

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

A Castle Turned Cage

XAVIER

I sat in the familiar plush leather chairs in the Knight Enterprises boardroom, looking at the long mahogany table and empty seats before me.

I loved this place.

From my commanding seat at the head of the table, I'd closed countless deals here. I'd felt the blood pump through my veins as I closed in on a client, sensed the moment they'd cave to my proposals as surely as a predator could sense the moment to strike.

I'd talked down competitors, destroyed rivals, all from this position of power.

It was an adrenaline high.

A rush of excitement.

The thrill of knowing I was the most powerful man in the room.

In the city.

We were about to hold a meeting concerning the projected profit margins for the new resort in the Alps.

I should be pacing the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing down at the commanding view of New York while I rehearsed my proposals under my breath. I should have been clearing my mind and sharpening my tongue, ready to shoot down any counter-argument that dared be leveled against me.

But I wasn't thinking about any of that.

Instead, I was thinking about my dad.

I was thinking of my final moments with him, the anger and regret still burning through me.

Of how he selfishly decided to remarry without telling me, how he selfishly decided to give Penny, my *ex-fuck buddy turned stepmother*, a stake in *-my-* company, without telling me.

I made a conscious effort to relax my grip on the armrest before I tore leather. I had to steady my breathing before I threw the fucking chair out the window altogether.

I knew Dad didn't do any of it to hurt me.

He just wanted to find happiness.

He just did what he thought would be best.

That didn't mean it didn't fucking hurt, that it didn't drive me up the wall with anger.

Still, what I wouldn't give to have him back. To have him here so that he could see his grandkid, see the beautiful family I wanted to have with Angela.

My Angel.

Thinking of her, all of the anger bled away. All of the stress, the annoyance, disappeared like a one-night stand early in the morning.

Even the things I loved about the business couldn't compare. The thrill of closing a deal didn't even come close to the thrill of having her skin on mine, the sound of her sighing my name.

I closed my eyes and pictured coming home after an exhausting day at work, all so I could see her face light up when she turned around and her eyes fell onto mine.

Xavier.

I smiled. I could almost hear her voice.

"Xavier?"

Wait. That doesn't sound like her.

"Xavier!"

My eyes flew open, and the empty seats before me were suddenly filled.

Penny was leaning over in the chair to my right, her eyes alight with concern.

"Are you okay?" She placed a hand on my forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever ..."

I pushed her hand away with a little too much force. I tried to ignore the hurt in her eyes.

You aren't my fucking mom.

"Looks like we caught our CEO drooling." Henry mocked. "Why don't you go take a nap, Xavier? We'll just fill you in afterwards."

A few people stifled sniggers underneath their breath.

And just like that, anger and contempt flooded right back into me.

Fucking cunts.

I smiled daggers at the room, and the people that laughed shrunk into their seats. Henry stared back, unflazed.

"Okay, let's continue," Penny said, trying to defuse the tension in the room. "Projections for the resort in the Alps are looking good. I'd estimate a seventeen percent increase in profits by the end of the quarter."

"Hmm," I murmured. The last place I wanted to be right now was in this boardroom, cooped up with a bunch of snakes and assholes. Penny closed this deal. She can handle the grunt work.

"...builder has told us that the new extension will be finished with construction soon as the ..."

What's Angela doing right now? I wondered. I thought back to seeing her hold little Bella in our apartment, and a smile curled its way onto my lips.

"Xavier."

I blinked.

Penny was frowning again, Henry's stare full of venom. The boardroom was silent.

"What did Penny just say?" Henry demanded.

"What?"

"You heard me."

My eyes narrowed.

"She was talking about how the new extension of the resort would be completed soon," I said through gritted teeth.

Who the hell does Henry think he is?

"Which builder?"

"What is this, a pop quiz?"

"Answer the damn question, Xavier."

I looked around the room, filled with expectant faces. Even Penny was staring at me, waiting for an answer.

"Dream Mason," I said.

Henry leaned back in his chair, smarmy as ever.

"Xavier ..." Penny seemed to hesitate for a second before continuing on. "We passed on Dream Mason. Their quote for materials was too high."

"Good." I shrugged. "Well done, we have some common sense."

"Unbelievable." Henry leaned forward in his chair, looking around the room. "Can you believe that this guy is our CEO?"

"What did you say?" I growled.

He stared at me, and I had to fight with all I had to stay in my seat and not get up and clock his smug face.

"What, have you not cleaned out your ears recently, Xavier? It's like you can't hear anything today. Not what we're talking about, not what's been going on with our next big project..."

I exploded upward from my seat, the chair clattering to the ground behind me.

Penny leaned forward, capturing my gaze. There was a silent message in her eyes.

A plea.

He's not worth it, it told me.

Henry gave a self-satisfied smirk.

This fucker was goading me on. He wanted me to take him by the scruff of his shirt and beat him senseless. He's trying to play up to the board, make me look like a villain. Make me look incompetent.

And what pissed me off the most was that it was working.

I stormed towards Henry, and he turned to me, readying himself for a fight.

"Xavier!" Penny shouted.

I rushed past Henry, making straight for the doors.

"Coward," he whispered.

"I'm going to get some fresh air," I seethed.

I pushed open the doors with a slam, making my way down the corridor. I heard the clicking of high heels sound out behind me in the hallway.

Leave me the fuck alone.

"Xavier!" Penny called. She half ran to catch up to me, stopping to block my path. "Damn it, Xavier. *Wait!*"

I glared down at her, rage bubbling in my chest.

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into my dad's office.

No, I had to remind myself. ~Her office, now~

She closed the door, pushing her back against it. She looked up at me, a steely determination glinting in her eyes.

"We need to talk."

ANGELA

I was exhausted.

I couldn't shake that horrible feeling of uneasiness brewing in the pit of my stomach after leaving my family's house in New Jersey. The car ride back to New York felt like it took an age, and I found myself bouncing up and down in my seat. I felt restless. I had to do something.

Anything.

So I threw myself into my work.

Zoe and I were scouting out locations for the Gala, and we'd been up and down New York all day.

We'd been in multiple warehouses, a science museum, and even an abandoned ship on the harbor. None of them seemed to be the proper fit. The venue had to be *perfect*. Full of flair and personality like the museum, a space worthy of the Gala. None of the places we'd visited came even close.

My feet were sore and my head was pounding, but I trudged forward, determined to find at least a possible venue by the end of the day.

It didn't help that Zoe was strangely quiet either.

She looked disinterested, her naturally bubbly personality subdued. Whenever I tried to bounce ideas off of her, she gave me terse one-word replies.

We were walking down Thirty-Second Street, dejected after a fruitless day of searching, when I saw it.

A large structure rose up into the sky. It looked almost alien, layers of circular levels thrusting upwards, its bronze reflective surface glinting in the glow of the sunset.

"Do you see that too, or am I going crazy?" I asked Zoe.

She looked over and saw the structure, her eyes lighting up.

"Oh, it's finished!" she said.

"You know what that is?"

She nodded, some of her natural bounce returning.

"It's a new structure they built for Hudson Yards called *The Vessel*. Apparently, it's like a maze in there, winding up into the sky."

"Zoe, that's it!" Looking up at *The Vessel*, I knew that this is where I wanted the Gala to take place.

Sleek.

Modern.

A symbol of a new, evolving New York.

"You want to rent out *Hudson Yards* for the Gala?" Zoe asked, incredulous.

I nodded, a twinkle in my eye.

"They weren't stingy with our budget. Let's be bold with our choice," I said with a wink.

She shrugged, and it seemed like she was holding some of her enthusiasm back. "You're the boss."

I tilted my head to look at her, wondering what was going through her head. I linked my arm through hers and felt her stiffen, just a little bit.

I decided to ignore it for now.

"Let's get some dinner, shall we?"

Zoe and I found a place with some mean pad thai.

I'd like to think that the silence throughout our meal was because the food was really good, but something in my gut told me it was something more.

Ever since we got the Gala gig, Zoe had been acting strangely. Was she upset that I didn't specify that the pitch was based on her idea?

We were a team, weren't we? What did it matter?

"Hey, Zoe," I began. I rummaged through my bag as she picked at her pad thai.

"Yes?"

"I got something for you." I pulled out the little black box and slid it across the table towards her. I watched Zoe open it, examining the little diamond earrings nestled within.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"I just felt like getting you something," I said with a shrug. "I felt like we haven't been on the same page for a while, and I thought this might cheer you up a little bit."

"So you bought me earrings?"

"Do you like them?" I asked, smiling.

"Um, yeah, Angela. They're nice. Thanks." She closed the box, slipping it into her bag.

My smile faltered a little. She didn't look very happy.

"Listen, I'm going to take off for the night. We'll hash out the details for Hudson Yards tomorrow, okay? I think I need to go home and get some rest." Zoe stood up, leaving some cash on the table.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Angela."

I watched her go, the metallic ring of the door charm sounding out as she stepped into the night.

I picked at the remainder of my food, staring at the crumpled up twenty-dollar bill Zoe had left on the table. I reached for my own wallet, and I found that my hands were trembling a little.

I thought back to my time in New Jersey.

I felt like a stranger to my own family. Now Zoe was acting distant.

I put my head in my hands, sitting alone at the table.

What was I doing wrong?