

The Arrangement

Therapy

XAVIER

Marco held open the door for me, and I crunched through it. I gave him a little nod as thanks before maneuvering myself around.

The ground wasn't slippery anymore, now that the ice was melting. In the month since the accident, New York had broken out into an early spring.

The fast cars of Tokyo felt like a lifetime away. Now, everything was slow.

I'd gotten pretty adept on my crutches. Using them was a good arm exercise. But that was the only bright side. The damn things were driving me crazy.

I sighed, taking in the therapist's waiting room. I was the only one there.

"Mr. Knight?" A woman entered. She was tall and sort of burly.

I nodded, and she took my hand in her firm grasp. "Dr. Elmore," she introduced herself.

"Nice to meet you." I grumbled, making it clear that I wasn't thrilled to be there.

She led me down the hall to her office, which was outfitted with dark wood floors and vibrant Persian rugs. I plopped down on the brown leather couch.

Beside me was a chaise lounge like patients always lay down on in cartoons. I didn't think anyone used them since Freud, but it was a nice touch.

A beautiful globe stood on the low table before me.

I reached out to touch it. It was inlaid with ivory.

"Are you interested in antiques, Mr. Knight?" Dr. Elmore asked me from her massive wing chair.

"Not really," I responded. "I guess I have a soft spot for globes."

She smiled in a way that was reserved and warm at the same time.

"Then you like to travel," she intuited.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I do."

Silence descended on the room. I glanced around. How was this whole thing supposed to work? Would she ask me some questions, give me great advice, and then solve all my problems?

I agreed to come to therapy because Angela thought it would be good for me. But I was pretty skeptical that this stranger could tell me anything about myself I didn't already know.

"So...do you need to get a notebook or something before we start?" I asked.

Dr. Elmore shook her head. "I won't be taking notes during our sessions. We'll just have conversations."

I nodded noncommittally.

"Have you ever been to therapy before, Mr. Knight?"

"Call me Xavier," I replied. "And no, I haven't."

And I never planned on it ...

Sure, I needed to make a change. I had nearly drowned in a pool of hard liquor, and I almost lost my wife and unborn children. I needed to shape up.

Therapy helped some people. But I didn't think it could help me.

Nothing that some stranger told me would help me understand my problems better than I already did.

"That's okay, Xavier," Dr. Elmore continued. "I follow a straightforward approach. Feel free to ask about my methodology anytime. And remember, whatever we discuss remains in this room."

I nodded again.

"I can see you injured your leg. Are you in any pain?"

I looked down at my bum right leg. "Not anymore," I shrugged. "The accident was a month ago. I can get this damn cast off in two weeks."

Dr. Elmore folded her hands. "I'm glad to hear that. Was it a car accident?"

The night flashed before my eyes. Shinji's hand clapping my back, urging me into the race ...

Asuza's voice in my ear, urging me on. *Izanami's* engine revving at my slightest touch.

The thrill of victory that transformed into terror only moments before ...

The collision.

"Yeah."

Neither of us said anything. I just stared at the globe.

"I was going too fast," I added, then stopped. Why had I felt the need to explain myself?

Still, Dr. Elmore was quiet. Something in her silence made me want to keep going.

"It was kind of a wake-up call, I guess," I continued, and then I finally looked at her. Her expression was thoughtful, neither pleased nor disappointed.

I'd thought she'd be smiling. I fell right into her trap after all, opening up with so little invitation. But she was totally neutral. A true professional.

Maybe I wanted someone to talk to. The thought streaked through my mind, then disappeared.

"What are you waking up to?" Dr. Elmore asked.

I stared at the European continent on the map. I focused on France, and remembered when Angela and I traveled there. Before we were in love. Back when I was still a total asshole.

But more than the past, the present was weighing on my mind ...

Since I left the hospital, Angela and I had been living together at the penthouse. Well, it depends on how you define "living."

Angela insisted on sleeping in her old bedroom, and she was hardly ever home.

"My wife is pregnant," I answered eventually. "She's going to have twins."

"Congratulations," Dr. Elmore remained level. No false enthusiasm touched her voice.

I chewed on a fingernail. "I wasn't a very good husband for a while," I said, inspecting my finger.

She was quiet.

I was lost in my thoughts, remembering Tokyo. I was drinking so much then ...

My life looked a little brighter through the bottom of a beer glass. I didn't have to think about disappointing Angela or my father. I didn't have to wonder why grief and longing still haunted me, nearly a year after his death.

When I lost my title as CEO, I could no longer hide who I really was. I was a fucking loser, and suddenly everyone knew it.

But on the streets of Tokyo, behind the wheel of the fastest, sexiest car in Asuza's garage, I felt like myself again. Or at least, the person I wanted to be.

The truth was, I didn't have any idea who I really was anymore.

"The hardest part of making a change is beginning," Dr. Elmore said. "And you've already done that."

I met her eyes and gave a little smile. "Yeah, maybe."

But honestly, I wasn't sure if I believed it.

My phone pinged.

"I should check that ...might be my wife."

I pulled out my phone, but it wasn't Angela.

It was Shinji. My buddy had been texting me like crazy since I got back to the city. First, he was worried about my recovery, but when he knew I was okay, he tried to convince me to return.

I wasn't going to, of course. Though I couldn't deny I missed my old friend.

Shinji

Yo man

Shinji

You won't believe this

Shinji

Fucking wish you were here right now

Shinji

Huge race tonight and everyone's betting AGAINST Titan

Shinji

But we both know that MF is gonna clean up 🤔

Shinji

Wanna go in with me?

I shoved my phone back in my pocket. Even here, so far from Tokyo, the cool rush of chance seduced me.

Who was Titan racing against? What car was he driving? I wondered how big the pool was. If Shinji and I bet against everyone, the payout could be huge!

I looked at Dr. Elmore. She was staring at me intently, her brow furrowed almost imperceptibly.

ANGELA

"Ooh, I just *love* lavender," Em said, tearing open the package of seeds.

"I know you do," I smiled. "That's why I'm growing it."

Em and I were sitting at the table on the balcony preparing my herb garden. Leo mentioned that some women found it therapeutic to garden during pregnancy, and his words had stuck with me.

It allows you to visualize growth and nurture something with your hands.

I liked the idea. I knew my babies were growing—I could feel them kicking. But being pregnant didn't really feel like I was *nurturing* them. It just felt like I was their house.

Their huge, waddling house.

"So, Xavier's cast must come off pretty soon, huh?" Em asked.

The only positive thing about the stress in my marriage was that I was spending a lot more time with Em and Bella. That was truly the only thing keeping me sane.

"Two more weeks," I answered, pushing my fingers in the soil.

"Good. He'll feel more confident when he can walk again."

I considered this as I poured water into the little pot. I hoped Em was right. Xavier had been so down on himself since he got home from Tokyo, it was hard for me to stay mad at him.

And I wanted to stay mad.

I couldn't believe he'd left me on my own. It broke every promise he'd ever made to me.

But it was so obvious he was suffering, even Em could see it. It made me sad. He was so angry at himself that it broke my heart to add to it.

"You know," I began, "when Xavier was in Tokyo, I imagined he was having the time of his life. Partying, drinking, womanizing..."

Em raised her eyebrows.

I watched to see how Em would respond. Truth was, I had been thinking a lot about the paparazzi pictures of Xavier. I wanted to talk about it, but I didn't know how without Em telling me what I already knew ...

If Xavier had really cheated on me, I would need to end things for real.

"Is this about the photos?" Em asked. As always, she knew exactly what I was thinking. "I was wondering why you hadn't brought it up before."

"Yeah ..." I began.

"You haven't asked Xavier about it yet?" Em asked, clearly shocked.

"Well, I ..."

"You have to," Em said.

I knew she was right, but I'd been so overwhelmed. Xavier and I had so *many* things to work through, and I was avoiding all of them. I didn't know where to start.

My husband had left me alone, ignoring my calls while I was pregnant with his children.

And when he finally did come home, it wasn't of his own volition. He told me he was planning to come back, but I didn't know if that was true.

That was the worst part.

I didn't really believe that Xavier would cheat on me. He wasn't the playboy he used to be.

But the way Em looked at me told me I shouldn't be so sure ...

"He started therapy today," I offered, hoping to redirect the conversation.

"That's good."

It was good. I was happy Xavier took my advice. Maybe someone could get through to him, even if it wasn't me ...

Since Xavier had been home, we'd had many conversations. He had apologized, groveled, professed his love.

It was a good start, but it wasn't all I needed. I needed him to take care of himself, to work through his grief, his depression, his alcoholic tendencies ...

And until then, I needed my space. I needed to be strong for the babies.

Just then, there was a knock on the sliding glass door. It was Xavier, gesturing with his crutch.

I was so caught up in my conversation with Em that I hadn't even heard him arrive.

He opened the door, and Em was already on her feet, ready to leave.

"Goodbye, Mama," she called, kissing my cheek. "Bye, babies!"

She glared at my husband. "Xavier."

"Nice to see you, Em," he responded, smiling like a saint. "Won't you stay for dinner?"

Em was already heading to the door. "Can't I have a family to take care of!"

And then Xavier and I were alone.

He gazed at me like he wanted to kiss me, but I walked right back to the table and sat down. He followed me on his crutches and lowered himself into the chair next to mine.

"Look at all these plants! Super cool, Angie. I'm sure your garden will be—"

"Xavier," I interrupted. I wasn't in the mood for small talk. Em was right. I had to talk to Xavier about the pictures. Now.

"We need to talk about the pictures of you in the press from Tokyo. I know the paparazzi has a way of making everything look worse. But I can't run on trust anymore."

He paused, but only for a moment.

"I kissed another woman." He sagged like a deflated balloon after the words were out. "Well, she kissed me, but I should have stopped her sooner. I was drunk. Which isn't an excuse. And I understand if you never—"

"Xavier," I interrupted.

Despite the topic of conversation, I felt a rushing sense of calm. Finally, my husband was being open with me.

The bullshit between us fell away. The chasm of guilt and shame, blame and insecurity fell away. It was just us two.

I saw Xavier for who he was. Hurting, regretful. But the fact that he was being honest with me showed that he was willing to change. He was willing to dig himself out of the hole. And that was what I needed.

He stared at me, confused, but I gave him a little smile. "Thanks for telling me."

"You aren't mad?!" he asked, incredulous.

"Of course I'm mad," I said. "But I'm sick of being mad. A kiss isn't the end of the world."

I gulped, shaking my head. My trust had grown so weak.

"I would rather focus on moving forward," I went on. "I mean, we're having kids together."

Xavier smiled. It was his real smile, the one that got me every time. The one I hadn't seen in months.

"You're incredible, Angie," my husband said. "Thank you for putting up with me. Honestly, I don't totally know what happened to me. But I'm working on it."

He brushed his fingers along my cheek. "And the only thing I'm sure about right now is you."

I grabbed his hand and smiled.

I knew he was being honest. My anxieties from the past few months weren't resolved, but now a Band-Aid covered part of the wound.

And we *did* have a lot to look forward to. Later that week, we would find out the genders of our babies at the reveal party Zoe insisted on organizing.

If Xavier and I kept focusing on the future, maybe we could get over our past...