cutting, a challenge that woke the competitor in Xander. For a moment, Xander's face softened before solidifying back into chiseled stone. He remembered Xander had his own training school, his own students, and that speech reminded him of his grandfather, the only coach he ever respected.**

"I'll make things happen."

"You might think the odds are against you, that the whole world is conspiring. But don't you perform best in a pressure cooker?"

"I welcome the chance to spit fate in the eyes." **A smile emerged on Xander's cracked face. Hiro nodded in acknowledgment. Without another word, he turned back towards the locker room to gather his belongings and head out to a bar for some R&R.**

Halfway back, Xander stopped. He didn't know if Hiro had just played him or given him the push he needed. He glanced down at his calloused hands. He didn't know how the pieces fit together to form the puzzle. But he had to succeed. The hand of the clock ticked. The sands of his hourglass dwindled ever to exhaustion. Sooner or later, the curtains would close, and Xander would find himself standing out in the darkness.

Derek Adonis might take an unserious approach to wrestling. Hell, Xander might even consider him a stain on this sport. The mockery his existence served while collecting a paycheck from the premier wrestling promotion sickened Xander. But Billy sucked too, and Xander carried that dead weight.

Kemal was a little easier. Even the wildest dogs' hunger could be steered. There was a reason why human ancestors tamed the beasts of the forests. When Xander had his run-in with Konrad and his pack, he saw the glint in the kid's eyes. That raw hunger, if only tapped, could provide a wealth of success between the ropes.

Like it or not, they were the pieces destiny gave him. They stood on the board now. But victory wasn't out of his reach. His gambit needed to be flawless in execution; any misstep would cost him his golden ticket. But he was Xander fucking Valentine. The numbers game didn't matter to him. As long as he could swing his fists, he had a chance.

Let them reap what they sow, but he would scorch the earth.

Let this tournament be a reminder of who he was not only to the world, but to himself.

Like Atlas shouldered the weight of the world, Xander planned on carrying this team.

The herd thinned out. Most went home. There was someone in the shower. Derek Adonis dressed himself. One had to wonder why he was changing clothes; he wasn't booked on the night. But he stepped into a very flamboyant suit. The stench of sweat mixed with heavy cologne hung in the air, a concoction Xander guessed he called his ferocious musk or whatever oversexualized branding the fat man could conjure up.

Derek paused, his slacks only managing past his cankles. A towering object blocked out the light. A large shadow cast over him. He gulped, slowly pivoting to address.

"The Chest?!" **He called out as the pants dropped to his ankles.**

When Derek turned, relief crossed his flushed face when his eyes registered Xander Valentine, who just happened to be Derek Adonis's meal ticket to the Trios contract that everyone coveted. He didn't move to lift his pants, leaving the slacks where they rested. He chose instead to puff out his burly chest, as if he was trying to communicate from one alpha male to another.

"Xander. You scared me. I thought you were someone else. Someone dangerous and tricky,**"
Derek managed. He wiped his hand on his oily chest and offered it to the big man. When Xander didn't accept the handshake, Derek propped his hands on his hips.
Xander's grimace wilted away to an awkward, uncomfortable expression as Derek seemed to sway his hips. He clearly wasn't prepared for a budging mustard yellow thong.**

"Pants."

"You like my pants? I knew you had an eye for style. They always were like 'Xander Valentine is such a dolt. Such a stiff. Such a walking, talking fashion disaster.' But no, deep down, Manmountain to Mountainman, I sensed your sexual prowress hidden beneath your rugged exterior,**" Derek Adonis exclaimed. He slapped his chest proudly and went to pound Xander's fist; however, Xander again ignored his attempt at physical camaraderie.**

"Put some damn pants on."

"Oh? You're shy, too? Now, that's *surprising*. You'd think you'd be comfortable in a MEN's locker room. With all that MANMEAT."

"I came to talk, little piggy. If you don't pull your leopard-spotted fucking pants on this minute, I'm going to stuff you in that locker like this is high school all over for you**," Xander threatened, losing his patience completely. His eyebrow twitched. Rage-flared nostrils. To Derek, he now seemed like a fire-breathing red dragon---maybe a homophobic fire-breathing red dragon, but a fire-breathing red dragon all the same.**

"They were right to label you a bully. I just thought that you were..."

"Reformed?"

"Gone soft?"

"I'm as hard as they come,**" Xander growled.**

"Whooh, there, tiger. Let's not talk about getting hard when my package is basically out. Manmountain is only a ride for the ladies. I don't blame you for**---"**

Xander erupted, "PANTS. ON. NOW."

"Kablam!" **Derek squealed, stiffening up. This time, he didn't crack any jokes, sensing that he was under the barrel of a gun ready to fire. He yanked up his pants, slipped in a purple leather belt, and only then allowed himself an inhale. He fanned his hands out and looked up at the big, lumbering man before him. "**Better?**"**

"Shirt."

"Right. Right.**"**

After Derek pulled over his white collared shirt with some frills, he was sure to leave a few top buttons undone to show off his chest. It was, of course, out of habit. He wasn't trying to seduce any angry Executioner or is ilk; however, he represented Kablamia, and there were always ladies traveling about. He wanted to ensure they understood the glory of his land.

"So, you came here for a friendly chat about our partnership?"

"Friendly?"

"Despite your reputation, you've managed to win the whole shebang twice now. Now, it's Kemal's and my turn to go to the promised land. I, for one, just want to say that I'm very honored to be your partner. We're going to kick ass, right?**" Derek decided to go for a high five this time, but much to his chagrin, Xander Valentine left him hanging. He pulled at the collar of his shirt, wondering what he needed to do to share a moment of camaraderie. How were they supposed to work together in a team environment if Xander seemed allergic to physical touch?**

Unless...

"You're not a germophobe, are you? I can only imagine what it must be like for you to have to wrestle. Wrestlers aren't the most hygienic, but don't worry, big man, I am very CLEAN. Except when the lady wants something special,**" Adonis winked. But he didn't even manage a laugh from the big man. Just stoicism. Just boring stoicism.**

"Did you listen to my interview earlier?"

"No?"

"I came here to send you a message. Clear and loud."

"Yeah?"

"Not as a friend. Not as an ally."

"But as a brother-in-arms?**" Derek hoped. He hoped that was the messaging Xander was trying to convey. They were in this together. Together, we stand. Divided, we fall. Or something like that**?

"As an angry man who is not going to have the patience for anything short of perfection from you and Kemal. You better be damn motivated---"

"Motivated? Damn, right I'm motivated. You check me out,**" Derek slid his hand through his hair, slicking it back. That definitely won over the grouch. "**Woo---ha, smooth."

No dice as Xander's face withered into a frown.

"I mean, more motivated than you ever been."

"Of course."

"And if you can't perform at a high level, then stay the fuck out of my way. I'll win for us. Got it?" **Xander said, placing a hand on Derek's shoulder. The moment of pride faded quickly as pain started to set in from Xander's firm grip. He knew a shakedown when he felt one.** Derek shrugged off the hand. "Don't worry. Just ask all my wives, past and present, I always perform. And if not, there's always a pill. No shame in that, partner."

"I'm dead serious."

"It's no joking matter. It's a plight that afflicts many of our brethren. But regarding the tournament. I'll be there. Willing and ready. Don't you worry,**" Derek gave Xander his best smile. He swore if he looked in the mirror, he nailed the salesman grin. If everything fell through with his businesses and other ventures, he could sell some cars.**

"Good. Don't screw up."

"Or else?"

"You're smarter than you let on.**" A grim smile appeared on Xander's face. Derek decided that he would never again try to joke around Xander's presence. That smile should never be shown to the public. Someone might be scarred for life at the sight of that ugly display.**

The giant left the room, leaving Derek to adorn himself with his jewelry. He shook his head as a revelation dawned on him. "I know pent-up frustration when I see it."

"That man needs to get laid."