

Men need projects to calm their aching souls. The project could be physical: an out-of-shape middle-aged man returning to the gym to improve his health. The project could be mental: a cruel person committing to doing one kind gesture daily. The project could be material: Xander Valentine remodeling his daughter's bathroom. Xander lost himself in the brushstrokes. His eyes watched as lavender watched to the light of the old bathroom. Inch by inch, he felt progress. His mind ignored the rumblings of the earlier discord with Hunter. He understood he should have consulted her before adding a new member to the family. What frustrated him more wasn't her annoyance with him but his feeling pretty stupid for making such a mistake. Hunter deserved better. Instead of trying to patch things up right away, Xander allowed Hunter to breathe, and he spent the afternoon into the evening in the bathroom.

The next day, he will cut the tiles and complete the floor. There was something satisfying about working with one's hands. Xander never ventured into the home improvement side of home ownership until he brought the compound. When he owned a home with Calli, they contracted out the work. Then again, Xander's focus remained steadfast on the ring. The schedule that SCW had was a lot more hectic. Xander also believed he tried to bury his guilt for being a shitty husband by providing Calli with the best. Their mansion in Rochester went against his frugal tendencies. Doing the work yourself was cheaper. He no longer felt guilty investing money. Turned out he enjoyed the work. Another hobby he wouldn't mind having. Xander learned skills that he thought he'd never wanted to know.

Xander Valentine finished the last section of the wall before sealing the can of paint. He took the brush and tray to the barn, where he had a small workshop with a concrete sink. Xander rinsed the brush out. The sun started to show signs of turning in for the night, and he thought he'd do the same. A shower later, he walked into the bedroom.

"You're still unhappy with me," Xander noted as he climbed into the bed. He chose to only wear a pair of boxer briefs. Hunter turned to him, placing a hand on his thigh. She donned an oversized Executioner t-shirt, even with Xander's signature grim reaper logo on the middle of the chest. Underneath, Xander knew Hunter wore nothing underneath during the warmer months. Her foot slightly kicked him as she stayed there on her side. "What will it take for me to get your forgiveness?"

"I don't think you understand where you went wrong."

"I didn't consult you."

"That's worrying. We're months away from having a child, and you're making decisions independently. That's not going to fly when we have a child," Hunter explained. Xander growled slightly at the scolding. He didn't initially think the two were related. A dog and a child were very different. Judging from her disappointed jade eyes, Xander nodded, accepting her point. "From now on, we have to make all decisions together. You can't keep telling me what to do and expect me to accept it at face value. We're partners, aren't we?"

"Yes. And hopefully, husband and wife one day."

"When you've earned that honor," **Hunter responded with an evil smirk.**

"Good intentions or not, I have to go to you. Got it."

"Don't act like I'm a ball and chain. I only want to have input over the things that are going to affect my life and also that of our family. I think it's only fair," **Hunter said. Xander relented, knowing far too well that he was making a fuss over what should be a common courtesy. Perhaps the only thing he had to compare his relationship to was his marriage with Calli. That was very one-sided. Admittedly, he was very tyrannical in that marriage. Xander brushed his hand through his dark hair.**

"You're right."

"I know I'm right."

"There won't be a next time. I need to understand that I'm not a bachelor anymore. I'm a man with a family. My decisions alter more than my life," **Xander responded. Hunter stared at him; he knew she pondered if it was easier said than done for a man of action like himself. Xander scratched the side of his face at the stubble he maintained. Xander would describe himself as impulsive, after all. He reacted without much thought. Was he capable of slowing down?**

"I can't help but feel like you're reading from a prepared script."

"I'm sorry. What do you want from me? I know what the right answer is. I'm not blind; however, that doesn't mean that I'm inclined to do what's right. I've been operating a certain way most of my life. It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks," **Xander countered her attack. Despite his concessions, she seemed still upset about the day's events. Xander reached over to her side, and his hand landed on her budding bludge. "It's more than the dog. Isn't it?"**

"You sent me to the hotel the other night."

"For your protection."

"I know. And you probably made the right call. But again, you didn't give me a choice."

"I'm not trying to be an asshole here; however, when it comes to keeping my child out of danger. I don't care what anyone says; I will secure my child's safety. One way or another," **Xander fired back. That was a non-negotiable. Hunter squeezed his hand, nodding in acceptance of his words. What did she expect from him on that front? There were too many volatile variables, and he wouldn't put it past anyone involved from attacking her. She was liable**

to be collateral damage. "Until our child is born, I want you away and safe. If you want to travel with me, you should stay at the hotel. You're not going to the arena. Some dangerous people aren't going to hesitate to target you to get to me."

"And what if I insist on staying by your side?"

"Please, Hunter. Why are you making this hard on me? All I want is for you and our child to be okay. I'm not trying to strip you of your rights. I'm not trying to make decisions for you. All I want is to protect my family. You. The child. Trinity. I want to ensure your safety," **Xander pleaded. Hunter seemed to relent, caressing the side of Xander's face. Hunter leaned up and placed a delicate kiss on his chapped lips. The kiss soothed him. He realized the argument riled him up.**

"I'm lucky to have a man that cares so much about me."

"You have been crucial to my life these past few years. With you by my side, I would never have grown into the man I am today."

"I could see why some women would have considered you a lost cause," **Hunter teased. Xander lowered his head. She ruffled his hair at his response. Xander didn't have any romance in his life after Calli. His marriage with Calli ruined any romantic aspirations. He wanted her or nothing at all. Calli didn't want to come back to the abuse. Understandingly. Then Xander happened upon Hunter. While they would never speak of the first time they met their children, slowly, their fates became intertwined.** "Don't think you're out of the doghouse yet."

"Very relevant terminology being used in this argument."

"We've been dogging the last few months. Let's take a break. Trinity's home now. She will be fine. So how about it?"

"You want a vacation. Now?" **Xander asked. Xander had a million reasons why that couldn't happen. Trinity had only just gotten home. They should wait and see how she responded to the change in her life. Then there was the SCW World Championship match against Selena Frost in a few weeks. If anything, he should dedicate himself to preparing for that match.**

"I know it's selfish. But sometimes, you need to catch your breath."

"I think it's a bad time right now."

"You have other priorities. I get it."

"You're a top priority. You have to understand. I'm not going to have another chance like this. And against Selena? It's even more personal. I love you, Hunter. And I want---," **Xander stopped. Hunter nodded her eyes, but he detected the dissatisfaction on her face. Xander reached across the bed and pulled her in for a tight embrace.** "A few more weeks, babe. And then we'll take a break from all of this. I won't have to worry about the title. Selena. By then, we will know if Trinity is okay on her own. Then we can go wherever you want. Paris? Rome? You name it. Let's go."

"You're right. Sorry for asking."

"Don't be sorry. You're right. There have been hard times. The stress can't be good for the child."

"Or for us."

The canopy overhead filtered the sunlight into a soft, ethereal glow. Xander stood in awe of the towering trees around him within one of the pillars of light. He sucked in the crisp air with all of its rich, woody aromas. His hiking boots sank into the thick carpet of needles that coated the forest floor. The nearby babbling brook filled the silence. Hunter and Xander hiked the trails in Northern California the entire morning.

This was her choice of vacation destination. Not the crowded streets of world-renowned cities but amongst the trees of the ancient forest. Xander knew there was a reason why they were a good match. After losing to Selena, the last thing he wanted was to be struck in a bustling city like Paris or Rome. The match left a sore taste in his mouth. The fact that could have been his last shot at the SCW World Championship gold bothered him. Do you know what else bothered him? Crowds. Xander found it funny how he could beat the shit out of someone in fun of thousands but put him on a busy city street, and the sense of claustrophobia assaulted his senses.

The national park they adventured in had people. Camera flashes occasionally polluted the scenery, and people posed at the base of the gigantic sentinel. Xander was surprised that his knee was held up on the journey. Given her condition, he had also been worried that Hunter could make the trek. The fantasy land that this forest offered created an atmosphere he found to be inspiring. Most of all, the relaxed expression on Hunter's face showed him that she really needed this break. Xander found himself relieved that he could deliver the vacation she requested. He made a point to fulfill the promise. Maybe more for his sake than hers.

Of course, when he thought everything was going smoothly, life kicked him in the teeth. His phone vibrated in his pants. Surprised he got reception that far out into nature, he slipped the phone out to see Mathis Robertson's name on the caller ID. Hunter crooked

her eyebrow in his direction as if he was going to answer the phone. Xander hesitated. Xander didn't want to ruin the peace of the trip. Trinity was not an unwelcome burden, but the journey into the forest was a welcome reprieve to the awful world. An escape that they enjoyed thoroughly but that appeared to be threatened by this phone call.

"Are you going to answer it?" Hunter said on the second round of ringing.

"It might be important," Xander determined. Since their first meeting when Xander funded his investigation, Robertson had not contacted him. After that point, Robertson planned to directly coordinate his efforts with the police investigation, if needed, and Xander's attorney for the civil suit. There was distrust there. Xander spoke into the phone,

"Xander speaking."

"I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"I must have finally got some coverage. I'm out in the middle of nowhere," Xander answered. He stepped off the trail to gain some privacy. Xander sensed the urgency in Robertson's voice. What was happening? Hunter paced behind him. Xander was trapped between concerned curiosity and annoyance at their vacation being interrupted.

"By now, McGowan should have contacted you too."

"I bet if I checked my voicemail, I'll find some messages. What's going on?"

"As part of my investigation, I checked a few things. I noticed unusual activity on your daughter's Instagram account. Logins. The rabbit hole led me to something very worrisome," Robertson started. Irritation nipped at the outskirts of Xander's mind. He wanted Robertson to spit out these findings instead of wasting his time. Cut to the fucking case! Xander clenched his fists, fingernails digging into the meaty flesh of his palm. Noticing Xander's demeanor, Hunter stepped and tugged on his grey t-shirt.

"And?"

"Your accounts have been compromised."

"What do you mean, 'compromised'?"

"Basically, you've been hacked. Someone has come in and accessed a bunch of your accounts. Of course, I went in myself. Your bank activity and the internet history tied to your Gmail—were all accessed by the same person who tapped into your daughter's social media accounts. They were not professionals because they didn't cover their tracks well. I could see the crumbs they left behind," Robertson explained. The revelation that Xander's digital privacy was violated sent a shockwave through his system. An out-of-body experience is experienced

as his thoughts race at what exactly he was exposed to. Hunter's green eyes searched for answers on his contorted face. He brushed her off as he needed some space to breathe.

"What do you mean they hacked me? What the fuck did they want? Who is this guy?"

"You know the conditions of my employment. I only called you to give you a heads-up."

"I need more than a head-up. I need answers."

"Fair. My investigation needs to be completed. I warn you that I won't ruin my chances at squandering my best lead yet; however, it's clear that you're the target. Not your daughter. They chose your daughter to get to you," **Robertson concluded. Xander's heart sank at that news. What made Robertson jump to such a determination? To think that Trinity suffered because someone wanted to lash out against him sickened Xander. His stomach twisted. Xander's breath became short, erratic. His body reached a feverish pitch. There was only one person who could be responsible for this. Only one person motivated to go after him in such a matter: Connor. Fuck the suggestions that it could be anyone else.**

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" Hunter asked. She took his hand gently. Xander ripped it free and held it against his aching chest. His heart seized up.

"Are you still there?" **Robertson asked.**

"Breathe. Xander. Breathe," Hunter insisted. Xander realized he wasn't okay. He dropped to a knee, still grasping his chest. He swore his heart could explode at any moment. His heart rate was off the charts. His entire body was on fire. Xander almost fell over onto his side, crying in anguish. What was happening? Was he having a heart attack? He was too young to suffer a heart attack. The throbbing pulse in his ear drowned out Robertson's and Hunter's words.

Finally, Hunter brought his face into her chest, nestling his head in between her breasts. Her hand brushed his hair. Xander found his breath. In. Out. In. Out. The crisp air entered his lungs. His heart rate slowed. He warded off the feeling to eject his stomach's contents long enough for the sensation to fade away. He was okay. Everything was going to be okay. Xander nuzzled his nose deeper into Hunter. Her body had projected a sense of safety. Her embrace served as a security blanket. What transpired still left Xander's speechless for the moment. The scare didn't sit well. The thought of Connor targeting him sent him over the edge. When his mind wandered to dwell on the topic, everything started to ramp back up. Hunter detected his tensing of muscles and shushed him. He retreated momentarily to catch his breath. He couldn't let himself get worked back up. Xander would figure out what happened later. For now, he needed to get right.

"You're going to be okay," Hunter whispered in her ear. She pressed her forehead against his, clutching his face with both hands. Xander nodded as he found his footing. He stood.

"Mr. Valentine, what's happening?" The distant canned voice of Robertson echoed.

"Poor reception," Xander lied. His voice sounded distant, even to him. "I think it's better now."

"The point of the call is to warn you. You're being stalked. Well, in the digital sense. Your movements and online activity are being watched. I suggest you do a better job at installing security software on your devices. I already reached out to a contact who owns a company that specializes in this. I will be sending over their information. Until then, they can lock down your accounts; I'll be careful what I do on the internet," Roberston said. Xander sighed, looking up at the sky. He continued to breathe heavily. The brilliant beams of sunlight penetrating the canopy gave way to the muted light of swirling clouds. Xander heard the chatter of raindrops against the leaves. The sprinkle struck his exposed skin. A storm was moving in.

"Send me more information. I'll do what it takes. Appreciate the warning."

"I will continue to send my results to the state police. I've made some friends on the force. They seem eager to get this bastard. So that should be some good news for you," Robertson said, apparently oblivious that Xander had already met with the state police investigators. Xander wanted to finish the conversation. He understood Robertson's intent. He tried to give Xander a heads-up on Connor's doing. The fact that Connor reneged on their agreement incensed Xander. But dwelling on that hatred only brought chest pains. He needed to stay calm.

"I appreciate it. I have to get going. I'm about to be caught in a storm."

"Be careful now. Once this is over, I promise you'll have peace of mind that this guy was brought to justice."

"I'm sure I will," Xander echoed. He placated Robertson, but Xander doubted he would find peace of mind. He sacrificed integrity to pay off Connor, and where did they get him? Connor hadn't gone away. Maybe Xander's poor decision further motivated Connor to pursue sabotaging Xander's life. Xander knew everyone told him not to jump to conclusions. That it could be someone else pulling the strings. Xander knew better. His gut, heart, and brain told him his son was gunning for him.

"I'll know if anything else comes up."

"Thanks again."

"Stay safe," Robertson bid farewell.

The phone screen went black. Xander lowered the phone. The rain picked up its ferocity. His artie eyes met Hunter's jade. Her worried expression remained glued to her face. Wrinkles that arched on her forehead underneath her auburn hair. Xander motioned for her to follow him back towards the trucks. He welcomed the prospect of the open road. Something about the splatter of rain on the windshield seemed soothing right now. He needed to subdue the turmoil in his soul so he didn't end up having another attack.

"Are you okay?" Hunter called after him.

"I'll explain in the truck. Let's get out of this shit before we're sopping wet."