



We are an accumulation of past events. No hard we run away from the past, like the gravity of an all-consuming black hole, we can't escape. The past pulls us back every time. Swimming against the currents seems futile. We are who we are, after all. Denying the thesis that forms our character is an alien act in itself. People like to talk about change, a fresh start. Some go as far as to flee to another part of the world and mint new identities to escape themselves, but the memories remain, those that shape who you are intact. Therefore, escape is out of our grasp. A pipe dream. Xander decided that instead of running, he'd embrace his past: for better and for worst. The good, bad, and the ugly. What other choice did he really have? And while his past lurked in the darkness of an ancient forest, with ravenous wolves roaming between the trees, he no longer feared the journey. The melody of their howls did not strike terror in his heart. Nothing did these days.

What people failed to understand about his holy war against Adam was that the obsession became cathartic in nature. He experienced a privilege that few have been afforded in life; he could cleanse past regrets from his consciousness. The nature of professional wrestling allowed him to avenge the past. Adam wronged him. Adam was a regret. Adam was his past. Now Xander would repay the debt Adam incurred. For years, Xander lived afflicted with such angst that normalcy was elusive. Now, Xander handed Adam the receipt. Others might balk. Xander knew he was justified. Adam struck at the apex of Xander's boxing career, and now Xander attacked when Adam approached the pinnacle of the man's wrestling career. And the motivation to act as a force of karma made waking up in the morning so much easier. Xander found his life's purpose in his one-man crusade.

The rain pelt Xander's leather motorcycle jacket. Twenty years ago and some change, they placed his grandfather's coffin in the ground among the headstones of Mt. Hope Cemetery. The soil solidified. The grass grew. His grave didn't boast a single splash of magnificence; instead, the marker chosen was a meager granite slab listing his only name and the dates of his reign as a mortal on God's Earth. Nothing more. Nothing less. Even that would have upset Anders, given his penchant for a spartan existence. Behavior Xander inherited from him. Xander wiped the headstone clean with a rag. Afterward, he solemnly tossed the flowers at the base.

The city of Rochester buzzed with life. The PGA Championship and the Lilac Festival swirled up a flurry of activity, but Xander stood still before his grandfather's grave. The rain washed down his head and seeped past his jacket's collar. He didn't care for merriment. Xander returned to his grandfather's grave site to remind himself how this all started. To cement the passion he held for the cause. Xander lost the amount of time he spent in silence. He absorbed a sense of serenity. Is this why we bury our dead? Xander asked himself. But the peacefulness didn't last. Angry thunder started to rattle his soul. He clenched his fists. Adam caused this reality. Adam took not only his boxing career prematurely but, more importantly, the only father figure Xander ever knew. Seeing Anders's grave doubled down Xander's conviction. That the past justified his revenge. Xander stared at the consequences of a man's selfish actions. Adam's manipulation caused this. Xander needed to continue with his efforts to end Adam. But not everyone understood that this became a matter of honor.

On cue, the rain stopped striking when Hunter hoisted an unwelcomed umbrella over his head. She needed to stand on her tiptoes to do so, leaned on his side for support, but succeeded in shielding him from the elements. That annoyed him. Xander snarled, looking down upon Hunter pressed against his wet body. Their relationship became strained after she requested a child out of him. No, the dynamic changed overnight. She became more motherly and attuned to his emotional and physical needs. Instead of being a sister, she acted more like a lover. The change didn't settle well with him, who became used to their companionship being asexual and primarily platonic. Still, he said nothing. For over a year, he remained quiet about the topic. Made her wait. He saw cowardice in that approach but did nothing to change his reaction. He didn't want to lose her.

"Sorry for being cliché. But you'll catch a cold standing out here in the pouring rain," **Hunter chastised him.**

"I don't care."

"You have an important match in a few weeks. This is not the time to be getting sick."

"I'll be fine."

"You know something? You're acting like a teenager. Too cool for another person's valid concern. I'm only trying to watch out for you. And you make that very difficult, especially lately," **Hunter stated. Xander brushed past her to disengage from her touch. He approached the headstone, growing closer as he released a frustrated sigh. He never asked her to watch out for him. He was always fine being the lone wolf. She followed him, reaching out underneath the umbrella to touch his elbow. Xander yanked his arm away.** "You can speak to me, Xander. You trust me, don't you? I know you do."

"Why are you making this about trust? Of course, I trust you." **Xander spun around and locked eyes with her. She didn't flinch. She expected answers from him. He wasn't going to be able to avoid giving them. He conceded,** "You're trying to be something more. And I don't know how I feel about that. I ask, why can't we return to the way things were."

"Because the world doesn't stand still."

"On some matters, it should."

"Relationships evolve. Ours is evolving. I honestly find that exciting. I'm hurt that you disagree."

"So now, I'm the bad guy."

"Don't play the victim card. That never suits you. But tell me, why don't you want us to be more--- normal? I understand you. You understand me. We get each other when I doubt anyone else in this world would. Do you want more? I don't know what to say if that's the case. Only that I accept you for who you are," **Hunter said. Xander didn't know what he wanted. Xander only experienced fear when he thought about their relationship going to the next level. He walked past her and stopped with their backs to each other.**

"I'm afraid. There's no way around it. I haven't had many relationships with women in my life. I didn't know my mother. I scared off my first girlfriend. For fuck's sake, she ran from me and gave birth to our daughter in secret. And then there's my ex-wife." **Xander struggled with that last note. Even in the act of the abuse, Xander fought with guilt. If anything, regret often fueled the abuse further than the insecurities he harbored. Xander tossed a wild punch into the air as if he could knock those thoughts straight out of his head. They remained ever so defiant.**

"I'm not your mother. I'm not your exes. I'm something else."

"You've been something else. Now, you want to be my next."

"You think I'm going to let you walk all over me? Do you think I'm not going to hold you accountable?"

"I don't want ever to hurt the one I love again."

"You're hurting me now, but that is how love works. You've taught me more than anyone how important it is to stand up for yourself and be strong. And if I have to stand up to you, I will. I'm not afraid of you. And you've grown, so you shouldn't be afraid of yourself. You're not the same person. Xander, isn't it about time to forgive yourself?" **Hunter tossed aside the umbrella. She reached up and swung Xander around. She clamped both hands onto his jaw and drew him down for a kiss on his lips. Xander recoiled. What was she thinking?**

"Stop this. I'm not ready. You can't force me to be ready."

"I'm sorry," **Hunter said. She retreated a few steps back and looked down upon the ground in shame. He knew she gambled on the kiss to ignite change, but that infuriated him even further. He struggled with this concept of being with her. He found her attractive. He believed he trusted her with the entirety of his being. For fuck's sake, he might even love her. But he swore to never love again. To never allow himself to put himself in that position again.**

"This isn't the time or place to talk about this. Right now, especially. You said to yourself that I need to focus. There's the Taking Hold of the Flame Battle Royal. You know, that's the one accolade that's alluded me all these years. I've won championships. I've won honors. I've done it all but that damn battle royal. I'm going to do it this year," **Xander explained. A sense of cheapness swarmed him. He was deflecting, and he immediately recognized precisely what he was doing. A better man wouldn't be so indecisive when handling a woman's heart. Hunter saw through his bullshit, too, as she sneered upon hearing his response.**

Hunter threw back her now wet auburn hair and poked Xander in the chest. "You know damn well that's not why you're so interested in that match. You're fighting for all the wrong reasons. You're not going to try to win for your sake. You want to win to spite that man. Your obsession has grown out of control."

"You don't understand what he has done to me."

"You don't think I understand wanting revenge. I know what it is like to wish for revenge. Do you think I haven't wanted to exact revenge on Chad for what he did to me all these years? And you know exactly what he did. He bound me up and had---" **Hunter stopped herself from completing the sentence. Xander knew she didn't stop to protect herself but to shield him again. Xander admired her strength yet resented her tendency to defend him from the harsh truth.**

"That's unfair."

"Don't give me that shit. This obsession with that asshole has to end. It's unhealthy. It's consuming you."

"No. It's driving me."

"Then why didn't you defeat Ace? You were only weeks removed from tossing Syren out of the ring. But again, just like that show where you could have won the title again, you were too busy fixated on Adam. That's all you are thinking about. I don't care what he did in the past. Leave it there," **Hunter argued. Their voices became elevated. They had never fought like this before, and that convinced Xander more than an intimate relationship would only be a repeat of his failed marriage. Calli thought she could fix Xander, but she didn't understand he lacked the right tools to be someone's lover.**

"I need this."

"This is the last thing you need."

"I can't let this go," **Xander said. He turned back to his grandfather's grave and knelt before the marker.** "Adam robbed me. He took everything from me. Like what Chad did to you, Adam did to me. Before me, I have another opportunity to punish Adam for what he did. I will never let him forget. I will never let him be free. He's going to suffer the consequences; I'm going to see to it personally."

"But at what cost? Relationships? The remainder of your career? I was there when the doctor put an expiration date on your career. You will regret not spending the short time left on better things. Why can't you see that?" **Hunter responded. Xander, of course, contended with her assertion. In the back of his head, he acknowledged that she provided sound advice. That bothered him more. He accepted that would likely be in store for him at the end of the road; however, he believed also that if he didn't act now, he would lament not taking advantage of being a thorn in Adam's side. That provided a whole different level of satisfaction.**

"I'm sorry, Hunter. I can't let this go."

Xander became conscious of the fact he stuck out like a sore thumb at his grandfather's funeral. He mustered together a black button-up shirt and a pair of black jeans. He didn't own a proper suit and stole his tie from his grandfather's closet. Xander fought against the confines of his clothes, but what made things awkward was the people who showed up. The strangers claimed to be friends and family of Anders, but Xander had never met them since he started living with his grandfather. Their condolences seemed forced. Xander sensed the resentment between their tight grimaces. They all viewed him as a parasite. These visitors whispered behind his back, whereas his uncles verbalized their disdain for them. At least they showed they had the balls to do so. Xander still contemplated that punch he had landed on his uncle Lars's jaw. He savored the feeling of accomplishment tho, regardless of it being right or wrong.

Xander wouldn't doubt that many blamed Xander for the financial ruin that was the gym. They always wanted something from Xander's grandfather: perhaps more attention or money, whatever they believed they were owed; they suspected Xander to have interfered due to Anders's fixation on Xander's boxing career. Jealousy reared its ugly head, even at a funeral. He saw their stares while holding up one hand to speak ill of him. Xander struggled with maintaining his rage. The only thing that prevented him from popping off was knowing his grandfather would disapprove if Xander went on a rampage, punching and kicking every petty bastard in attendance; instead, Xander allowed that violent fantasy to remain a daydream as he kept his mouth shut and let the proceedings to continue without a hiccup. He'd be a good boy today.

Afterward, Xander drove the old black van they used to transport the equipment between matches back to the gym. Xander only realized he had been followed once he arrived, which upset him. He wanted to be left alone. He played along long enough for one day. His uncles swarmed through the front door of the gym behind Xander. Xander pivoted around, clenched his fists, and readied himself for a fight. They reminded him of jackals, wanting to feast on the festering corpse left behind. They looked at the meal now.

"Boy, it's time to pack your things and get out of here," Lars said. Even in the dim gym lighting, the bright purple of the bruise from where Xander struck him shined brightly. He dusted his hands as if he just finished taking out the garbage. He would enjoy kicking out Xander.

"I'm afraid there's a mistake," Xander said.

"What's that?"

"Last time I checked. Grandfather said he would leave everything to me. That includes the gym."

"Why you---" Uncle Lars lurched forward, but Uncle Rich stopped him. A good thing, too, for Lars, as Xander would have easily knocked his lights out with a one-two combo. For the son of a great boxing mind, Lars forgot all the training he did as a youth. Now the man barged into Xander's home and tried to evict him. His grandfather explained the arrangements he had made for Xander in case the worst happened. Anders changed everything in the will over to Xander, making him the sole heir. For better or for worse, the kingdom was his. The empire might crumble without his grandfather's management soon enough, but that wasn't their problem. That was Xander's problem. At least, it should be his.

"He's right, Lars. Dad left Xander a piece of a pie."

"He told me he'd leave me everything."

"Now, now, Xander. That might have been the case for a while, but things change. Not too long ago, I was told that he had changed his mind about leaving the gym to you. You're too young, after all; given the current state of affairs, you couldn't possibly run things around here. He didn't want you to be trapped. See this as the perfect opportunity to spread your wings," **Rich explained. He, too, found pleasure in this. Xander watched the vultures circle around the boxing ring in their firmly pressed black suits and hands in their pockets. They even managed satisfied smiles. They might have lost their father, but they distracted themselves with the recent victory over their much-despised nephews.**

"I don't believe you."

"No one cares about what you believe, boy," **Lars interjected.**

"Now. Now. Let's not argue. That's not what Dad would have wanted. Xander, that shitty van is all yours. That's your inheritance. I'll be generous and let you take whatever you can fit in the back. All we care about is that we're rid of you. This family will no longer be sucked dry by you and your so-called boxing career," **Rich said. Xander eyes turned to the floor. Glimpses of red blocked out his vision. This was his home. They wanted to take his home away from him. A van? Why would he be satisfied with that old hunk of junk? He didn't have money. Not for food or gas. He came to the realization that if his uncles were telling him the truth, Xander would be penniless and homeless.**

"You boys are pretty cruel. Kid lost his only father figure, and your only concern is kicking him out of his home. I thought family is supposed to stick together during rough times," **a voice called out from the entrance. Xander glanced up, surprised to see Adam Allocco standing there. Mixed feelings swirled around inside. Adam, too, donned a black suit, having attended the funeral as well. He rubbed his shaved head as he stared down Xander's uncles.**

"Who are you?"

"I consider myself a family friend. I'm definitely that kid's only friend from the looks of it."

"This is a family matter. Get out."

"The will hasn't even been read yet, and you're evicting the kid. And without notice? Something smells fishy here. I'll tell you what, why don't you come back with some real documentation? Until then, your threats are empty. You guys are real cunts, and this kid eats cunts for breakfast," **Adam said. Adam's bravado lifted Xander's spirits, knowing someone would stand up for him. Xander's uncles exchanged glances, trying to figure out a response to Adam. Adam followed up, "I know some real good lawyers too. Let's not play hardball. Come back with your lawyer with the proper documentation, and Xander'll leave. Isn't that right, Xander?"**

"I guess I wouldn't have a choice."

"You heard him? Until then, you both can fuck off."

"I don't know who you think you are---" **Lars started.**

"Let's go, Lars. This asshole is posturing. If the boy wants proof, we'll give him proof. That won't be a problem. There's no reason to escalate things any further. We're better than that," **Rich cut his brother off. Xander maintained eye contact with Lars until both uncles departed through the front door. Once the door closed, Xander took the closest object, which happened to be a steel trash can, and tossed it against the ring post of the boxing ring. He released a primal yell. How dare they try to take his home away? How dare they rob him of his grandfather's legacy!**

"That was harsh," **Adam commented.**

"Thank you," **Xander managed.**

"I'm glad I decided to come back and check on you. Sounds like you're in a real pickle."

"Can they really kick me out? Take the gym from me."

"Listen, I don't have a clue what's in that will. Maybe they were telling you the truth. And even if they weren't, you're too young to run a gym by yourself. Gyms aren't what they used to be, and I know your grandfather struggled lately--- hold on, before you get angry, I'm only stating the facts here." **Adam waved his arms. Adam's mention of Xander's grandfather reminded him that the last time Adam interfered in their lives, he created a whole bunch of stress--- stress that might have caused Anders's ultimate despise.**

"I appreciate your help, but I don't want it. Not after what happened last time you helped me."

"I had nothing but the best intentions. You know that."

"You put a wedge in between me and my grandfather."

"You made a choice, Xander. I made an offer, but I did not force you to come to wrestle for me. The person you're angry at is yourself. You decided to go against your grandfather's wishes. Not me," **Adam answered. Xander released another roar. The truth stung more than Xander wanted to admit. He landed a haymaker in a nearby heavy bag and hugged it tightly to stop its swing.** "And the offer still stands. If they do come back with an eviction notice and a lawyer, you're out on the streets. And you don't have to be. I'll put you up. I'll make sure you have some cash in your pockets. All you have to do is wrestle some shows for me."

"He wants me to go on without him."

"Anders said that? I thought you guys were in trouble with the committee."

"He believed his friends would smooth things over with them."

"But you'll need a gym. You'll need trainers. Kid, I can help you out with all of that. I know a guy. I have the connections. We can make it work. You can go make your grandfather proud," **Adam said. Xander held his hand against the punching bag. He side-eyed Adam to gauge the man's trustworthiness. The man spoke the truth. He needed help; however, despite his young age, Xander bore enough wisdom to be skeptical. Adam read his facial expression and continued:** "If you are wondering what I'll get in return, it's not that I am offering to do this for free. Regardless of what sport you're participating in. As long as you're under my management, I expect a cut."

"It's amateur boxing. Amateur."

"But one day, you'll be a pro. And when that day comes, you'll reward me. Consider this an investment towards your future."

"And what if I don't make it to the pros."

"You already have a backup plan. Xander, I can see a bright future for you in professional wrestling. The sky's the limit for someone with your size and intensity. Hell, I could turn you into a star. But if your heart is set on boxing, then I'll help you deliver on that dream, too," **Adam said. Adam walked up to Xander and patted him hard on the arm. Xander gauged the offer. Everything seemed logical to Xander. Adam saw Xander as a business opportunity. That he trusted. If he had said that, to begin with, and foregone the family friend bullshit, accepting the deal would have been easier for Xander.**

"I guess it's a deal then."

"Then let's shake on it." **Adam offered his hand with a smile.**

Xander glared at the extended hand before thrusting his hand forward and shaking it fervently. He didn't see any other alternative. Xander needed to assemble a crew; more importantly, he needed a roof over his head. If Adam offered to provide him the necessities to continue his boxing career, he could at least deliver on his promise to his late grandfather. Anders correctly warned Xander that he made his bed. Now he had to lie in it. And if that meant getting in bed with the devil, so be it. Adam held up his end of the bargain from their prior arrangement, so perhaps Xander acted too paranoid about the situation.

"Good. I'll make some phone calls first thing tomorrow. We'll get you to the promised land, Xander. Don't fret. We'll make sure you're a gold medalist." **Adam turned, heading for the exit.**

He waved goodbye. Xander turned back to the punching bag beside him. He threw a few more punches into the bag before hugging it. Still, had he made the right call? All the troubles recently came because Xander's instincts had been wrong. He thought he was doing the right thing, but it turned out he was acting against his interest. Working with Adam, could that be another poor judgment call on his part? No, the man now had a vested interest in Xander. He wouldn't waste his time by leading astray.

"Please, watch over me, Grandpa." Then another punch.

And then another

And Adam initially delivered on his promises. So did Xander's uncles. Adam set Xander up in his in-law's apartment with an aspiring wrestler, Clapping Gabe Durgan. Neither cooked, so the kitchen remained clean. Xander started to rely on foul-tasting protein shakes to supplement his diet. Adam's wife, Sarah, cooked for them most days, even though the cuisine usually varied on chicken and potatoes. Sunday was spaghetti. Free food was free food. What other alternative did Xander have? He could live out of his black van. Then what? He didn't have a job. This was the best he could do under the circumstances. At the very least, he should be grateful.

On the contrary, Adam came through for him in a major way. He assembled a staff to oversee Xander's preparation for the Olympics. Some old faces. Some new faces. They reserved a ring in a gym downtown to spend most days sparring. When Xander wasn't preoccupied with training, Adam expected Xander to help with chores around the house or yard. Weekend nights were spent setting up the ring at Adam's weekly shows. Not hard work. And at least by doing something now, guilt didn't persist. He paid some of Adam's generosity back.

Still, the arrangement wasn't without wrinkles. Some nights down by the ring, Adam eagerly suggested Xander practice his wrestling skills to prevent them from getting too rusty. Xander always declined, fearing his instincts could possibly become confused in the heat of a match. He didn't want to resort to a wrestling hold when he needed to respond with a combination. He feared his wires would become crisscrossed. Adam always showed a disappointed gleam in his eyes afterward but walked away. That looked always ate away at Xander, made him feel a bit guilty, and for that, resentment started to bud inside the young man towards his benefactor.

"You know he wants you to be a wrestler," Gabe said. It was the morning of Adam's biggest show to date. Adam tasked the roommates to load up the back of the U-Haul with ring equipment. "He won't stop talking about you when you're not around. He won't stop saying you'll be the next big thing in professional wrestling. He laments you being so stuck on boxing."

"I know."

"Makes me jealous."

"Don't be."

"I'm only saying. I look up to Adam, grateful that he's accepted me on when he didn't have to. After all, I appeared on his doorstep one morning with nothing but my gym bag, begging to be a wrestler. I expected him to turn me away, but he offered me a place to stay while I learn under him," **Gabe said. Gabe always spoke about Adam in high esteem, too high. Xander rolled his eyes, dreading that he was about to hear Gabe's origin story again.** "And at first, I sucked. Most unathletic thing ever. A worm had more grace than me. But eventually, Adam set me straight. Little by little, I worked hard, and I became better. Good enough that Adam even put me on the card. He gave me the chance to prove myself, and now I'm living my dream. A regular feature on wrestling shows. Now I might not be a star, but at least I have a job that I love. Still, I want more."

"Is there a point to this story? Adam will be here soon, and there's still a lot of stuff to move. So how about less talking and more working?" **Xander said. Gabe nodded, but Xander could tell he wasn't finished gabbing. The two lifted up a heavy trunk together and carried it toward the truck.**

"See, Xander. You only had what? A few weeks of training, and there you are, slap dab in the middle of the card. You didn't need to work for it. And that made some of us in that locker room jealous. We were jealous that we had to work to get that opportunity, and you were handed it," **Gabe answered. Xander held the heavy box in his hand and stopped in his tracks. He pondered whether or not he was about to have an issue with his roommate. Xander looked at Gabe and couldn't tell any disdain emitting from the man's wide smile.**

"And?"

"And what frustrated me the most when I watched you compete. I found myself in awe. You're a damn natural. You're a freak of nature. You're everything I wished I was. I saw that day precisely what Adam still sees in you today. A potential superstar," **Gabe said. They hoisted the crate onto the end of the truck. He didn't know how to take Gabe's compliments. Xander felt he should say something, but no words came to mind. If anything, he'd wished the conversation would end and wanted nothing more than for Gabe to keep his mouth shut for the rest of the morning. That'd make things less awkward.**

Gabe didn't pick up on the cue. He continued, "Like I said, jealous. Adam wants you to be his main event. His golden ticket. And you're over here, training for the Olympics. Don't get me wrong, the Olympics would be a huge accomplishment. Imagine winning a gold medal. I get it. People have different dreams, and yours are simply bigger than mine."

"I just like boxing. That's all." **Xander wanted to downplay it.**

"I get it."

"Are you boys done loading up the truck?" **Adam asked, approaching the storage unit. He held a duffle bag over his shoulder and wore some shades to hide probably bloodshot eyes. He signaled to Gabe to come over.**

"Almost finished." **Xander went into the unit for another box. He heard muffled talking but paid no heed. Xander lifted up a box to his shoulder. When he returned to the truck, he saw Adam and Gabe off to the side.**

"Good. Now, here you go. What the doctor ordered." **Adam thrust his hand into the duffle bag and placed something into Gabe's pant pocket. He slapped Gabe on the back. Xander suspected something illegal with the exchange between the two men but looked the other way.**

Since living with Adam, he saw another side of the man. Despite having a good wife and kids at home, Adam spent nights at strip clubs, getting sloppy drunk with the dancers. Xander hated the nights Adam would call him to fetch him and that night's mistress. He'd pick them up at the club and drive them to a motel until Adam sobered enough to call a taxi. Xander only guessed what went on until Adam did. Or how much money he spent. Xander assumed Sarah knew Adam's nightly transgressions as they weren't the best-kept secret. Everyone knew; however, Xander kept his mouth shut. Despite Adam's shortcomings and evident lack of morality, Xander needed this arrangement. He didn't plan to risk it all by getting involved in Adam's messy personal life.

"As I was telling Gabe, I can't drive him home tonight. You don't mind giving you a lift," **Adam asked.**

"I planned on having an early morning tomorrow."

"It won't be too late. I'd appreciate it. Plus you can stay and watch the show. See what you're missing out on," **Adam insisted. Xander wanted to double down. He saw what Adam wanted to pull, more interference, yet at the same time, he owed Adam. Staying up a little late and giving his roommate a ride home wasn't a difficult ask.** "Don't make me beg. I would, but I planned on meeting up with some friends after the show to celebrate its success."

"Oh, come on, you won't bring me along," **Gabe said.**

"I love ya, kid, but I can't afford the tab for two idiots tonight." **They both laughed. Xander didn't join in. He didn't find much humor in the situation. Gabe's pay seemed like peanuts, and he joked with Adam, who planned on spending the night's proceeds on VIP**

treatment at the sleazy strip club. Something seemed unjust about the whole situation, but that wasn't his battle.

"I'll do it."

"Atta a boy. We'll get Gabe his own car one day," Adam responded.

"That'd be nice," Gabe commented.

Adam stared past Gabe momentarily at Xander and offered a smile. A car of more wrestlers from Adam's promotion arrived on the scene. One hopped out and waved before climbing into the U-Haul. He started up the engine. Xander hopped onto the back of the truck in one leap and closed the gate. When he turned around, Adam already disappeared. Gabe raised one eyebrow as if he had proved a point. Xander shrugged him off, not understanding how he read anything into that conversation. They had time to spare before the show, so they should return to their apartment. Xander approached his van. He ran his hand along the side, noticing scratches that hadn't been there before. Just his luck. The groaning of the U-Haul dissipated in the distance while Xander climbed into van's driver's seat. Gabe hopped into the other side of the van. They didn't speak on the ride back home.

Just the way Xander preferred.

Xander didn't mind watching the show that night. In fact, he enjoyed the spectacle. He never watched television, except for when his grandfather turned on the fights. That was research, in a way. That was the only reason Anders kept a tv around in the first place. He often spoke at length about how much better radio was in his day. He thought the pay-per-view specials would be a major motivator for Xander, but fame was insignificant to young Xander Valentine. Watching from the dingy backstage area through a small monitor hit differently. Adam taped the show and slapped the footage on the internet. Rough quality, but Xander found a certain charm with Oblivion before the promotion received significant backing--- before Adam's wrestling kingdom had been put on the map. Sure, the Allocco name bore influence on the indy circuit, but the self-proclaimed Wrestling's Enlightenment wasn't mainstream. Not yet.

There was a charm. The Rochester crowd went full-on rabid for Oblivion. Packed in a small armory, a site oft used for wayward stops on much bigger musical tours, everyone crammed into the venue to see the night's event. Wrestlers waged war in poor air conditioning, shoddy lighting, and a looming crowd. And like it or not, Adam taught his students well. Taught them the technical aspects of the game, so allowed them to put on clinics despite their youth and inexperience. Some of the names Xander watched that night went on to find success in Japan or Mexico. Some remained in North America,

including Hiro Tanaka and Celeste Camini. While this wasn't a glamorous event, with its limited lighting and an overrated smoke machine too boot, Xander still found himself mermized with boyish wonder. Maybe he liked wrestling. But the thought seemed unnatural. Boxing served as Xander's destiny. Not professional wrestling. He immediately recoiled from the allure of a mistress. He remained loyal to his beloved.

After Clapping Gabe's spectacular defeat at the hands of Tank Williamson, Xander sought his roommate in the back halls. He only planned on staying as long as necessary, regardless of how entertaining the show was. Xander's momentarily lapse in devotion to boxing made him more eager to return to the gym in the morning. He tracked Gabe down in the changing room alongside Adam. As Xander walked in, Adam seemed to have finished dispensing advice to his young protege while changing his ring gear. Unfortunately, Xander caught sight of Adam's hairy ass while the man pulled his tights up. Of course, the main event featured Adam as a headliner. Adam always made sure he placed himself on top of the card.

"You want to leave so soon? I haven't even wrestled yet!" Adam exclaimed. He feigned a pang of disappointment with a frown.

"My trainers expect me early in the gym."

"You're going to deprive me of watching Adam wrestle tonight? I'm none too pleased about that! I could really learn a thing or two by watching him. Did you see me tonight? I sucked. I need to do better," Gabe inserted, turning to Xander expectantly. Xander shrugged. He didn't exactly care about Gabe's development as a wrestler. That wasn't his concern. Xander's focus remained on being the best boxer possible, so the Olypmic Selection Committee chose him to represent in the Olypmics. So what if Gabe lost a bunch of matches? That wasn't his problem. Xander didn't have the time to concern himself with other people's issues. Or career development. Or whatever. Only boxing.

"Do you want a ride or not?" Xander asked.

"Maybe I can go ask one of the other guys for a ride---"

"No! No! No need for that, Gabe. I admire your loyalty and enthusiasm. The best thing for you is to recover from tonight's match. Go straight home, relax, maybe crack open a beer. We can watch the tape tomorrow--- or the next day. We'll even throw in a film review of my match tonight. How does that sound?" Adam interrupted. Xander wondered why he sounded so eager to rid himself of Gabe. Gabe could be annoying, so he went with that explanation. Xander didn't appreciate though that Adam wanted to pawn Gabe off on him. Especially if drinking was involved. Xander didn't want to hear Gabe whining about his loss once back at the apartment.

"Really?" Gabe asked.

"Really."

"Awesome! Yeah. Let's do that over some brewskis. But for tonight, I'll take your word. We'll head home, and I'll give myself the night to mourn my loss," **Gabe decided. Xander noted how easily influenced Gabe appeared to be. One suggestion from Adam was all it took for Gabe to jump through hoops. Adam possessed this way about him, always seeming to control his legion of students as if they were more underlings than disciples. Xander didn't fall underneath Adam's spell. He recognized Adam for what he was: a mere mortal man with ambitions of his own.**

"Then it's settled. Let's go." **Xander didn't want to waste another moment standing around there, having to watch Adam prepare for the main event. He didn't want to be mooned again. Leaving the show early made sure they also beat the rush. Xander ignored Gabe the entire way to the black van parked on a nearby side street, knowing the conversation would only be steered toward Adam's greatness or Gabe's loss. Neither topic interested Xander. Gabe tossed his duffle bag in the back of the truck and hopped into the passenger seat.**

"Let's play some tunes," **Gabe suggested once seated.**

"Let's not."

What should have been an uneventful trip into the suburbs twenty minutes away changed the course of Xander's destiny. Police sirens matched with red and blue flashing set the stage. Xander turned off to the side of the mostly empty road, wondering what he could have done to incur RPD's attention. Xander was a good driver. He didn't speed. He didn't drive recklessly. If anything, he drove like a grandma. Xander flicked his license out of his wallet, pulled his registration from the glove box, and readied himself for the officer's arrival at his window. There wasn't one officer, but two. They took both sides of the van. Xander rolled down his window for the officer at his window but kept the passenger side window up. In the corner of his eyes, he saw Gabe anxiously bouncing in his seat.

"Good evening, officer."

"Now, the two of you look to be up to no good. Where are you coming from? Have you been drinking? Anything in the van we should be concerned about? Hmmm?" **The officer unloaded question after question in quick succession. The aggressiveness of the questioning surprised Xander. Wasn't this a routine traffic stop? Xander already felt indicted for a crime.**

"No, sir. And we were returning from an event."

"A concert?"

"A wrestling show."

"Now, do you know why we pulled you over?" **The officer asked. Xander wanted to get smart. Perhaps his face showed his dismay because the officer sneered and pushed up his aviator glasses.** "We received a tip that a suspicious van might have been doing some deliveries of an illicit nature. The description matched this van perfectly, down to that long scratch along the side. You don't happen to have anything illicit in your van, do you?"

"No, sir. I do not."

"Mind if you two gentlemen step out while we take a look."

"I would rather go home."

"But we insist," **the officer said.** "Step out of the vehicle, please."

Xander growled, finding himself on the ledge, almost already at the point of plunging into the vast depths of his anger. Do they receive a tip? That sounded like absolute bullshit. They kept him from his bed. They kept him from getting a good night's rest and waking up early to spend time in the gym. They kept him from boxing. They instead wanted to fuck with him. Why? Why did they have to take on such a piss-poor attitude? Why the disrespect? Xander talked himself down, knowing they won't find anything in the back. Xander kept his van empty most of the time, and on this evening, the space was barren outside Gabe's duffle bag. He was allowing himself to be goaded by them. They wanted some excitement that evening, and he refused to provide. Let them find someone else to pick on.

"If that lets me go home quicker, then sure," **Xander answered.**

"Out of the vehicle, please. Sit down on the curb where Officer Kennedy can keep a good eye on you."

Xander left the van as he was told and headed toward the area designated by the police officer. Gabe slowly did the same but did so in an awkward manner. Something didn't seem right to Xander. He sensed something off with Gabe. He looked sick, pale white like a ghost. The van door slid open, and the officer climbed inside. A moment later, the officer returned with the duffle bag, now opened. He waved his partner over. Gabe bolted at that moment. Xander tried to catch his ankle, but Gabe hurtled his arm and ran towards a fence. He ran. And the officers froze long enough to allow for the escape.

"Call that in. The idiot's wallet is in the duffle bag," **the officer decided. Officer Kennedy returned to the police car as another one arrived shortly after. The original officer threw**

the duffle bag at Xander's feet. Inside, Xander saw vials of clear liquid and some syringes. He didn't know what that was for sure, but he had a guess. "Care to explain why you and your buddy have this?"

"I don't know what that is. That's not mine."

"Sure. Sure. That's a lot for one person. And I guessed if we stopped you earlier, there would have been a lot more," **the officer dismissed Xander. That angered him more than anything. He was telling the truth, and there were few things he hated more in life than being accused of something he didn't do. Xander rose. The officer's hand drifted towards his holster. "Now, son. Don't make this any worse than it has to be."**

"I'm telling you. I don't know what shit is. It's not mine. You got to ask my roommate!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to calm down. Sit back down on the curb," **Officer Kennedy said as he returned. This time he was flanked by another two officers. All of them approached Xander as if he was deranged. A dangerous animal that needed to be swiftly handled. Why wouldn't they believe him? He told them the truth. Red started to take over. He didn't sit down. He refused to. They were going to--- and that was when they swarmed him. Four against one. He didn't know who gave the signal, but they attacked in unison. Their primary effort was to tackle him to the pavement, but that was almost impossible given his size. His natural instinct was to flail. Perhaps he landed in good body shots. He didn't know. A chokehold served as blinders. They dispersed with some punches, elbows, and kicks. After an eternity of being unable to breathe, they removed the legs from underneath him. The cold metal of handcuffs tightly pressed against one wrist while they tried to bring his arm.**

"Let me go. I can't breathe," **Xander wheezed.**

"Stop resisting!" **One of the officers ordered.**

Xander didn't oblige. He managed to toss two off him and find his footing once again. He tried to gain his bearings and didn't realize reinforcements arrived. Two more officers joined the scrum. And their fresh bodies toppled Xander back to the concrete. A knee pinned Xander's neck, grating the side of his face across the concrete. Xander yelled, but that didn't matter. Eventually, they wore him out. He conceded. He didn't know what they wanted and why they attacked him, but he knew he couldn't resist further. It hadn't quite dawned on him the severity of the situation. Perhaps a more intelligent person would already realize this chance encounter jeopardized his Olympic aspirations. Instead, when they dragged and shoved him into the back of a squad car. All his thoughts could manage was how fucked up this was. And where the fuck was Gabe?

Fuck the cops.

Fuck Gabe.

Fuck everything.