The Arrangement

Demons

XAVIER

Bright lights.

I don't remember much.

Swirling colors.

Deafening crashes and absolute silences.

And pain.

Lots and lots of pain.

I looked up into the faces of masked men and women. One wore long, white gloves covered in my blood.

It always started the same way.

"Xavier," she would call.

nostrils and into her eye sockets.

"How could you leave our child?"

clasped desperately over my ears.

I'd get up, remembering nothing.

And it would begin again.

That's probably not good.

was for sure.

"Xavier ..."

Then it would all stop.

"Angela."

her.

I was looking for her. And I always found her.

I heard her voice, calling for me in the darkness.

I heard voices. A man's and a woman's.

I knew them, but I couldn't remember their names. I heard words, but didn't know their meaning.

I remember a massive silhouette in the clouds, a man so large that thunder boomed whenever he moved his arms. I tried

I was wrapped in a hardened cocoon, and as much as I struggled, I couldn't break free. I could barely move.

That terrified me.

to run away, turning a corner before he squished me with his mighty fists.

I was moving. Fast. On the ground then in the air. But the dream was worse than all the rest.

One dream that repeated over and over.

I was walking down a long, dark tunnel. So dark I couldn't see where I was going, but I knew I was underground. A hot wind blew at my face, so fierce it felt like I was walking into a blast furnace.

And I would always answer. I stumbled, deeper and deeper into the dark, following her voice until I was right in front of her. I could feel her. Touch

We would make love.

And it was then that the feeling of dread would build within me. A sensation so overwhelming that I was rooted with fear. I knew it was coming. Each and every time I knew it was coming. But I couldn't do anything about it.

I'd turn and run, as fast as my bare feet could take me. Back up the tunnel, back through the searing heat.

Rotted flesh sagged off of brittle bones. Weeping boils leaked pus. Creatures crawled underneath her skin, out of her

I could only watch as my hands lit a torch, illuminating the monster that was my bride.

The goddess of creation and death. The dread lady of the underworld.

"How could you leave me?" Her voice would haunt me. Her words would gnash at my ears as I ran.

I'd run and run, the words bouncing around me until they merged into a deafening roar. I'd collapse, my eyes shut, hands

Silence.

There was only a long tunnel before me, and a siren's call luring me into the dark.

First, came hearing. There was a slow, steady beeping, and the sound of my breath.

felt drier than the Sahara, and I couldn't feel my right leg at all.

I squinted an eye open, and I immediately regretted it.

"Penny," she replied, her voice soft. "Sorry to disappoint."

I offered Penny a weak smile. "Thanks for coming."

part that thought I deserved her.

I felt a jolt of life when I heard her name.

"Do you see her here?" Penny asked, remorseless.

"No," I said. "But I guess I'm not surprised."

I could see the pain in his eyes clear as day.

I watched him flounder a bit longer.

He looked up at me, untrusting.

I wanted to yell at him.

pregnancy. She'll probably be back soon."

"She's here?" I asked.

I deflated.

She hates your guts, Xavier.

*** I came to my senses slowly.

Next, came touch. There was a dull ache that was spread throughout my body, along with a killer headache. My mouth

"Xavier," a voice next to me said.

My eyes slowly focused, and there was Penny, sitting in a chair next to me. She looked exhausted.

"Where the hell am I?" Each word burned my throat. It felt like I'd swallowed a gallon of seawater.

"You're in a hospital in New York. You got in one hell of a crash, Xavier." My mind raced back in time.

The final turn, that asshole in the Lancer Evolution, Shinji and Azusa screaming in my ear, the blinding light

I winced as the tear of rending metal rang in my ears. I knew I wouldn't ever be behind the wheel racing again, that

I meant it. I wouldn't expect anyone at my bedside at that point. Especially not Penny, after all I'd put her through. But I had to admit, I was disappointed.

A small part of me still hoped that Angela would welcome me back with open arms. Some delusional, self-centered

I took stock of myself. Other than the fact that everything hurt, it was hard to breathe, and the leg I couldn't feel was

wrapped up in an extremely complex-looking brace, I was fine. There were tubes and IVs sticking out of my arms.

I didn't feel lucky. "Why am I in New York then?" "Angela requested it," Penny said.

That was mean, Penny. It was so obvious that Xavier was hurting, and not just physically.

Instantly, he looked healthier. There was a shine to his eyes that wasn't there before, an alertness in the way he looked at me. "She really is perfect, isn't she?" he said aloud, though he was probably talking to himself more than to me. "What did I do to deserve her?"

But that's not what Xavier needed right then. He was the one who was truly in pain.

"Not whatever you were doing in Tokyo, that's for sure." I sighed.

I wanted to let out all of my frustration and anger.

"I'm glad you're safe," I said. "I'm glad you're home."

feel the need to explain yourself to me?"

"Ah." I smiled. "Sweet, sweet revenge."

I didn't reply.

chance to prove it."

This time I believed him.

This was Xavier.

Xavier chuckled, and the action made him wince.

I was too surprised that he was even telling me this.

Xavier Knight was opening up to me?

The world was turning upside down.

It would definitely have made *me* feel better.

"You aren't going to yell at me?" Xavier asked. "You aren't going to lose your shit and ask me what the hell I was thinking?" I shook my head. "What's the point? I'm sure you already know what you did was wrong

Xavier stayed quiet for a while, and the steady beep of the medical equipment filled the silence.

"I'd prefer if you got angry at me," he muttered. "You being nice right now is way worse."

pleading. "I fucked up and decided to go for one more race, but I'd decided to come back."

This wasn't the final death cries of a proud CEO trying to save his position at a company.

... Besides, when did you ever

I was reminded of that fateful meeting at Knight Enterprises all those months ago. Here Xavier was before me, pleading his case again. But this time...

"I know there's something wrong with me. I know I fucked up big time. I want to get better. I know I can... I just need a

Anything. It was like pleading my case to her at Knight Enterprises all over again. But for some reason, this felt way more important to me.

I knew it was a hard sell. I expected her to kick me to the curb.

I think deep down, I felt like I deserved all the shit I was getting.

And honestly, my near-death experience had opened my eyes.

Brad's face flashed into my mind, his kind eyes and kinder smile.

Maybe things are going to work out after all, Brad.

I waited anxiously for Penny's response.

A yeah right, get out of here with that shit, idiot.

A frown.

A smile.

She'd done it before.

didn't hold it against her.

I knew what was important to me.

And that was Angela.

That was my family.

"But?" I asked.

Penny blinked a few times as if waking from a trance. "Xavier, is that really you?"

lulling me to sleep. "He's awake," I heard Penny's voice murmur from beyond the door. My eyes flew open. Someone else was here to see

Everything faded away, my entire being focused on a single person.

Angela.

Light blinded me, sending pain shooting directly into my brain. I groaned; my throat raspy from disuse. I blinked a few times, forcing myself to get used to the light. There was a woman sitting next to me, though my eyes were still blurry. "Angela?" I rasped, hope blooming in my chest.

I felt like some sort of test subject. "It was a close call, but Tokyo has some of the best hospitals in the world. You're lucky to be here, Xavier."

PENNY

You're definitely getting meaner, I thought to myself. "She's here, Xavier." I bailed him out.

"She's been by your side for hours. The doctors had to convince her to go and get some proper rest for the sake of the

He was the source of a majority of my headaches, so I thought it was only fair that he pay for it some more.

He probably thought that Angela wanted nothing to do with him anymore. And he had good reason to.

I just didn't have it in me to hate someone. Maybe there was something wrong with me too.

And try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to scold him. To rub salt in his wounds after all the heartache he'd given me.

"Brad would definitely disown me if he saw this." "Without a doubt," I agreed.

"Before I got into the accident in Tokyo... I was going to come back to New York. Honestly." He looked at me, his eyes

The real Xavier. And he honestly wanted to get better. Not only for himself, but for those he cared about. He wanted to get better for Angela and for his future child.

XAVIER

Like instead of trying to convince her I was a good CEO, I was trying to convince her I was What? A decent fucking human being?

Sure, she might have been the deciding vote that dictated whether I kept my position as CEO or not, but surprisingly, I

"Hard to believe, I know."

me.

It was her. I could feel it in my bones.

"But," she continued. "I'm really not the one you should be trying to convince right now." Penny left me alone in the room, closing the door behind her. I closed my eyes, the constant beep of the EKG monitor

She laughed. "It's okay. You don't have to justify anything to me. I believe you."