

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Spirits at Sunset

### ANGELA

Usually, the sight of a half-naked Xavier got me hot and bothered. He had a chiseled physique any Hollywood actor would kill for.

But tonight, I flushed bright red with embarrassment as I watched my husband shirtlessly straddle the tanuki ice sculpture like it was a bucking bronco.

I guess I was hot and bothered after all.

“Giddy up, raccoon!” he cried. He swung his shirt around like a lasso as he ground his hips into the ice, his pants soaked, sweat glistening on his abs.

The crowd around him was equal parts amused and horrified. Some cheered, some laughed, and others tried to gently pull their entranced female companions away from the scene. A rugged-looking Japanese man with a topknot was particularly loud, laughing and goading him on.

“Is this part of the itinerary?” I turned to find Marlena Marlboro staring at Xavier, a mystified look on her face. “East meets West, maybe?”

At that moment, I wished a sinkhole would form underneath me and swallow me whole.

“I’m so sorry,” I squeaked, panic making my voice shrill. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Take off your pants!” a lustful woman cried from somewhere in the back of the crowd. Whoops and laughter followed her lewd request.

Xavier made a show of cocking his head to the side, cupping an ear with his hand.

“Well, I am a man of the people.”

He grinned as he fumbled with his belt.

I walked up to him, feeling the eyes of the crowd on me.

Sure, I was getting used to attention. But not *this* kind.

“Xavier!” I whisper-yelled. “What the heck are you doing?!”

It took a second for his eyes to focus on me, but when they did his grin widened, almost splitting his face in half.

“Shinji!” he cried. “This is my wife! Total bombshell, right?”

The rugged Japanese man stepped up, and I felt him eye me head to toe.

“Damn, you were right. I *am* jealous,” the man who I assumed to be Shinji said. He looked to be about Xavier’s age. Old friends? He looked up and gave Xavier a wicked grin. “Mind if I borrow her for a while?”

I decided I didn’t like Shinji.

“Keep your filthy hands away from her,” Xavier laughed, not at all taking him seriously. He leaned down to swipe at Shinji’s head, but his friend dodged him with ease. Xavier’s balance wavered, his muscles straining as he wrapped an arm around the ice tanuki’s neck.

A collective sigh escaped the female population of the crowd.

“Enjoying the show?” Xavier winked at me as he ground his hips suggestively.

“Get down from there!” I cried.

“But why?” he asked. “The people are enjoying themselves, aren’t they?” He turned to the crowd, throwing his arms wide. A few clapped and cheered, but many looked on in silence.

“Huh.” Xavier frowned. “Less than I thought.”

“Seriously,” I hissed. “Get. Down.”

My husband blinked at me, my tone blowing away some of the champagne cloud he was on.

“Your wife’s a feisty one,” Shinji jeered.

I glared at him.

“Did you tell him to do this?”

“Woah Mrs. Knight, take it easy,” he laughed. “I just had a few drinks with him, that’s all.”

“A *few*?” I pointed to my shirtless husband.

Shinji shrugged.

“He never could hold his booze like I could. Speaking of, you’re a little low on champagne yourself.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said through gritted teeth.

Xavier plopped down on the ground next to me, his arms winding around my waist as he tried to find his balance.

I glared at him.

“*You.*”

“*Me,*” he replied, a bemused smile on his lips.

“You’re coming with me.” I grabbed his wrist, dragging him away from the gala.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

I ran into Zoe, her eyes going wide when she saw Xavier—and the state he was in.

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m taking Xavier back to the hotel. He’s had too much to drink.” I placed a hand on Zoe’s shoulder. “Are you going to be okay here by yourself?”

“Of course,” Zoe nodded. She glanced at Xavier’s bare chest. “Um, have fun?”

I moved past her, feeling every set of eyes on us as we waded through the gala.

Xavier rested his chin on my shoulder.

“Back to the hotel?” he whispered into my ear, the smell of champagne on his breath. “I like the sound of that.”

I shrugged him off my shoulder.

“I cannot believe you.”

“What?” he asked.

“We’ll talk later.”

We eventually made it to the outskirts of the gala. A fleet of high-end taxi cabs waited to ferry guests back to their accommodations. I dragged Xavier into one, and after a few words with the driver, we took off into the night.

Xavier leaned into me, pawing at my kimono.

“You look so good in that dress.”

I pushed him away.

“Cut it *out*,” I said firmly~::~~

“What’s up with you?” Xavier frowned, his eyebrows coming together in a frustrated knot. “Do you want to talk about it, or are you going to ignore me?”

I gave a very pointed look to the street ahead. The driver, for his part, was politely ignoring us.

“Save it for the hotel, Xavier.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, sinking into his seat.

I turned at the darkness outside the car windows. I’d never been so annoyed with Xavier before. I watched his reflection as he sulked in his seat.

This was going to be a long ride.

\*\*\*

“So, what’s the deal?” Xavier asked, as soon as the hotel door closed behind us.

I say hotel, but it was more of a *ryokan*, a Japanese-style inn, complete with tatami mats and bamboo furniture.

There was a beautiful Zen garden outside of our room, the bubbling of a bonsai tree fountain mixing with cicadas’ song in the night air. It was a tranquil scene.

But I was far from tranquil.

“*What’s the deal?*” I repeated, incredulous. Xavier seemed to sober up a little on the ride back, but he was still drunk. “You ~embarrassed me,~ Xavier. You made a fool of yourself.”

“Oh, come on,” Xavier said, unrepentant. “It was a party! We were just having a little fun.”

“It was an *art show*, Xavier. Not some fucking frat mixer!” I thought back to the old Xavier, the Xavier who disappeared during the night, only to return with another woman to bed.

Was he becoming that Xavier again?

The thought terrified me.

“I thought you changed,” I said, my voice small.

“*Changed?*” Xavier barked. I stumbled back a few steps. “Changed? If anyone’s changed, it’s you, Angela. It’s like you don’t like to have fun anymore. Why don’t you drink with me?”

*Because I’m pregnant.*

“If you forgot, Xavier, this is my job. I was *working*.”

Xavier shook his head, his hackles raised. “I’m not talking about just tonight. For the last few weeks, too. You’re always tired. You never want to go out. Are you that bored of me?”

“No!” I said. “It’s because     ...”

“Because *what?*” he pressed.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling lightheaded.

*Because I’m pregnant.*

“I’ve been sick,” I said. “I haven’t been feeling very well lately.”

“Sick?” He loomed over me. “Yeah, right. You seem to be just fine when you go out to meet with Em and Dustin. Why is it that you’re only sick when you’re around me?”

I shrunk into myself.

“Even the last time we tried to make love,” he said. “You *threw up*. Am I really that gross? Are you really that sick of me?”

“Are you serious?” I asked. I couldn’t believe this. After all we’ve been through, how could he even think that? “You’re being ridiculous, Xavier. You know that’s not true.”

An irrational anger swelled up inside of me, tears springing into my eyes. Was he seriously doubting that I loved him? That I didn’t want to have fun with him?

My brain pounded against my skull, a steady thump in tandem with my heartbeat. Xavier’s voice rang around the room, crashing into my ears.

“Then tell me what the hell is going on, Angela! You’ve got to give it to me straight because apparently, I’m too much of a dumbass to know what—”

“I’m pregnant!” I yelled.

Xavier staggered backward, shocked.

“It’s because I’m pregnant, okay? I’ve been getting nauseous and lightheaded a lot, and when we were making love that one night, I smelled the whiskey on your breath. That’s why I threw up.”

I took a deep breath, everything that I’d been keeping to myself for the past few months coming at Xavier like a meteorite.

“I can’t drink, obviously. I’ve just been really emotional and confused. We’re going to have a baby, and I was scared about what you would think. There were a lot of things happening at once, and I wasn’t sure how to bring it up, and I’m really sorry—”

I stopped myself, my throat closing up as I choked on my next words.

I told Xavier I was pregnant.

He stood stock-still, almost like he was frozen in time. He looked traumatized.

Shell-shocked.

I covered my mouth with my hand, my heart in my throat.

*What have I done?*