

The early spring chill broke. The buds on the tree branches exploded into leaves. Wildflowers ran rampant on the property. The days grew longer as the season marched towards summer. There wasn't a cloud in the vast, infinite blue of the sky above. Xander's pick-up rumbled up the gravel driveway. The ceramic tiles bounced in the bed of the truck. Pails of lavender and white paint from Sherwin Williams swooshed. New floral printed shower curtains joined a steel shower curtain—everything Xander needed to remodel Trinity's bathroom that he had left destroyed weeks prior. Trinity didn't seem bothered by Xander's impulsiveness. She also didn't give much input into what she idealized the bathroom's appearance. Xander debated swapping rooms with her so Trinity wouldn't have to confront that memory; however, both Trinity and Hunter thought Xander was babying his daughter. There would be a point she needed to confront that day's events. He couldn't shield her from that inevitability, just as she couldn't stay in the hospital forever.

Today was Trinity's first step back into the real world. Her release from the hospital was imminent. Despite having months to prepare the house, Xander felt unprepared for the moment. Too many questions battered his mind. How should he act? What would she need from him? Xander knew the bathroom repairs should have already been completed by now; however, his wrestling career had pulled him away from the property the past few weeks. His championship match was on the horizon, and the company roped him into making promotional appearances.

On the road, though, Xander had much time to think. His mind often turned to what he could do to support Trinity when she did finally return to the home. During a signing, Xander met a combat vet with an emotional support dog. Curious, Xander inquired about the vet's bond with the dog. Why did a dog help with his PTSD? The veteran mentioned during the darkest moments, he always knew his dog was in his corner. The dog actively comforted him during times of distress. While it didn't cure the man of his disease, the presence alone dulled the edge of the blade that cut into his mind. Xander leaped from the truck and opened the back door to the cab. He didn't bother tugging on the leash of the golden retriever, with its brilliant coat capturing the midday sun. Xander had yet to name the dog. That would be Trinity's honor.

The dog darted out into the yard. Xander didn't hold any concerns about traffic. The gravel driveway was far away from the back road he lived on. Xander watched the dog circle around and bound towards him. The dog stopped at his feet and looked up at him expectantly, tongue hanging from his mouth. What did he want? Xander sighed, not understanding the dog's need. The dog ran away again, only to return, staring up at Xander with droopy eyes, expecting something from him. Did he want a pet? A snack, maybe? Xander hoped he knew what he signed up for. More than that, he prayed that Trinity would be excited about the addition to the family.

Xander heard the crunch of gravel. Hunter's Subaru rolled up the driveway. Xander spat his frustration on the ground. He hoped he had more time to bring in the material before

Trinity and Hunter arrived. Also, he had this idea in his head to keep the dog waiting in her bedroom for the ultimate surprise. Hunter climbed out of the driver's seat first. Instantly, Xander knew he made a mistake by the glare he had received. Her emerald eyes shone with anger. Trinity joined her at the front of the car; however, seeing the dog at Xander's feet made a smile pop off on her face like fireworks. The dog turned towards Trinity and Hunter and back at Xander. He didn't seem to want to leave Xander's side.

"Who's your friend?" **Hunter asked.**

"Dude, when did we get a puppy? What's his name?" **Trinity practically squealed. Xander found more life in her tone than he had since the incident. Trinity knelt on the ground. She began whistling, waving her arms frantically to get the dog to come to her. Finally, the dog peeled off Xander and ran towards the attention-wanting Trinity. The dog leaped up, placing his paws on Trinity's knees. Trinity's purple-tipped hair hovered over her face, but Xander still saw her smile. The blonde roots showed she couldn't dye her hair in the hospital. Hopefully, life was going to get back to normal for his daughter.**

"He doesn't have one, so you had better come up with a good one. He's yours."

"Mine?! He's mine!"

"I thought you might need some company for when we're gone. I hope you don't mind having a dog to care for," **Xander said. After that statement, he realized his mistake. He never once asked anyone about their thoughts on getting a dog. Xander now knew why Hunter approached him with a tight face. Despite her youth, wrinkles showed up when she was angry. Trinity didn't seem to notice the pending conflict between Hunter and Xander. She became far too invested in giving the dog love. Hunter stepped to Xander's side.**

"Look, I know what you're about to say. I know I fucked up."

"Do you, now?"

"I should have forewarned you about my intentions."

"Ya think?"

"But look at her. She's happy," **Xander countered.**

"A dog's a great amount of responsibility. Haven't anyone told you that? We travel a lot. Who will care for the dog when we are halfway around the world? Is it trained? Have you given this much thought?" **Hunter started. The dog pulled away from Trinity and flew back to Xander. The dog slid across the ground, kicking up dirt before stopping between Hunter and Xander. The dog stared down Hunter. Hunter didn't shy from returning fire, glaring back at the dog. This continued as the dog's expression softened. Hunter's finally succumbed to the puppy dog look the dog issued. "I'm holding you responsible for this."**

"It's fine. Everything will work out."

"I always wanted a dog. This is perfect," **Trinity commented as she approached the group. Sensing that the situation had been defused, the dog returned to Trinity. Trinity scratched the back of the dog's ear. "I dub this dog Charlemagne. He looks like an emperor to me."**

"See? This made Trinity's day. I always wanted a dog, too," **Xander said. The relief that Trinity accepted the dog settled in Xander. Charlie trotted over to him and brushed his head against his leg. Xander never actually thought about pets in his entire life. When he lived with his grandfather, his grandfather cited they didn't have time to care for a cat, let alone a dog. When Xander lived alone, the notion of keeping a pet never crossed his mind. Xander was a solitary creature, after all. Still, there was some sense of satisfaction in having a dog by his side.**

"I just wished you spoke to me about it. That's all," **Hunter replied.**

"We're not taking him back, are we?" **Trinity asked.**

"No. You gave it a name. Plus, I would have been on board anyway. It's just that your father sometimes gets an idea in his head and doesn't think to include anyone else in the decision-making," **Hunter said. Hunter lowered herself to pat Charlie on his head. She stood up properly and gave Xander one more glare for safe measure. Hunter turned up the path to the house, leaving Trinity and Xander behind. Xander sighed, knowing he must work to make it up to Hunter.**

"Ouch. She's not happy with you, dude."

"She has a legitimate reason to be annoyed."

"It's a nice surprise. You didn't have to, though. I am fine. I wouldn't be home if I wasn't going to be okay," **Trinity said. Xander nodded. He reached out and hesitated initially, but then he pulled her in for a hug. Trinity rested her head on his shoulder. Charlie circled them impatiently, wanting in on the display of affection. "I think I will be okay. Everything will work out."**

"We'll fix up your bathroom, we'll start your training again, and I'll do everything to make it seem like everything is back to normal."

"I can't see the world the way I used to. First, the bullying. Then, the video was posted. But all I want is that sense of normalcy. To be comfortable in my skin. I don't know what it will take to get to that point, but I plan on working towards that goal," **Trinity explained. She stepped away from her father's embrace to stand on her own two feet. Xander looked her up and down, nodding in agreement. Had he been worrying too much about her? Despite the visits to**

the hospital, he sensed that she was still in a rut. Yet that statement convinced her that she was strong and willing to fight out of the corner she found herself in.

"They're going to catch the fucker."

"I know they will."

"I've been on their asses about it too."

"Don't be too mean. I'm sure they're working hard. Even if they never catch him, I have to move on," **Trinity said. Xander wondered how much to reveal to Trinity. He didn't want to upset her. He decided against divulging that there was a likely connection between Mike Christopher and her half-brother. No, Xander didn't want to burden her with theories. Until he knew for sure who Mike Christopher was, he would keep things close to his chest. This was his burden to carry. He wanted her to focus on rebuilding her life.**

"That's the right attitude."

"I know you think you need to protect me, Dad. Don't force yourself. I can do this."

"I don't know if this is a father thing or something; however, I can't help but feel like I have to protect you. You're my daughter. You're important to me. And---"

"I know. I just want to let you know that. What I need for you is to act normal. Let's continue where we left off. Before this mess ever happened," **Trinity said. Xander didn't know if he could do that. The image of his daughter in his arms with her cut wrist haunted him. He destroyed the bathroom because of that image. Xander wanted to hunt down this Mike Christopher and make him pay for that image. Ultimately, he felt driven. Sure, he spent most of his life shirking the responsibilities of fatherhood; however, with Trinity, it was different. There was a need to act. Despite her insistence he didn't need to do anymore, he didn't know if he could ignore the voice urging him on.**

"Let's get you and Charlemagne settled in. Then, tomorrow, we'll start back up with training. You have a lot of work to catch up on."

"You're going to run me tired."

"You did ask for normalcy."

"I have had a lot of time to think. To reflect. I'm ready to kick some ass."

"You're my daughter. You already kick ass. It's in your DNA," **Xander said with a slight laugh. Xander turned towards their home, still in the possession of his daughter. He reflected on what McGowan told him; focus on supporting her through her healing process.**

Xander nodded to himself. Xander supposed he was the only man for the job. The way her icy blues, the gifts she inherited from him, looked up at Xander showed him that she trusted him to guide her into a brighter future. Connor never expressed such faith. When Connor came to live with Xander after Calli's passing, there was nothing but ire. An artic coldness existed in those eyes. He never once forgave Xander for the broken home he grew up in. Xander's rage bathed him with discord for large stretches of Connor's childhood. To Connor, Xander would always have been the one who deprived him of his innocence.

"I want you to know something," Xander said as they approached the house's threshold. Charlie nipped at his ankles in a playful manner.

"What's that?"

"You are my second chance at this fatherhood thing. You're important to me. My life has gotten better now that you're home."

"You're making this very sentimental, dude."

"I'm just calling it how it is."

Time after time.

They say the same ol' line. It has become a cliché.

They say my run is at its end. That it is time to pass the torch onto the next generation as if I finished my leg of a relay race. I'm outdated. Obsolete. I hear these upstarts curse my name. I see the determination in their eyes to knock me from this perch. They've fed up with me, sickened that my presence has persisted; my dominance is unwavering. Almost twenty years into this, and I'm still kicking ass. The body count keeps climbing. My arms haven't grown too tired to throw a punch. My legs keep marching to the war drums. I can still swing my gladiator's sword. Foe after foe, fall before me. I'm soaked in the blood of my enemy. My resilience is the only truth that rings supreme.

Kandis thought she was special. Kandis thought that because she tasted the fresh air at the top of the mountain, she stood a chance against my wrath. Folly of youth. She has taken her position for granted. Entitlement and blind aggression led her astray. Now she's sitting at home, licking her wounds after I drove her six feet into the mat. Kandis gave it her all. I commend her. But her all wasn't enough to stop me at Rise to Greatness. I said I wasn't done yet, and she found out that was the case. I forced her to eat her own words: Fuck Around and Find Out. Look where that got her.

With the landscape at the top changing and with my old friend Hudson dethroning Selena, everything is set up for me to have another go at the World Championship. Let's be honest. The fans will always be more than happy to see Hudson vs. Valentine. For the hundredth time, our battles never grow old. I routed a contender in Kandis. We all saw that I had Selena Frost dead to rites until Kandis showed up. It's only fitting for me to be given another crack at the top title. To the right injustice that transpired. If not me, then who? Give me your list, and I'll strike each name off. I'll twist CHBK's fucking arm if I have to. That seems par for the course regarding me and being given opportunities. So be it if I must do more than the next guy. That's my cross to bear. I'm more than capable of the weight on my shoulders. This is my last ride, and I'm going pedal to the metal.

But I'm sure there's an upstart waiting in the wing. Another voice that is calling foul. That voice belongs to Amelia Blythe. Now, I'm not saying that with disrespect to Amelia. I wouldn't dare. She's been cutting her teeth in the tag team division for years, and it's about time she blossoms into a singles star. One half of the best tag team we have seen in years. Light in the Darkness has had a stranglehold over the division. Their dominance reminds me of Dark Fantasy. That is a position Amelia deserves to be in. That position can be a springboard into the singles division and to greater heights. Look at Syren and Ravyn Taylor. They carried over the success into their singles careers. Syren is considered by many the greatest of all time. Ravyn Taylor is a Supreme Champion. Amelia is walking in their footsteps.

Or is she?

Because this week, she is pitted against me. Amelia Blythe faces the death kneel of the Executioner. My last stand is now, Amelia. I'm retired in the not-so-distant future, and my legacy will be cemented forever. I still have things to do. I still have regrets to right. And from the way I see it, you're in the may way. Have you ever stayed up all night thinking of all the what-ifs? An existential crisis is the name of the game. And I hate to say that I dwell in the past. I wish I could say that I'm a stronger person. But I keep going back to the mistakes I've made. The opportunities I've forfeited—the errors of my way. I learned the right way to conduct myself in this business too late and squandered my career. I might be the most dominant wrestler to have stepped in that ring, but I look at the resumes of Syren, Frost, and Hudson, and I knew I could easily have executed them if I stayed focused when I was younger. That is why I hated seeing Kandis before me because she's making the same fucking mistakes I did.

But not you, Amelia. Not you.

You have approached this business with the right attitude. You're a winner in spirit. I admire that. I've noticed you. You've turned heads in the locker room. You've stepped up to the plate, time after time. You've hit home runs. You've pulled off upsets. And you get right back up every time you've been knocked down. Now, before you, it's the biggest singles match of your career. You're pitted against a legendary force. A win against me on this random Breakdown in August could be a wake-up call for the locker room and SCW officials. You could make your presence known. You could establish yourself. Be more than one-half of the SCW World Tag Team

Champions. You could be a star in your own right. All you have to do is the herculean feat of taking down the Executioner.

Easier said than fucking done.

Because I have unfinished business, and the way I see it, I have to keep trampling across the hopes and dreams of your generation. Call me a gatekeeper. Call me selfish. But until that final bell rings, I will put down every wrestler who dares to step in my path. I have so much to prove—more than ever. If I want to be chasing after World Championships, I can fall victim to a trap match against Amelia Blythe. I have to put her on display and show the whole world that I cannot be ignored. And on Breakdown, that is precisely what I intend to do. Your destiny is to fall victim to my unwritten legacy. You're fated to be another trophy on my wall. I cannot rest until I prove that I'm the very best. And that is bad news for you as right now, you're the only target that I have locked on.

So Amelia, clench your teeth. Brace yourself. The axe's swinging for your head, and before you know it...

Everything...

Will...

Fade to black.