



When Xander initially purchased the compound on the outskirts of Fort Collins, Colorado, he hadn't planned it to be a family home. Sure, there were enough bedrooms to support a large family and then some guests to boot. He viewed the property to be a secluded oasis for him to escape society. Surrounded by acres of woods, tucked away with a long driveway, no prying eyes could disturb him while he took a break from the strenuous travel schedule. It was his hermitage. A place he could pour time and effort into improving his physical strength and also shore up his mental fortitude. He had a full gym erected in a detached garage that the previous owner used to collect classic cars. That was his workshop, where he ironed his soul into something tougher than steel. There were wrinkles now in his plans for the property. New dynamics made life at the compound less serene, not that Xander complained about the change in his lifestyle. Xander loved the unique opportunity that had opened up before him.

Despite possessing a kitchen table with six places, only two were ever intended to be used. Trinity now claimed the third spot. With the addition of his daughter, Xander had to contend with more than his own mess of emotions. He had to deal with hers too. That particular morning, a storm passed through nearby, lending its rumbling to the background noise of bacon, eggs, and steak sizzling in an iron skillet. Xander manned the stovetop. Hunter convinced him to adorn himself with an apron to prevent the grease splatter from striking his workout attire. Right after breakfast, Xander had slated another day of rigorous training. Hunter set the table with plates. She then poured Xander the smoothie she had made for him into his tall glass. Trinity had yet to be seen or heard from, which was unusual as she was a morning person.

"Maybe she's feeling a bit under the weather," **Hunter commented. Xander almost felt as if Hunter adopted Trinity as a younger sister. Their age difference could have been more profound. Hunter definitely understood Trinity much better than Xander did.**

"It's not like her. She's usually up before you."

"I can go check on her— well, speak of the devil," **Hunter said. Trinity emerged from the corridor leading to the far back of the house, where Xander gave her a room. She donned a baggy sweatshirt. Her dyed hair seemed matted from where Trinity must have slept on it before. Xander noticed she didn't look like her usual, perky self. Maybe she was sick.**

"Good morning." **Trinity walked over to the refrigerator. "Do we have any orange juice left?"**

"We should. Are you sick?" **Xander asked. Not that he feared a cold or anything.**

"Rough night. I don't have a cold or anything."

"You look out of sorts," **Xander followed up. Trinity grunted as she fetched the OJ and poured herself a glass. She quickly finished the drink before pouring another, returning an almost empty container to the fridge. Seeing a tiny fraction of a glass of anything sitting in his refrigerator bothered Xander for some reason. Why not finish the rest? He didn't bring up that fact to Trinity. Something bothered her, and he decided to take mercy on her. She sat down. "Good timing; I was finishing up with breakfast."**

"I'll skip the steak."

"You'll try the steak," **Xander said as he unloaded the meat, eggs, and potatoes onto her plate. He served up the same for him; he skipped Hunter over for the steak. Trinity groaned but dug into her meal. Xander wanted to make sure she had enough intake. The amount of calories burned through their training sessions made groceries expensive; however, you can't maintain your muscle mass by skimping on the meals. Xander claimed his spot at the head of the table and didn't pay any heed to the depressed sighs his daughter breathed in between bites. Not until Hunter nudged his arm and motioned did he notice her melancholy.**

"What's the matter with you?" **Xander probed.**

"It's nothing."

"Something's bothering you," **Xander said.**

"Do you miss home?" **Hunter asked.**

"No— I mean, of course, I miss home, but I chose to stay here. And I feel like we're making up for lost time and all of that; look, I don't want to come off as being sensitive, it's just last night I came across some trolls online that really hit a sore spot for me, I guess," **Trinity explained. She placed her silverware down. A distressed expression flashed across her face. Xander and Hunter exchanged looks with each other, nodding that this was something that needed to be addressed.**

"Trolls?" **Xander followed up.**

"Basically, a bunch of losers online that get off trying to bully people with mean comments and the like," **Trinity answered. Xander still didn't get it. He rarely went on the internet. There was a time that SCW encouraged wrestlers to have a presence on social media; that backfired in his face as all he ended up doing was getting into pointless arguments with his peers rather than social interactions with the fans. Xander wasn't built for that stuff. Public relations was always a liability, not a strength of his.**

"And they're picking on you?"

"Of course. Ever since Rise to Greatness."

"Why? About what?"

"They're calling me a freak. Somebody even made an Instagram account that mocks me for my size. I didn't think someone would go so far as to attack me. It's like, what did I do to them? What have I done?" **Trinity said. Xander didn't know what Instagram was. Was it like Twitter? He ate while he listened, trying to get through the meal before the food became too cold. There was nothing like room-temperature steak and soggy eggs. He looked up from his plate to see that Trinity didn't put much of a dent into her breakfast. What was she doing?**

"Why do you care? They're strangers. Nobodies. Like you said, losers. They're trying to get a response from you. Ignore them."

"It's easier said than done."

"There's a reason why I don't bother with social media. It's a waste of time. I appreciate the fans spending their hard-earned cash on the product, but unlike some people, I don't wrestle for them. I wrestle for myself." **Xander pointed his fork at Trinity before cutting up the rest of his steak. Once finished, he leaned back in his seat and examined the room. Hunter shielded her face from the conversation, a tell-tale sign that Xander might not have handled a proper response. Trinity toyed with her food.** "Come on. Their opinions don't matter one bit. Don't let it get to you. You have to toughen up to succeed in front of the cameras."

"You're missing the point. It's not only me they're bashing. They're making fun of you. They're saying it's only logical that a monster like you would produce a daughter like me," **Trinity attempted to explain. Xander laughed at the comment. He labored to his feet, thinking this conversation had run its course. He started to rinse his plate before setting it inside the washing machine.**

"They're reaching," **Xander commented.**

"I think I've had enough," **Trinity responded. She scraped her plate into the trash. Xander noted how much waste Trinity had but bit his tongue. Xander watched as she left for her room instead of the gym. Xander grunted disapprovingly as he started to wash the pots and pans, delaying his start time to give Trinity time to collect herself. Xander didn't understand why this upset her this much. As he said, they were strangers who wanted validation through off-hand comments. All celebrities and their families had to deal with this shit.**

"You need to lighten up on the girl. She's still young— and new."

"What did I say?" **Xander asked.**

**Hunter joined him, hopping in to dry the pots. "You make it sound easy. We're in a digital age, where social media rules supreme. I know you're a technophobe."**

"I wouldn't say that I don't distrust technology. It's just that—"

"You have the most basic phone. You don't use your computer that often, and when you do, it takes you forever to figure out how to navigate. You end up asking me for help."

"You told me to," **Xander replied. He never grew up with technology. Outside of cars, Xander spent most of the time in the gym or a ring. His grandfather had a PC for the business. Xander never was allowed that. Sure, they forced him to interact with a computer a few times in school, but that never turned out well. Nowadays, he managed to get by without having to rely too much. Mainly because Hunter did most of the stuff that required the internet. He knew how to work the remote, though.**

"My point is— that she probably wasn't expecting people making fun of her appearances. Appearances are important to us women. More so than men."

"She's a lovely girl by all accounts."

"I agree with you, but she might still have some self-esteem issues. Again, she's young."

"What do you expect me to do about that?"



"You're not only her father. You're her mentor. You're supposed to build her up, not tear down. She already knows that she shouldn't let the internet bother her. Talking down to her will only make it harder for her to trust you with these things. I think you need to go talk to her and work it out. Make her understand that she is a beautiful woman, regardless of her height," **Hunter proceeded. Xander slapped down the washcloth. Not that he resented the lecture from Hunter, but he couldn't deny that he wasn't growing frustrated. No matter what he said or did around these women, he always seemed to take the wrong approach. Always put his foot in his mouth. He found himself growing tired of that real quickly.**

"I'll have a word with her."

"Of course."

"You talk about having a child. You talk about me being ready to be a parent again. But look at me; I'm struggling here."

"You're not going to be perfect at parenting. You learn on the job."

"I feel ill-equipped to deal with other people's emotions. That's all. But I'll do my best," **Xander decided. Hunter rewarded him with a kiss, leaning up on her tiptoes. Xander squeezed her and pressed her lips harder, with more passion. He broke away. He noticed Trinity standing there in the kitchen, looking on awkwardly. She discarded the shorts and sweatshirt for a sports bra and yoga pants.**

"Aren't we training today?" Trinity asked.

"I'm waiting on you," Xander answered.

"Well, I'm ready now. I needed to change out of my pajamas," **Trinity answered. Trinity walked briskly through the kitchen and towards the door to the outside and, past that, the gym. She stopped in the doorway before turning. "So, are you going to take off the apron and get to work?"**

**Xander returned a wry smile. He undid the apron and tossed it onto the kitchen table. He would rather see that fire than someone moping around about the place because some shiteheads wanted to bully her online. He followed her into the backside of the house. The previous owner quarantined a plot for a garden between the garage and the house. A picket fence rose up to ward off the deer that would be interested in snatching a meal. Neither Hunter nor Xander utilized the area, leaving it deserted of desirable vegetation, the soil succumbing to weeds. They didn't have the presence to maintain a garden while being on the road more often than not. The lawn service he did subscribe to only ensured the grass didn't get too tall in front of the property, leaving the backside a jungle.**

The morning routine started as usual. They warmed up. They ran cardio on the treadmills. They lifted weights. After that, that was when they delved into the ring work. Xander believed if your technique was flawless when exhausted, then it'd definitely be perfect when at full strength. Strengthened discipline. Prevented one from getting too sloppy as the body became tired. Xander credited his recent string of victories to that philosophy. The practice in the ring appeared to be where Trinity lost her focus. She made day-one mistakes. Landing completely wrong. Not shifting her weight to mitigate the throws. Xander knew Trinity's frustration built with each error. Finally, Xander decided to put a halt.

"You're unfocused. You're all over the place. If my grandfather saw me perform in such a manner, sparring or not, I would not hear the end of it," Xander said. He climbed out of the ring by ducking through the ropes. He dropped down onto the floor and headed to the refrigerator. Trinity placed her hands on the hips. She exhaled strongly to blow her bangs out of her face while staring at her father with some resentment about those words. Xander returned with two bottles of water and tossed one to her. "What's going on with you? Are you still stuck on this social media bullshit?"

"So what? We're going to stop training now because I'm making mistakes. I can work through this."

"When you step into the ring, you remove everything else from your mind. That's important. Clear your mind. Nothing else is more important than what's going on in that ring. That's your entire world from bell to bell. You got that? Not what people think on social media, or in the stands, or anywhere else. Not what you want to do with the winner's purse. No, all your attention has to be on how you're going to defeat your fucking opponent. How you're going to work," Xander explained. Trinity went to respond, but instead, she drank from the bottle given. She leaned back in the corner of the ring, holding the cold bottle against her forehead. Xander returned to the apron and threw his arms over the ropes.

"I don't know how to clear my mind. I thought I'd get over it by just going through the motions."

"It takes practice."

"That doesn't help much."

"I think you have to ask yourself. What are you in this for? Why are you going to such lengths to become a winner in this ring? Because if you're only doing this to get closer to me. To do me proud. Then I can't help you because that's not how I operate," Xander said. He crushed the water bottle in his fist. Once finished, he tossed the bottle over his shoulder and into the trash can. Trinity continued to give him a dissatisfied expression. She didn't know the answer to his question, and Xander could tell. He knew he touched upon some of the motivation behind her decision to follow in his footsteps.

"And what does this have to do with drowning others out?"

"The source of your strength needs to be unwavering because that's all you'll have when you're wrestling. It's going to be a test of will. Either you're going to outmatch your opponent's will, or you're going to crumple. Plain and simple," **Xander responded. He knew she didn't understand how that related to her current crisis. That frustrated him as he contemplated how to connect the dots for her. Maybe he wasn't ready to be a sage, dispensing with seasoned advice.** "This is a lonely road. Once you're out there, you're going to hear everyone. Everyone's a fucking critic. Everyone's petty. Everyone's looking to cut you down. It's more than just strangers on the internet. It's people you see every day. People who are going to be flying around the world with you. People you thought were your friends. Who you thought you shared respect with."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"I'm trying to prepare you."

"You're telling me that the locker room is that toxic."

"Yes, absolutely. It's a dog-eat-dog world. Everyone wants to be on top. So you're going to have to find the center of gravity. That one passion, that one driving force, that you know to be always true. So you can weaponize it, defend yourself and then use it to strike down your foes— or your critics— or whoever the fuck stands in your way," **Xander explained. Trinity nodded, but she pouted. She had more questions than answers at the moment. Xander understood that; however, he didn't lie to her. He was trying to prepare her for the hardship that was approaching her. The difficulty that professional wrestling provided. Xander watched her leave the ring but refrained from commenting further on the subject. He dropped down onto the apron, deciding that perhaps this was a perfect time for a break himself.**

"Look." Trinity returned with her phone. She presented the cell phone in her hand. She started scrolling through obvious photoshopped pictures of her, images pulled from her school's yearbook, the local news station website for when she was interviewed for her success at volleyball, among others. How they got so many of her photos was unknown unless she was very generous on her own social media. They all made her out to be some sort of monstrosity; some aimed to morph her into a demon, others an ogre. And it wasn't a handful of pictures, but dozens. With captions that read along the lines of *'only Xander Valentine could produce something that ugly. Lol.'* or *'This is why we shouldn't let monsters breed our women.'*

"What is this?" **Xander managed. His anger flared up. He'd probably spike the phone on the cement floor if he held it. He rose to his feet, sensing his face turning bright red. For months, he had been able to maintain his rage. He kept St. Anger in check, but now he wanted to hunt down this so-called internet troll and strangle him.**

"I thought you told me not to let myself be bothered."

"I didn't realize they went to such lengths. If I find the asshole who—"

"You'll never find him. I reported him. That's all I can do. It's scary how many pictures— some I thought were private," **Trinity said. She took back the phone and looked at her father expectedly. What was Xander supposed to say? He spent the entire morning trying to minimize her dilemma and then discovered the true extent of the bully's efforts. Did that make any of what he said any less accurate? For the most part, no. Nevertheless, he found himself angry. At whoever was behind that Instagram page. At himself.**

"Some people are better off fucking dead," **Xander grumbled. He left the gym, not wanting to speak on the matter anymore.**