



Trees became sparse at higher altitudes. When the rain started to fall, and the gusts commenced with its lashings, Xander only had a light jacket to protect himself from the elements. The trail became muddy. Yet the poor conditions didn't deter his party. They came this far; they would see it to the end. Once again, Xander fell behind the two women. Trinity used to mountain climb with one of her uncles. For her, this was a walk in the park. A bonding experience, though Xander wondered how much bonding they were benefiting from when she left him in the dust. As for Hunter, her tenacity kept her at a steady rate in her ascent. At times, he stared up, wiped the water from his eyes, and caught a glimpse of their brightly colored attire. He cursed under his breath. His right knee bothered him at this juncture; however, Xander refused to turn around regardless of how severe the swelling would become. He didn't want to show surrender in front of the ladies. Hell, he had always been stubborn. Nevertheless, the steep climb to the peak became bogged down as Xander allowed himself more and more breaks. Something he wasn't particularly proud to admit.

Not too far from the top, he tossed aside his backpack. He stretched out his knee and elevated it onto a rock. He rocked slightly on his seat, not caring that his ass became muddy. What a miserable day. Xander scanned the neighboring mountaintops. A few other hikers, descending from the peak, waved to him before disappearing down the mountainside. Only a few others visited the mountain during their stay. Maybe they knew the weather was going to be shit too. He gripped his knee. He needed to get back up to his feet and finish the climb. Things would be much easier on the way down. He assured himself of that. Right now, Xander needed to stop feeling pathetic. Consider the climb to

be a wrestling match. Xander never quit in the middle of the match before. He never showed defeat. Sure, the climb was tough, but his standards were more rigid.

"Did you hurt yourself?" **Xander jumped. Hunter's voice surprised him.**

"It's just my knee."

"Has she ever heard the story of where you successfully defended the SCW World Championship on a partially torn ACL?"

"I don't typically brag."

"I think you should. That spoke a lot about your tenacity. I can't imagine too many others would have been able to survive that night and leave with the championship."

"Some might argue that was the pinnacle of my career. That night encapsulated everything I wanted to be. Never say die. An unstoppable force of nature. That's what I wanted to be. But that was a pyrrhic victory because that injury started the downfall," **Xander said. Hunter went to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder. She dipped down so she was crouching. Hunter reached for his thigh, right above the swollen knee. She massaged the muscle, wanting to give him some relief.** "Something died within me the next day when I had to vacate the belt. A fire—a passion that I never felt. And I allowed the darkness to come in. The rage that was my strongest ally became my worst enemy. And this damn knee reminds me of that change."

"Life is not without its fair share of setbacks."

"I know that. Still, when I was champion the first time, I had this sense of being. Almost like I had reached nirvana. And then the world took that away from me, and I became resentful," **Xander conveyed. He settled his hands onto her and squeezed. He offered up a grim smile. His first Rise to Greatness was bitter-sweet memory. He knew he would never forget that rollercoaster of emotions until the day he died.** "Maybe that's why I didn't share the story. I couldn't only show her the good, but I know I would have to tell her the dark side."

"So why haven't you gotten over the past? You're not the only one that suffered injuries. You're not the only one who failed at parenthood. You're one of many. And that's okay. You stumble, but you always get back up. It might not have been pretty, but you always pulled yourself together," **Hunter paused to produce a frustrated sigh. She pressed the side of her face against mine. The edge of her lips flirted with his. There she went with physical intimacy that they avoided for most of their relationship. What was transpiring between them? Hunter continued.** "I guess what I'm saying. Be proud that you stood back up. Stop holding yourself to this standard that you have to be perfect. No one is perfect."

"I know I'm not perfect."

"But have you accepted that to be fact?"

"I wanted more, Hunter. I wanted to have accomplished more in my career. And to have done that, I needed to be better than I was. To be perfect. Perhaps what frustrates me the most with Syren is that she didn't have to live up to those standards. She never screwed up like I did. The company ultimately trusted her to be the top dog. They feared me. They distrusted me. They placed every obstacle they could in my place. But still, when the chances did present themselves, I didn't rise to them. And then I allowed distractions to get in the way. And now I'm staring at the end of a barrel, wondering where I went wrong," **Xander explained. What happened to the gap that was between them? He found himself very comfortable describing his feelings to Hunter in this moment of vulnerability. Her arms tightened around his torso in an embrace. Her lips pressed against his neck. Her hot breath brought welcome relief to the damp chill the rain had brought.**

"You project your shortcomings onto her."

"Maybe I do."

"And here I thought you were simply dismissive of her."

"Deep down, I compare myself to her. She's done more than me. More than anyone. But she's settling now. Adrenaline title? Lexy Corp? Now, that's different from what it takes to be the best. She's grown complacent. I want her to put me down, pull the trigger, or else. Or else I give her that wake-up call. Make her feel the pain I endured over the years when I was forced to wait my turn. No, that's wrong. I never waited. I had to scratch and claw my way to opportunities they handed out to lesser fighters, including her," **Xander spat bitterly. He brushed off Hunter, finding that anger once more. The pain in his knee seemed to have dissipated. Hunter drew herself in front of him. She grabbed hold of the front of his jacket and pulled him in.**

"You don't need to retire, Xander."

"I meant what I said."

"That's not what I mean. If you don't want to retire, then win. Your destiny is in your hands. You have the killer instinct. You have been acting like this is up to Syren to decide. And I can't disagree with it further. You're capable of dominating her. You've shown that. Even at her best, I believe you can pull through and still win. So if you still want to accomplish more in your career, win. Just keep winning," **Hunter suggested. Easier said than done, Xander thought. He needed to find out where his confidence had wandered off to. He simply felt old. Tired. Still, he had the grind to look forward to. For now, that slow burn was the climb to the peak of this mountain. And in a few weeks' time, the challenge would be against Syren in possibly his last wrestling match ever.**

"What's taking you two?" Trinity shouted from a ledge above. She backtracked to check on her companions.

"Your father is—"

"Was taking a short break," Xander cut Hunter off. He didn't want to show weakness before the girl. He stretched his knee out, kicking the air a few times. The talk with Hunter renewed his sense of drive. He needed to get to the mountaintop. He refused to let his knee slow him down. More importantly, he didn't want Hunter to worry about his mental state. He had this. The climb. The match. He needed to believe.

"We're almost there!" Trinity yelled.

"Let's go."

"Are you sure?" Hunter asked.

"I'm fine," Xander stated. He reached down and swung his backpack over his shoulders. Together they started the trail again that winded around the peak's base. Soon the burn radiated from his legs, especially his knee, but he kept going. He managed to keep pace with Hunter, who he suspected might have slowed hers for his sake. The rain continued to pester them. The wind still whipped against their bodies. That didn't stop anyone from their pursuit to reach the top.

Dear Xander Valentine,

It comes with regret that the USA Boxing Olympic Selection Committee....

Xander crumbled up the letter without even finishing. Skimming through the rest, he saw a wordy explanation for their decision. Mainly his arrest. They didn't think he was a good representative of the moral character that the United States boasted. Xander offered up a sharp laugh at that implication. America, the land where guardians molest their wards, mentors sabotage their students, and a mistaken arrest cost a young man his dreams. Xander's mix of rage and despair spiraled within him. He took hold of the trash can in the kitchen and started slamming it against the side of the cabinets. Gabe hurried into the room to see the commotion and sputtered to a stop when he caught wind that Xander was engaged in a full-blown temper tantrum.

Upon seeing his roommate, Xander dropped the trashcan, letting garbage spill onto the tiled floor. He approached Gabe. Gabe's body tightened. His sleeveless shirt exposed flexed biceps. His jaw slacked to show a strained smile. He feared what came his way. Gabe witnessed this side of Xander in the holding cell a few weeks back. He understood

Xander wasn't afraid to get physical. He prepared himself for a fight or flight reflex as Xander drew near.

"Why are you so upset? Look, I get why things are bad, but Adam's working on it," **Gabe asked. He held out hope that he could defuse the situation. There wasn't any reason for anyone to get hurt.**

"Because of you and Adam, I'm out. That letter was from US Boxing. And guess what? They don't want me. They pointed towards the arrest being their reason. I guess I'm a real shit person and not worthy of competing at the Olympics. You know how that makes me feel?" **Xander posted up on Gabe. Gabe's arms naturally rose above his chest in case he had to cover up if Xander started to throw blows. He knew he better get out of there, but paralysis locked him in place. Gabe's legs didn't let him turn tail and leave the apartment. This news didn't bode well since he was to blame.**

"Damn, man. I'm sorry—"

"That was my dream. That was my grandfather's dream. I busted my ass all these years, and I could have seen it through. I would have. I should have. But you have gone and ruined it," **Xander accused. Xander debated whether that was enough to warrant a torrential rain of punches being unleashed upon Gabe, but Xander ultimately knew that Gabe wasn't the real villain. He was another victim. Adam manipulated him. Adam was to blame for this turn of events. He gripped Gabe and shoved him out of his way, starting towards the door. "Whatever. Get out of my way, Gabe. I'm done with this place. I don't want to see your sorry face again. And soon, I will be finished with that piece of shit."**

"Wait. Wait. Wait! You have to calm down. Buddy, don't make matters worse--- hey, hey! I know this is rock bottom for you, but you have opportunities elsewhere!" **Gabe chased after Xander. The urgency in his voice suggested he feared what Xander would do next. It was one thing for Xander to kick his ass. He deserved it. But Gabe didn't know what he planned on doing about Adam. From the sound of Xander's voice, murder might be on the table.**

"I don't care about professional wrestling. I'm not a wrestler. I'm a boxer."

"How can you say that? That's your golden ticket now. If you let him, Adam will make you a star!"

"See, that's the whole thing. It's bullshit. If Adam has a supposed magic touch, then he wouldn't need you to be pumping yourself full of steroids. You look fine. And about me? I expect he isn't too sad right now that I lost my chances at boxing. If anyone needs his ass kicked, it's him," **Xander decided. Xander still held onto that potentially paranoid notion that Adam had set him up. He hadn't been able to shake off that shrinking suspicion that Adam arranged for arrest to transpire that night. He knew Gabe had the steroids. Adam could have had someone else phone a tip in. Even if Xander's theory was proven correct, another one of**

Adam's schemes ultimately cost Xander his dreams. Either way, he justifiably blamed Adam for everything.

Xander jogged down the steps alongside the garage and started towards Adam's back door. Adam happened to leave at the same time, heading towards his Pontiac GTO. Upon sighting, Adam offered Xander a broad smile, but a hard hook demolished that shit grin. Adam staggered to the side, where Xander popped him again, this time on the bridge of the nose. Adam fell to the pavement. Gabe caught up by this point and held Xander's arm back before another punch could be delivered.

"What the fuck, my nose! I think you broke my nose, man!" Adam cried out. Blood gushed out, splattering against the blacktop of the driveway. Xander inhaled and exhaled, trying to keep his anger at bay. He didn't want to wrestle with Gabe, instead avoiding breaking out of Gabe's restraints. The punches felt too good. Another go at it, and he might kill Adam with his bare hands. Still, those two punches felt good. He had wanted to do that for too long. Sarah hurried out of the house and yelped when she saw the scene. Xander didn't intend to upset her, but her husband had it coming.

"You fucked me over," Xander spat.

"Here I was, coming to tell you that I got your charges thrown out, and you go ahead and punch me?"

"It's too fucking late. Your scheme cost me everything!"

"I already apologized for the mishap. That's just life, though. You can go around punching people because fate decided you can't be---" Adam started, but Xander broke through Gabe's arms and snatched Adam by the collar of his shirt. Sarah threw herself in between while Gabe regained a grip on Xander's right arm.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not the bad guy here. I'm not the guy who peddles false hope and steroids. I'm not the asshole you spend all his money out on the strip club while his wife's at home. All I wanted was to box at the Olympics. Make my grandfather proud. And you took that for me. Be happy that I only broke your nose," Xander said. Xander threw Gabe off of him and shoved Adam back. He stepped back, shaking his head. Xander simply stated the truth, and if they had a proud with that, fuck 'em.

"I thought you said you were done with the club---" Sarah started.

"Not now," Adam stamped out that line of questioning. Adam lowered his hand to examine the blood. He released a frustrated cry before pointing the finger at Xander. "You listen here, Xander. You were never going to make it. You were going to the Olympics, then what? I'm not sorry. I'm not going to apologize. Hell, I could make you into the biggest thing ever, get you

anything, money, power. You name it. But if you're going to be a real cunt, then fuck it. Get out of my house, get out of here."

"Gladly. But let me ask you something, Adam. Was this some ploy for you to get me to work for you? I know your company lacks stars, and with what you and everyone have been saying, I have potential. Were you really forcing me to work for you? To become your workhorse for Oblivion. Well, I do fucking hope Oblivion tanks?" **Xander paused for a moment. He lowered his head to release a hearty laugh. He raised his head, knowing what would drive Adam crazy the most. For now, the only real payback Xander could respond with other than a broken nose was:** "Look, you might get what you wanted. You might see me in the wrestling ring. But it will never be yours."

"You'll never wrestle. I'll see to it."

"We'll fucking see about it."

The rain stopped when they reached the peak, and the wind eased. The abrupt change in weather seemed unnatural. Clouds parted to welcome the sun, though the passing storm remained in view devouring nearby mountaintops as if the dark clouds fled the sun's glorious rays. The sun brought warmth with its arrival. Xander removed his backpack and stepped towards the ledge. He basked in the majesty of the scenery, stretching out his arms. He sat down, dangling his legs above a hundred-foot drop. Heights never bothered him. A sense of accomplishment washed through him. And also relief that he managed the climb. He made the journey and persisted through the pugnacious weather and his ailing knee. That ushered a smile upon his face, though he didn't reveal the expression to the women. They stood behind him, admiring the same panorama as he did. Trinity, of course, reached the top thirty minutes before Hunter and Xander did. Her ambition knew no bounds. Xander remembered the days he shared the same ferocity. Now he fought for survival, a less inspiring basis yet still as powerful.

"We did it," **Trinity said.**

"Yes, we did," **Xander responded.**

"Let's take a picture to commemorate!" **Trinity decided. Xander offered a short laugh before pushing himself off the stone underneath him. He turned towards Trinity, who propped her phone against a rock. She waved at Xander and Hunter, perhaps the two most unphotogenic individuals one could find, and they huddled together to get into frame. Before Xander could ask for a cue, the phone offered up a snapping sound. And like that, the device captured their image. "Let me see how it turned out."**

"No redos," Hunter said.

"I swore that would be his response, not yours," Trinity said. She scrambled to the phone and seemed to view the image for a few minutes. Trinity turned the phone over with a sigh. And for good reason. Everyone's hair appeared disheveled. His black hair jutted off to the right. They looked utterly miserable. And only Trinity grinned in the picture. The other two seemed more caught off guard than anything, making it a real candid shot of the outing. "We really need to work on ya two's modeling skills. You both seem like you're not enjoying yourselves. Basically, you look like shit."

"Thanks," Xander answered.

"Still, I'll cherish this picture. I'll get it printed out. Framed. Maybe you can frame it," Trinity suggested. Xander nodded, giving the image a second look over. The fact it bore meaning for Trinity moved Xander. They shared a moment in time. He never recalled once enjoying such a sensation with Connor. Instead, they seemed to always try to escape each other's presence. That being in the same room was an unspoken torture. He deserved that for what he did to Calli and Connor while he was still a boy. He inflicted trauma on the child like his uncle did to him. But with Trinity, he didn't have such baggage. Their relationship seemed unhindered by Xander's past transgressions. And now, Xander gifted her with a memory.

And that felt good to him.

Refreshing.

Renewing.

The campfire bathed the interior of the tent with an orange glow. They camped in the same spot as the night prior, a perfect stopping point on their descent. Xander turned in earlier than the girls, exhausted. His knee throbbed. He scrunched up his sleeping bag and propped his knee up, hoping for that to offer up some relief. He closed his eyes. Hunter and Trinity spoke at length at the campfire. Their low voices droned on. The tent had been pitched far enough that he only caught some of what they were saying. They didn't keep him awake. He simply couldn't sleep. His thoughts traveled from a range of topics. His mind wondered about what retirement boded for him. Would hikes up mountains become a more regular occasion? His knee surely didn't hope that would be the case. Yet he was sure there were other locations that he could become more intimate with. He traveled the world with SCW, but did he ever afford himself the opportunity to see those sights. Xander dwelt in hotel gyms. He never sought out the city life each spot on the schedule offered. Weren't retirees supposed to set up shop on sandy beaches? He contemplated what fine cuisine tasted like in Parisian culinary establishments. He had

money. It wasn't like he didn't have a brand. He could always start a podcast and earn money that way too.

Who was he kidding? Such a fate seemed alien to him. He wasn't a traveler. He was a hermit. Retiring wasn't going to change who he was overnight. He'd be utterly lost, a beast released out of its cage after years of captivity. Will he ever be able to survive? He scoffed. Xander feared the subject because brainstorming retirement plans opened him up to the possibility that Syren could defeat him. He wagered his career because he didn't think she could. Not in this state. Was he backtracking? Still, he needed some sort of anchor if the unexpected did happen. He would be a lost lamb in need of a good shepherd. And as if God heard his prayers, Hunter entered the tent on all fours. She zipped up the entrance and crawled up next to him. She sighed upon seeing his propped-up knee.

"You get along well with her," **Xander mentioned.**

"She's sweet. It's actually hard to believe that she's your daughter," **Hunter jested.**

"I had no role in her upbringing, so I'm not shocked." **Xander's usual deadpan.**

"Enough of that bullshit. I'm tired of you beating yourself up over the past," **Hunter erupted. Her voice remained low while the tone was harsh. She slapped his chest a tad harder than a love tap and drew herself to his side as if the previous night hadn't deterred her at all. Xander groaned, knowing they had picked up the conversation where they had left it off. But some of him welcomed the topic as if he still needed to finish speaking. Where before Xander thought it was a case close, something happened in the past twenty-four hours that changed his perception. Something clicked inside of him, whether he consciously knew it or not.**

"You see too much good in me."

"I see who you are. You underestimate your potential."

"I used to blackout, Hunter. Black the fuck out. When I would wake, the entire house would be a warzone. Tables broken, chairs smashed, lamps tossed across the room. In the worst episodes, Calli would be sporting injuries. Hell, I even tossed Connor around a few times, I guessed," **Xander confessed. The worst was that he would blame it all on Abaddon, his alter ego. An insidious side of him that would be responsible for all the sinister things he would do. Things he would regret yet still ultimately enjoy on some base level. He hadn't turned to that side of him in years. He stopped using excuses. Nothing could justify that behavior, especially against one's loved ones. Against the defenseless. Those individuals he swore to protect.**

"I'm not denying you're incapable of doing terrible things."

"Then why? Why do you want to be with me?"

"Because you've learned from your past mistakes. You've grown. You have turned into a man that I find desirable in every way. I want you. Even if you frustrate me, I am still drawn to you."

"You sure you aren't suffering from Stockholm syndrome?"

"Maybe I am. Maybe that is how things started out between us. But if that's the case, I don't care. What I care about is you. About us. About building a life together. A life that we might not think we could ever have, but the opportunity is in front of us. All we have to do is allow us the opportunity. Take it. See what will happen," **Hunter explained. She crept onto his chest, her fingers digging into his flesh. Her hot breath expelled every passionate word she dispensed. In the dim light, Xander could tell the emotions that gripped her. This wasn't the stoicism Hunter usually carried, but a boisterous passion. And such passion became infectious. Dangerous enough that he considered her words.**

"It's one thing to be lovers. But to be parents."

"I'm only stating my wants."

"Our schedule. Life on the road. We'll be—"

"You're retiring."

"Maybe."

"Either in a few weeks or a year from now, you're close to retirement. You're looking for excuses. I'm only asking you to reach deep down and see what you truly want. Do you want a second chance at being a dad? You already got it with Trinity. But do you want a third opportunity? A blank slate," **Hunter said. Xander reached her sides and gripped her tightly, keeping her in place. He knocked aside the bundle of bedding and rested her on top of him. He didn't care about his knee. He held her while thinking over her words. Did he want to experience fatherhood from the beginning? A chance to redo everything. He wasn't there for Connor for years. There were gaps. Calli initially hid Connor for him, and for good reason, as it would turn out. And with Trinity, she was already an adult. If he had another child, he could experience what most fathers did. That growth from a seedling to a full-fledged tree.**

"You've only seen a small sample size."

"I told you. You've learned from your mistakes. Grown as a person. You're the perfect candidate for a father. Allow yourself to be the person you want to be. I know you'll succeed this time."

"Hunter—" Xander tried but silenced him with a deep kiss. He initially resisted, but as the surprise receded, he embraced her tightly, taking her fully. He rolled her onto her side, where he continued the kiss. He wanted this. How long had he subconsciously wanted this? His hands gripped her tank top and yanked it up over her head. His large hand cupped her breast with his thumb rubbing her underneath her bra's cup. She undid her belt and zipper, shoving her pants around her ankles. She kicked them the rest of the way off. Xander paused for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"Don't you fucking dare get cold feet now."

"Of course not," Xander returned. He lowered himself for another kiss while she hurried to undo his bottoms. His belt buckled and clanged against the ground after she discarded the belt. She jerked his pants and boxers down and proceeded to mount him without hesitation. He thrust. She leaped yet drew herself down back onto him entirely. Then they fucked shameless. They fucked like teens in a ravenous frenzy. The feel of each other's flesh wasn't enough. The taste of each other wasn't enough. The thirst compelled them to continue, switching positions, their centers of gravity violently colliding. The pace accelerated until the finale occurred suddenly, seeing Xander crumple beside Hunter. They remained interlocked. Their bodies were covered with hard-earned sweat.

"You seemed to have made your decision," Hunter whispered in his ear.

"I did."

"I promise you won't regret this," Hunter stated. She nipped at his neck. Xander understood what she meant, his hand now resting on her side. Whatever happens, Xander was prepared to take full responsibility. He was done living in the past. He refused to stop himself from living the life he wanted, denying himself opportunities. If he wanted to be a proper father, what was stopping him? Nothing. He knew he was capable.

"I've made up my mind, Hunter. Once I do that, there's no stopping me. Now you better be sure you're okay settling for a man like me."

"I'm not settling at all."

"I love you. And I thank you."

"I love you too," she responded. Despite the discomfort of the heat and stickiness, they remained hugging each other. Xander wrapped his arms around her, allowing her to rest her head on his bare chest. Her eyes flickered as Hunter succumbed to sleep. She purred while she slept. Xander remained there, starting to rock her softly. He knew now that there would be a life after retirement. Hunter was the center of that life. And if they had a child? Well, that creature would also be a crucial part of the story. That didn't scare him

as it once had. And maybe when everything was written when Xander lay there on his deathbed, he would find he had no regrets. That was indeed what he wanted from life. And that night, Xander knew he had taken one step forward.

What is this all about, Syren?

I keep coming back to that question.

You and me. This final match at Rise to Greatness. One last contest between us. After all, this could even be my last fight ever.

Philosophically.

Spiritually.

What does this all mean?

I lay awake at night recently, pondering a lot of what-ifs. Regrets have been nipping at my heels for years, and I have constantly been looking over to my side, seeing your face--- all smiles and shine. Selena Frost. Kennedy Street. More recently, Owen Cruze. The list of stars that shimmer so intensely on the world's stage, and here I stand beside the curtains, wondering where it all went wrong for me. I'm sure I'm one of the countless names that wake up one day, old and resentful, wondering how life passed them by so quickly. And question whatever happened to their dreams? In our youth, we aspire to be astronauts and firemen, but then we settle for consolation prizes from life's vending machine.

And I'm no different. I settled.

You see, I burst onto the scene in SCW, not much unlike yourself. Fuck, I bet some say no rookie went a tear as I did. I ascended to the pinnacle of this company in two months, held the top championship hostage, and pounded my opposition into submission week in and week out. I was a fighting champion. Untouchable. Everyone sang my praises. There's some addictive feeling, I'm sure you know, about feeling invincible. A state of mind that makes life so uncomplicated. And I pictured I would keep going at that rate as long as I kept fighting. The fire that burned powered me and kept me flying so close to the sun would always be present within my soul. I took that for granted too. And when I stumbled over that first hurdle, that first Rise to Greatness I ever took part in, I was never the same.

Something changed within me.

I might have won that night. I might have defied all the odds. I might have turned back all my enemies. But my knee was injured. My pride was gone. And the next day, my title was taken

from me too. The SCW World Championship represented my dreams, my passion, everything. It was a symbol. It was evidence that I existed. And when I was deprived of that status, that was when the cracks formed in my foundation. I started to allow weakness to creep into my being. And when such darkness enters the soul, compensation occurs. And compensation breeds terrible character in men. Thus, I became a bad actor. I transformed into my worst enemy.

Despite my knee and my heartache, I still had the potential to have everything. I was the face of the company. My merchandise was the top seller. I sold out the arenas. Fans came to witness my dominance over my peers. And I was still unmatched, albeit a notch down from the standard I set during my first reign of terror, but I was competing at a high level. The company trusted me then. But I started to lose sight of myself. That darkness consumed me. Made me a horrible investment for SCW management. And despite the fact that I kept winning, the opportunities started to dry up. I became more frustrated and more monstrous, led astray by St. Anger. A vicious cycle formed. A negative feedback loop came into existence. And regardless of how well I performed in the ring, outside, I failed a human being and, as a result, the less likely the company would entrust its future to a despicable creature like me.

And looking back now, I don't blame them. They have a business to run. And there are people here on the roster that can wrestle and don't carry the same baggage. They were more deserving in a sense than I was. And that includes you, Syren. And you might laugh at the sincerity because you, too, have looked back at your legacy and felt some remorse over your actions; however, I will say that you were never truly a wretched being. You weren't the monster. You might have cheated. You have been unsportsmanlike. You did it all in the name of victory. You could never sate your competitiveness. That's who you are. While there might be a circle of hell reserved for someone of your criminal nature, your offenses are petty compared to mine. That's not the reason why I don't respect them. If anything, I can get behind that drive to conquer the win. Such purpose is admirable.

But me? I was inhumane. Sadistic. Cruel. And that cost me. I had all the potential in the world, Syren. These records you hold, they could have been mine. They should have been mine. There was a time when I was the undisputed greatness in SCW history. I controlled my destiny, and I fucked it up. And when I started recognizing that others were surpassing me because they kept focused on doing what's essential, and that is winning. That other ambitious wrestlers were accomplishing bigger things than I was. Well, I became angry. I became resentful. And at first, that bitterness was directed towards them, but soon the blade turned inwards. And here we are, fast forward to the present, and I have had a career of many ups and many downs, with a mythos that many would be proud of, but I'm ultimately not satisfied with. I could have done better. I should have climbed higher.

I am a king when I should have been a god.

And then you came along and challenged me. For the first time in our illustrious careers, our paths crossed. At first, I was a little annoyed that you were selected as my first challenger to the SCW World Championship belt at Apocalypse. Not that I feared losing my title, but because,

once again, SCW handed you an opportunity. I needed to win the Trios to get the right to challenge for the SCW World Championship. But then I decided this was an opportunity to prove to myself that I was your superior all along. All the resentment built up over the years from watching you be given chances and then your uncanny ability to capitalize on those said chances could be finally cleansed from my soul. All I had to do was defeat you.

I did just that.

And damn, did it feel good to have the boss march down the ramp, climb into the ring, and wrap my SCW World Championship belt around my waist. And to do it in Madison Square Garden, the one place I always desired to be able to defend the top title. I was living out one of my few remaining dreams. It was a callback to the early days of my wrestling career. All that fire. All that passion. Something I thought I could never feel again, I felt again. And to have proved myself against you in a dominant fashion. That meant more than you would realize. I showed the world that night I was better. I demonstrated that despite what the record books said, I had your number in singles competition. That night, I still had some respect for you.

Fuck, I even want to thank you for that moment.

It wasn't until we fast-forward to March. When you wanted your rematch. You had the audacity to claim that our first encounter was a fluke. No, Syren, it wasn't a lucky night for Xander fucking Valentine. I made sure to rub your face into that fact when I choked you out and tossed you from my ring. And I wanted to send you a message. You disrespected me. You failed to acknowledge, but more importantly, you entered that rematch without your typical devotion. You weren't committed to fighting your best. I could tell it from the start of the bell. Sure, someone of your caliber would land a few decent blows, but that match was mine to call, and I once again overwhelmed you. And that was when the disrespect I feel towards you today was born.

It's reciprocated.

Because either I'm being lied to.

Or you need to take me more seriously.

Either you are the best of the best, or you're a fraud. Plain and simple. I've been watching you your entire career. You could have fooled me. I saw your ascent through the ranks, from being one-half of the top tag teams to wrestling in the company to being the most historic World Champion wrestling ever seen. And like I said, I noticed your fight. Throw morality out the window. I saw fight in you every week. You didn't care how you got the job done. You didn't care how messy it became or how dirty you had to get. You got the fucking job done. And against me, you held back. You can't have a change of heart. And I don't want to believe your career has been one long con. I think you have changed. You've fallen off as of late. You're no longer being as competitive as you can be, and that's in direct opposition to who you are as a human being.

Listen to your wife.

And you have to go back to your roots if you want out of this, Syren. I gave you this one last match because I'm disappointed in you. Some part of me wants you to prove me wrong. That your change is for the better, but nevertheless, you've changed. In my eyes, you're ugly now and complacent. You've settled for the Adrenaline Championship. You're happy that you have friends. You say you want to do things the right way, but honestly, you don't want to do the work anymore. So now I'm forced with a dilemma, can I let this you, the woman who stole my spot in the history books, simply rest on her laurels, or do I need to kick her ass and make her earn her keep? You're stepping away from the spotlight, and you're going to become a bystander like I became all those wasted years? I don't know why I feel compelled to snap you out of that curse.

But I do.

To maintain this meaning of my resentment towards you. I lived this long accepting you as more accomplished; I'd hate for you to piss it all away. So I had to raise the stakes and put things into perspective for you. Deep down, you still have a desire. I know you do. If you want to break the record for most SCW World title reigns, add one more notch to your bedpost of records. So I decided that if I threatened your ability to realize that dream, you might finally wake up. Make you will come at me with everything you got. You may tap into your old book of tricks. Because at Rise to Greatness, you will have to run the gauntlet if you don't defeat me. Win ten in a row before you can earn a SCW World Championship shot. And in this league, with this talent, that is a herculean chore. That might be a door slammed shut on ever breaking that record. Now do you get it? Now will you fight with everything you got?

Tell me, Syren!

Do I have your attention?

Because I'm not convinced that even now I've done enough to arouse you from your deep slumber. I'm concerned with your mindset. So much so that I'm confident that you will stumble into this match like you did the last time, in a daze, lost and confused. You won't come close to defeating me. I hold such a conviction that will be the case that I wagered my career. And that's it. If you win, you'll have the last laugh. You will get to be the one that escapes the Executioner. You will be the one who finally slays the beast. So many others have tried to be that individual. So many others would love the opportunity to end my career. And I won't back out of this deal. I meant every word of my pledge. If you find the strength within yourself and overcome me, I will retire. The honor would be all yours.

And now that leaves me questioning, am I ready for that fate?

Am I ready to hang up my boots?

I've talked a lot about regrets. Missed opportunities. I have spoken about the resentment of watching others get opportunities. I wanted to have accomplished more in my career, whatever that means. I can't shake this feeling that there is still much work to do. Did I need to add this stipulation? It only becomes a mistake if I bow down before you, Syren. And at this year's Rise to Greatness, I set myself up for a real challenge. If you finally rise from the ashes, act like the Syren you're supposed to be. If you are motivated not only to keep your dreams alive but to be the one to retire, Xander, I might be facing my most formidable challenge to date. Anything less than your best would be a waste of time.

I want to feel invincible once more. I seek that sense of accomplishment. I need to drive myself to victory on Sunday night and make sure that I made no mistake. I have no regrets. No, I set out and did what I wanted: to beat Syren at her very best. No excuses. No doubts. I want to walk away, having defeated Syren three times in a row. That's what Rise to Greatness means to me. I have the opportunity to prove that I'm the absolute greatest of all time.