

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Breaking Point

XAVIER

I adjusted my tie in the mirror as Angela kissed my shoulder from behind, her arms wrapped around me.

Her eyes just barely peeked above my shoulder, and whenever my gaze would meet hers in the mirror, her eyes would crinkle in that adorable way they did when she smiled.

I laughed.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about how cute you are."

Her face flushed red before she hid behind my back. I laughed again. I promised myself I'd never take this for granted.

"What time are you going to be home?" she mumbled into my back.

"It should be a short day today," I said. We hobbled towards the elevator, Angela refusing to let go of me. "Are you going to be my backpack for the day?"

"I'm a bit heavy for a backpack," she said.

I ducked down suddenly, wrapping my arms beneath her knees and hoisting her up on my back.

She screamed, startled as I swung her around.

"Xavier!" she yelled, laughing.

I brought her to the living room, setting her down gently on the couch before turning around to kiss her.

"Not heavy at all." I winked.

She rolled her eyes at me, smiling as she shook her head.

"Good luck," she said.

I nodded. "I'll be back soon."

I sat in the back of the boomer, my mood worsening by the minute. The closer I got to the office, the more irritated I became.

I'd heard people describe their significant others as the sun before, but to me, Angela was more like a cloud.

You know those really hot days when the sun was just too fucking bright, and you'd get pissed whenever you had to be outside?

That was like dealing with the outside world on most days, anger and sarcasm my substitute for sunscreen.

But Angela was soft. Gentle. She protected me from the worst glares of the sun, and the days were more pleasant when she was around.

Beautiful, even.

Now my own personal cloud was gone, for the moment at least, and I seemed to be driving right towards the middle of a fucking star.

My gaze drifted down towards the side pocket of the car door, one of Dad's journals still wedged into it from when I had visited Ken in New Jersey.

I grabbed it, sighing as I flipped it open.

All right, Dad. Any last-minute words of advice?

BRAD

11/16/1983, Manhattan

I had a revelation today.

I was sitting in the Jacuzzi earlier after a long, frustrating day at the company when it hit me.

Running a company was like dating a woman.

Genius, right?

In the beginning, everything is exciting. Everything's new and fresh, the possibilities seem endless. Sky's the limit and all that.

You're getting to know the ropes, you're discovering new things, and everything's on the up and up.

Then, after a while, things begin to settle down. Your emotions kind of level out as you begin to build a routine. The intense excitement is gone. The wild all-nighters aren't as appealing anymore.

You take off your rose-tinted glasses and realize that it isn't all fun and games. There's work to be done. Real, honest work. You realize that you'd better be in this for the long haul, 'cause if you aren't this is gonna crash and burn real quick.

Doubt begins to creep in. Is this worth it? Is this what you want to be doing for the rest of your life? More and more things build up, more and more stress, until you reach, what I like to call, a breaking point.

My breaking point with the company's easy. I stop when I'm bankrupt.

With Amelia though, that's more complicated.

She told me today that she wanted kids.

I never really gave much thought to having kids. Never really had a desire to have one.

So when she brought it up, it caught me off guard. And I was surprised to find out that the idea scared me.

It scared the living hell out of me.

A little me running around? How do people not find the idea of that terrifying?

I mean, what if he turned out to be an asshole like me? That little shit would definitely be the death of me.

When I told her no, she looked devastated. Heartbroken. So we had a fight. A big one.

I thought it was over. Was this my breaking point with Amelia? I mean, I loved her to death. But is this where we could never see eye to eye?

What would I do for Amelia?

Well, that's obvious.

Anything.

I found what I thought was my breaking point and I busted through it. I wasn't going to let fear control my life. If Amelia wanted to have kids, then that's a journey I'd be willing to take with her.

I mean, it's not like I was the one that was gonna give birth to the kid. That's on her. I just had to plant the seed.

My point is, Brad, that when you find your next breaking point, you gotta ask yourself if it's worth the sacrifice to break through it. If it isn't, then have your bags packed and move on to the next thing.

Life's too short to be worrying about stupid stuff like fear or pride.

XAVIER

I closed the diary, a rueful smile on my lips.

Didn't know that someone could shit talk me from beyond the grave.

Sorry, Dad. I did grow up to be a little shit, didn't I?

I put the diary back into the side pocket, closing my eyes. I knew what I had to do. And I sure as hell wasn't going to like it.

"I'm sorry."

The boardroom was locked into a stunned silence, so absolute you could probably hear a pin drop on the streets outside.

I gazed around the room.

Henry's face was a mask of shock.

Penny still refused to look at me.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, in case they thought they were dreaming. They weren't. But I was trapped in my own personal nightmare.

"I know I've been an asshole, a misogynist, an ignorant prick, and all the other names you've probably called me behind my back." A spatter of laughter sounded out around the table, more surprised than amused.

"You have every reason, very valid reasons, to vote me out of being CEO. I haven't worked well with others, and I've caused more PR crises than I'd care to mention. But hear me out.

"I'd always assumed that I'd have control over Knight Enterprises. I mean, my name is on the building. I thought that as long as profits were up and we were expanding, that I could do whatever the hell I wanted. Clearly..." I gestured at the room around me. "I was wrong.

"I've treated you all like shit in the name of business. But that's not how a leader is supposed to act. I had a lot of personal shit going on in my life, but that's no excuse." I looked around the table, making eye contact with each person.

Penny was still looking at the ground.

"I swear, on my pride as a Knight, that I'll do better from now on. Just give me one more chance."

The board executives looked around at each other, unsure, though I could see that my plea hadn't fallen on deaf ears. Some of them seemed to be considering.

"Do you really think you can just apologize and put all of this behind you?" Henry asked. "You think that just saying sorry is going to make us forget how much of a shillbag you were? What guarantee do we have that you'll do what you say?"

"I already gave my word," I said. "Trust me. Please."

"Ridiculous," Henry scoffed. "Is anyone else going to stick up for him before we begin the vote?"

I looked around the room, but no one met my gaze. I felt the hope inside of me drain away until I locked gazes with a pair of bright, brown eyes.

Penny.

PENNY

Xavier stared at me, his plea clear.

I felt the mood of the room teetering on the edge of a knife. They might be willing to forgive him, but someone needed to step up and say something on his behalf.

Should I do it? I wondered.

The thing was, until Xavier had blown up at me... accusing me of being responsible for Brad's death... I had been planning on doing just that.

I'd been the only person on Team Xavier. Trying to convince the other members behind closed doors that Xavier deserved another chance.

But it looked like Xavier didn't even *want* me helping him...

At least, not until now.

And, to be honest...

I wasn't sure if I still had it in me to defend someone who had hurt me so much.

The whole situation was eerily like my situation with Jacques. I kept trying and trying to help him, only to be repeatedly stung and spurned.

Maybe I'm just destined to be a doormat for the rest of my life...

I looked steadily into Xavier's eyes, trying to see through all of the drama. Through all the anger and hurt and spite to see him for the man he really was.

I knew that he wasn't really an arrogant billionaire playboy.

He wasn't actually a paranoid businessman. He wasn't truly so paranoid that he thought anyone who tried to get near him was after his influence, power, and money.

The real Xavier was the sweet, loving husband who I'd seen glimpses of when he was with Angela.

But the question was... could he overcome his demons and become his true self at Knight Enterprises?

Whenever he was at the office he seemed angry. Stressed. He was more thornbush than man, pricking anyone who dared to try and get close to him.

It was almost like the place was a drug for him.

Poison.

A toxic relationship that would run him into the ground.

Was his apology true and genuine, or was it the final rallying cry of his bad habits, clinging on for dear life?

Brad's smiling face flashed into my mind, and memories of the night he asked me to join Knight Enterprises came rushing back to me...

"You can't be serious," I said, laughing off his ridiculous request. "Just because I beat you at a game of Monopoly doesn't mean I could do that." :-)

We were sitting in the rooftop garden of Brad's penthouse, a near-finished game of Monopoly spread out before us. He smiled at me, and my stomach did a little flip of excitement.

He stared at me earnestly. He wanted me to become chairperson of Knight Enterprises.

"Don't you know, dear? All of business is based on Monopoly."

"Be serious, please."

"Oh, I am. Well, not about Monopoly, but about this." He took my hands in his, the sparkle of the New York City skyline shining like stars in the night behind him.

"I just graduated—"

"Summa cum laude," Brad interrupted.

"I have no experience!"

"Penny," he said, smiling softly. "Trust me, I have an eye for business. And you're brilliant."

"I don't know about this..." I said. There was no way I could go from recent NYU graduate to chairman of a multibillion-dollar company...no matter how capable Brad thought I was.

"You've already taken the plunge before," Brad said, his finger tracing the simple platinum band around my ring finger. "What's one more?"

It was true.

When Brad had asked me to marry him, I'd been terrified. Terrified of the consequences. Of what people would think of us. Of social stigmas.

But I'd also felt excited.

Exhilarated.

Ultimately...it had been the best decision of my life.

"Besides," Brad went on. "I'll be around to help you if you need it. But I get the feeling you'll be shooting me away for hovering too much before long." He winked.

"Let me think about it," I managed to choke out.

"Believe me, the last thing you should be worried about is your business knowledge," Brad assured me. "It's dealing with Xavier that's going to be the hardest."

A lump rose in my throat.

"Right," I squeaked.

Brad smiled and leaned back in his chair, looking at the city that stretched out before us.

"You're kind, Penny. Sometimes to a fault. He's going to challenge you. He's going to scream and rage and battle you every day."

"You're really trying to sweeten the deal here, aren't you?"

Brad laughed, and the sound calmed some of my nerves.

"But kindness isn't always the right answer." He looked into my eyes, and I could see the wisdom and fierce intelligence in his gaze.

"Sometimes, Penny, what's best isn't always so obvious. You'll know the answer when you see it. I'm sure of it."

I sighed, smuggling into his side.

"I see," I lied. "Now should I wax on, or wax off, sensei?"

Brad laughed again, mischief lighting his eyes. "Karate Kid? Really? I'm not that old."

"Keep telling yourself that," I teased.

I stared straight at Xavier, the silence in the room suffocating.

What does my heart say?

And suddenly I knew.

I had made up my mind.