

WELCOME TO THE TENT

XANDER

XANDER WON. It's just what he did. Not because he wanted to, necessarily, but because if he didn't, he feared he might spiral into an existential crisis that had always been totally and completely forbidden to him. Losing wasn't a choice he'd ever been allowed to consider. And so he'd never lost. Not once. In his small family, performance was everything.

And so he pushed himself cruelly now, redoubling his effort as he sprinted up the steep hill, digging in and hammering vigorously up its grassy incline, the chiseled muscles in his quads and glutes burning at the final demand he placed on them now.

In front of him, the enormity of a tudor-style manor house came into view as he finally conquered the last of the slope, sweat-drenched blond hair slick across his forehead, shirt sodden against his muscled torso.

The Tent sat quietly in the center of the lush, dewdropped lawn that sprawled out to the tudor's rear. Xander regarded

it coldly for a moment. The thing was huge, white, billowing slightly in the gentle November breeze. The early morning fall sun illuminated it fancifully with pale hues of blush and gold.

The chill in the air caused him to shudder somewhat with anticipation, the cool-wet fabric of his synthetic running shirt grazing across his torso thrillingly as it did so. Xander checked his smartwatch, ending the workout he'd been tracking on it before hurriedly crossing the lawn to the tudor.

The other eleven contestants had spent the past two hours frantically rehearsing for their very first challenge. Xander spent those two hours running, obviously, choosing to forgo the chance to practice what he'd already practiced endlessly and instead selecting physical activity as an outlet to expunge any remaining doubts that dared creep into his mind like unwanted demons. His need to push himself like this was a well-worn ritual of self-exorcism.

Xander had managed to run every day for the last several years, and he had very much intended to keep up that habit now, even as he was forced to cohabitate with his competition within the great house for the duration of the filming.

His breathing had finally returned to normal as he slipped quietly back into the grand entrance hall of the old estate. He gracefully crossed into the enormous multistory gallery. Above him, a second-story rotunda ringed the vast space, providing access to the countless rooms and quarters they were all calling their homes for the week.

To his right was the test kitchen, the big tent outside reserved for baking only when they were actually filming.

The rest of the time, they were to practice here. But there was only so much *to* practice.

Within, the other eleven chatted nervously, anxiously helping each other with this or that as they distracted themselves from the upcoming challenge, their very first. He scowled, turning to pound up the huge flight of stairs to his room, his white sneakers squeaking along the marble floor as he crossed it.

Each episode of the show would consist of just three parts: the first, a chance for them to impress the hosts with a pre-planned bake of their choosing; the second, the Mystery Challenge they'd have to overcome with no forewarning; and the third, an elaborate "Centerpiece" that carried the heaviest weight in terms of judging. Each day, one of them would be chosen as "Baker of the Day" and granted immunity for the next day's challenge.

At the end of each of the next five days, some number of contestants would be sent home until, eventually, only three were left in the Finale—one of them emerging from the fray victorious and publicly crowned "Britain's Next Best Baker," which carries enviable social media clout these days, alongside a lucrative cookbook deal sponsored by one of the hosts.

And that all started today. Of the 12, one would be exiled in just a few short hours, banished forever from the big house and evidently *not* "Britain's Next Best Baker."

Xander felt a pang of pressure clang against his nerves, rattled that he maybe should have spent this time going through his bakes again instead of taking off on that run...

He shook the thoughts from his head, clearing the noise within only somewhat as he passed into his temporary bedroom. He quickly changed into the first of five outfits he had meticulously chosen for himself before arriving here and donning his apron. The competition began in just fifteen minutes, and he wanted to get inside the tent early to grab one of the workstations closest to the front, where he'd get more screen time.

XANDER'S BABY blue dunagal sweater scratched at his neck now as he stood inside the tent for the first time. It was far warmer in here than he'd expected, and he'd regretfully put the sweater on before he'd allowed himself to properly cool down from his run, trapping the heat of his exertion beneath its cashmere surface uncomfortably. He felt damp under his arms and hoped the viewers wouldn't pick up on it, trying his best not to appear flustered, wishing his shorts were keeping him cooler than they were.

He fought the urge to soothe that itch, too, but the cameras were right in front of him now, just as he'd anticipated, and he didn't want to look frantic or odd. Xander stood precisely where he'd planned to put himself: right at the front of the tent, the interior comprised of two rows of six identical cooking stations.

Flanking the sides of the space was a cadre of various cooking appliances—fridges and freezers, ice cream makers and stand mixers, bowls and spoons, and great shelves of all the baking supplies you could ever imagine or need to create just about anything.

Xander had barely even paid attention to any of it. He'd memorized the space by watching old episodes some while ago and felt no nostalgia at all being here in person now. His eyes, instead, were locked squarely on the three hosts ahead of him and had been since they'd glid into the room, cameras trailing them, the Annual British Baking Contest finally beginning after all this time.

He had studied each of them in meticulous detail, as he had his fellow competitors. He'd read all of their books. He'd listened to each of their interviews and podcasts. He'd watched and rewatched and rewatched again every one of the twenty-two seasons of this show that had aired previously until he felt like he'd known them his entire life; he'd even stalked through their social media accounts...

Xander had spent hours practicing bantering with them back home in front of the mirror, trying to learn from prior contestants which types of jokes landed, what flavors to avoid, and how not to be the person everyone watching hated.

The hosts were doing their intro thing now, introducing themselves and making awkward jokes and small talk for the cameras.

"Welcome to the Annual British Baking Contest!" the three finally said in shitty sing-song unison. The older man and woman, both highly competent bakers and entrepreneurs in their own right, flanked a dowdy, short man he knew was this season's comic relief.

He dreaded that little man. Xander was many things—handsome, rich, tall, hung—but the thing he very much wasn't was funny. He felt his eyes narrow involuntarily at

him, realizing with a start that he had let the forced pleasantness he'd practiced so diligently slip from his face for a moment. He wondered worriedly if viewers back home would take notice, slapping his smile back where it should be near instantly.

Baker's Choice had just begun. This day's challenge was bundt cakes, and Xander had practiced his Blueberry Sour Cream over a dozen times at home. It had come out identical each time, as did all of his baked goods. And he knew he could deliver that cake perfectly now.

To his annoyance, the judges had started in the back of the room for whatever reason. They had always started up front in each of the prior seasons, usually with the contestant on his side of the tent. He tried not to feel slighted by this change in routine and readily stirred his dry ingredients together, flustered despite himself not getting to go first as he'd anticipated. He then looked around to see what state the others were in as he neatly flipped on the oven at his station, setting it to preheat before buttering and flouring his woodland-themed bundt pan, ensuring his bake wouldn't stick.

Xander gone for sour cream because, in past seasons, the primary concern of the judges had been mealy and dry bundts, and this was an elegant solution to both issues. He creamed his butter and sugar together in his stand mixer, growing increasingly eager to show off his skills as he heard the trio making their way to the second row of contestants as they picked their way through the bakes.

Blueberries, Xander knew, were the older woman Candace's favorite berry. She'd remarkably written an entire, insufferable cookbook on fucking blueberries, and

he'd picked them just for her. He unceremoniously dumped the blueberries he'd hand-foraged yesterday in the estate's vast garden into the rich yellow batter he'd just finished. And looking around, he was pleased to see that no one was nearly as far along as he was. Xander smirked, folding it all together with smug self-satisfaction.

The old man at the station behind him, Bill, was clanking about noisily, slamming things on the counter, dropping a carton of milk on the ground, or spilling this and that here and there. Xander absolutely loathed the man, having gotten trapped in an hour-long conversation with him the day prior when they'd had a forced meet-and-greet in the old house.

Xander had shown up late on purpose, hoping to avoid forced small talk altogether and blame imaginary traffic for his tardiness. Xander had even planned on playing up how disappointed he was about missing them if anyone cared to ask—but the group had proven exceptionally social. Much to his chagrin, they'd drawn the evening out later than he expected, and he'd been forced to talk to Bill and Bill alone when he'd attended the final moments inadvertently.

It had been during that conversation, Bill droning on and on endlessly about his freaking grandkids, that Xander had eventually encouraged the man to forgo his prior plans for today's bake and take a chance on a particularly bold flavoring: rose.

From the moment Bill had started speaking, Xander knew he wouldn't be able to keep it together with the grouch for an entire month, especially if they had to live together. He was insufferable. He'd managed to interrupt Xander each time he'd open his mouth to speak, dominating their short

conversation entirely and marking himself squarely as Xander's first priority, the man never failing to one-up everything he shared, turning the conversation back on himself constantly in a way that was both boring and infuriating.

Xander knew very well that Candace absolutely *loathed* rose. She'd never complimented someone for adding the dreaded substance to anything in all twenty-two seasons. Rose, as far as she was concerned, was all but useless as a flavor. Xander stifled a cruel little giggle as he smoothly slid his cake into his piping hot oven, getting ready to make his signature blueberry-gin glaze, having infused the gin with the berries and juniper himself back home months ago.

"How's it going, Bill?" he innocently asked the old man, his false cheer apparently disguised to the blundering fool.

"Oh, you know..." Bill huffed. It's going." The irksome man was stirring all his ingredients together haphazardly in a single bowl, sending flour cascading to the ground. He was not mixing dry and wet separately, as Xander had taught himself to do over the past year since he'd taken up baking himself, and he found himself flabbergasted that the man had made it on in the first place.

He wondered curiously then if Bill had even needed his sabotage to screw this up for himself. Still, even as he thought it, the guy backed into Xander's cooking station, knocking the container of eggs he had set there off—sending it crashing with a splatter to the ground without even so much as a glance, let alone an apology. The slob just clambered his rose-and-mistake flavored cake into his unpreheated oven obliviously now, miraculously only the second contender to do so.

Xander felt his smile drop again as he furiously stirred his glaze, feeling unable to split his focus from the task before he quickly yanked it back into place, remembering once again to squint his eyes a little as he did so lest it look as unnatural as it felt. *The glaze was fucking perfect*, he allowed himself. But the cake was not yet cool enough for it, so he set it aside.

“You’ve got this!” Xander encouraged Bill from where he was now bent near him on the ground, scraping the broken eggs up into a bowl and emptying them tidily into the rubbish bin at his station, not bothering to inform Bill of his mistake because Xander had discretely noticed that one of the cameramen had begun filming the pair when the clumsy man had caused the spill and very much knew an opportunity for good publicity when he saw it.

“Could you clean up your mess?” Bill huffed angrily, having stumbled into Xander as he clumsily fumbled around his space. He was evidently beginning his own glaze or frosting now, his foot slipping a bit on some remaining yolk.

Xander sensed the film lens still pointed directly at him and measured his reaction accordingly. He forced a tight little laugh out of his mouth, feigning a shrug as he wiped up the last bit of egg, all the while imagining violently bashing Bill’s head over and over into the wooden surface of his station until he’d turned the boomer’s face into a pulpy mess of total gore.

His neck was still itching, too, and Xander finally gave in and scratched at it furiously now despite the camera still fixed on him, feeling his taught smile falter before correcting it once more and forcing his hand back down to his side, involuntarily clenching itself into an angry fist,

squeezing so hard he felt himself draw a small prick of blood from his palm.

His eye twitched once, and then he pulled his cake from the oven, wiping the little drop of blood discretely on his shorts. The bake had emerged as he'd expected: uniform and golden, the smell of blueberries and the sour-sweet of the crumb the first of the dozen to begin to fill the tent with its mouth-watering aroma. After a few minutes of well-studied patience, he freed it expertly from his buttered, floured bundt pan, the whimsical shapes of woodland animals adorning the outside of his seemingly flawless bake.

Xander had never tasted, let alone eaten, a single thing he had ever baked. He'd never even tasted the batter. He wasn't even quite sure if he cared about baking at all beyond desiring to get on this show and win it for himself, to prove to his mother what he was capable of, to force everyone to take him seriously. He tried not to waste his time with too many thoughts like that, though, nor waste his carefully measured calories on frivolities like sugary treats. Xander very much believed in keeping to his routine, and it had never, ever included cake.

The moment he'd set his sights on the goal of baking, though, he'd instantly taken to reading everything there was to read on the subject of bread and cakes, frosting and sauces, creme patisserie and lamination, and everything in between. He'd taken classes. He'd been up late into the night, endlessly practicing various skills. And eventually, inevitably, he'd gotten very, very good at it.

The obsession had gone on like that for the better part of a year until he finally found himself here—now—staring at a

near-flawless cake that he felt very little, if not nothing at all for.

He discovered then, somewhat disappointedly, that even now, after all the effort to get here he still only cared about adding to the roster of his already impressive resume. He often felt empty and hollow, and he pushed the gnawing disquiet of that emotion away from himself like an unwanted balloon, choosing to ignore its suddenly looming presence now, no matter the consequence.

The judges were in the row just behind him, gushing over one of the other contenders. Rowan was his name, and Xander had studied him like all the others. The guy wasn't any competition to bother about as far as he was concerned, and he'd spent little time considering him after he'd reviewed his socials months prior.

Rowan's Instagram had more or less just been pictures of him baking in some shoddy kitchen somewhere with an old, tired-looking woman. His bakes had all appeared haphazardly arranged, and the guy's mopish chestnut-brown hair always flopped to one side as he presented his questionable work to the camera, grinning boyishly like he was only taking it half-seriously.

Xander hated him instinctively. Nothing he'd seen the guy bake had impressed him in the slightest, and yet here the hosts were babbling away about how clever he was to substitute flax seeds for eggs, how interesting to flavor with pistachio and tart cherry, *blah blah blah*.

Xander realized he'd rolled his eyes *after* it had happened, having done so involuntarily as Rowan chattered away amicably with the trio. He had made them all laugh easily,

and they spent more time with him than they had with anyone else.

Xander realized immediately that one of the cameras had caught him. From the beginning, the third cameraman seemed to focus on him more than made Xander feel comfortable, eying him untoward from behind the unwieldy device and probing him with disquieting looks.

Xander had clocked him as thirsty from the moment they'd begun filming and had even allotted a bit of eye contact directed back toward the man in a bid to encourage him to spend more of his time recording Xander than the other contestants, despite how uncomfortable it made him feel to do so. Was it exploitative? Maybe. But the guy was the one doing the creeping, not him; this was merely business.

But now it had backfired spectacularly, and Xander felt the itching heat at his neck burn furiously, the dampness under his arms becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. His hand even shook slightly as he dribbled blueberry-gin glaze over his now-cooled cake, cursing at himself internally to get a fucking grip, not to be sloppy.

He took a shallow, ragged breath, pretending to have forgotten something in his obviously empty oven before kneeling under his workstation for a moment to buy himself some privacy. Xander eventually managed a second breath, deeper, and rubbed furiously at his temples, squinting his eyes closed, willing himself to get it together. And it worked, mostly. He was more or less settled out by the time the judges finally got to him, the last contestant to introduce themselves to the hosts and present their bake in the pre-judgment phase of this first trial.

Xander greeted them with his well-practiced smile, squinting a bit to form crinkles under his eyes that seemed to help convey the disingenuous emotion passably. He then shook their hands calmly one at a time as they stood around his finished cake.

“Well, you certainly got right to work! And what a *beautiful* cake. Truly stunning.” Candace beamed maternally at him, her grey-purple hair bobbing as she chortled, chin wobbling. “And *blueberries*, I see! I just *adore* blueberries. In fact, I once wrote a whole bloody book on them! You really must read it if you haven’t yet; I hear it’s become rather seminal in some people’s minds; at least, that’s what they tell me. Some good recipes in there, too, if I don’t say so myself.” She winked, her voice steeped in false modesty, relishing the opportunity as he’d seen her do for twenty-two seasons to push her merch, exactly as he’d expected from her when he’d selected precisely this recipe from her book and then adapted it to his own standards many weeks ago.

He had observed that Candace always got along best with the younger male contestants, and he was determined to play the role of a charming grandson to get what he wanted from her. He smiled away and stared deep into her eyes as she spoke, making sure she felt seen.

“I had no idea!” Xander lied expertly, placing a shocked hand on his chest and letting his jaw drop like this was the best news he’d heard all week. “I’ll have to read it!” He added, finding the enthusiasm hard to fake. The book was, in fact, terrible. He’d read it last summer, making each of the 100 recipes within precisely once, before dumping them along with the tome into the garbage, never intending to eat a blueberry again for the rest of his life.

"I'll have to get you a signed copy! You're an absolute darling," she praised, looking at his cake and then at him hungrily. "And quite the baker..."

"Sour cream, hmmm?" The older male host was chiming in flatly, clearly aware of his counterpart's proclivity to linger with contestants like Xander. "*Interesting choice.*"

The man flashed his piercing green eyes at Xander precisely once, genuinely sending a shiver down his back as he did so, before the pair made their way up to the judging table, leaving the little comic behind. He was still staring with a too-knowing smile in Xander's direction as if plotting how he might catch him out, as though from the very outset, determined to draw venom from the young man for everyone to see and judge.

Xander fought the instinctive urge to beat the living shit out of the creature. Something about his jagged, sneering little smile and how he tilted his tiny domed head menaced him. It appeared to Xander that the man was gleefully preparing to launch his first barrage of guided missiles, aiming at the many trigger points he'd somehow detected instantly across the surface of him.

"As the only gay host here, I must say I'm proud to announce there are a record *three* of us under the tent this year, at least for now..." The man winked, menacing the upcoming weight of the vote with the dread of failure.

"...have you and Rowan had a chance to share any special recipes with each other outside the tent? The culinary judges sure seemed excited about what he was scraping together over there." The man said, leaning in conspiratori-

ally as though trying to be helpful by sharing an unwanted secret with him.

Xander resisted the powerful impulse to grab his cake off his station and smash it across the guy's face, finding that he enjoyed it to imagine himself doing exactly that very much. He just blinked at the man.

"No, I'd dare say it doesn't seem like you're the kind to share recipes with anyone. But I *can* see a winner in you, oh yes." The stout man finished, giggling to himself before clasping his hands behind his back and strolling to join the other hosts, evidently pleased with himself.

The fucking itch returned furiously, and Xander's face grew flushed at having biffed his first encounter with the show's jester. He looked at his cake; the glaze had set into a perfect and now sickly-seeming mirror of brilliant violet sprinkled with the fresh yellow zest of lemon and dusted with crushed hazelnut. He reminded himself of why he had come here, forcing thoughts of the ruggedly handsome contestant across the way from his mind.

He did wonder, though, how he'd missed that the guy was gay... and it unsettled him. Not because *he* was also gay, but because it called to mind what else he might have missed, what other weaknesses or strengths or just outright points of potential exploitation he'd failed to notice in the strangers surrounding him now. And the uncertainty made him feel vulnerable for the first time in a long while, so much so that he was genuinely startled when they called his name to present first.

"*Xan-der*," Candace repeated herself, and he actually had the presence of mind to hear her this second iteration. Her

voice was a sing-song lilt, barely doing any work to hide how eager she was to have another chance to interact with him.

He set the cake down in front of them gingerly, giving her the most eye contact, confident in what he'd produced but still relieved when Eric, the older male judge, finally cut into the crumb and revealed it to be both moist and even, turning the slice this way and that before for the cameras before distributing additional sections to his cohosts on either side of him.

Xander knew this wouldn't be the bake that would get him the fabled high-five, but he wanted to start modestly. From what he'd studied, viewers always seemed the most drawn to contestants who continued to outdo themselves throughout the contest.

So Xander staggered his bakes in order of ascending complexity, not wanting to show off his true and formidable talent until it was essential, knowing better than to make himself a target early on by showing too much too soon.

"Mmmmmmf," Candice chomped contentedly, slicing herself a second, bigger piece, crumbs spilling out of her mouth as she looked at Xander adoringly. "Blueberries." The words mushed grotesquely through the cake in her mouth, her eyes glittering piggily at him as though he'd just delivered her some novel form of salvation. She dug into the second piece ravenously, the cake disappearing into her aged mouth at a terrifying rate as she became consumed once more by blueberries.

"Moist. Good crumb. Nice cake. I don't think I pick up on the sourness of the cream the way I'd like to," Eric said

quickly, eyes downcast at what remained uneaten like it really was a tragedy. “Shame,” he concluded.

And he seemed not to have anything more to offer in the way of feedback, tapping his fork rather impatiently against the bundt cake as if more than ready to get on to different and more exciting things.

Xander felt himself grow rigid then as he recalled that the comic got a vote, too. He felt himself resisting then the furious urge to go off on a rant correcting Eric that the cake was moist very much *due* to the sour cream he had substituted and that he was equally confident that the sourness that he had added there was perfection and played expertly off of the sweet-sour of the blueberries, and that he’d had also perfectly good and technical reason for making the selections he had when it came to his glazing and other flavoring choices...He realized his hands had formed fists again, the smile slipping once more mercurially from his face, far less easy to reclaim this time.

Terrance, the comedian, just gave him a thumbs up from behind the table, smiling at him like he was as unhinged as he felt, mouthing “well done” cartoonishly to him without the facial expression to back it up.

Xander felt his temper rumble dangerously inside him. He rudely snatched his bake off the table before brusquely crossing back to his station, scratching furiously once more at his collar when he got there. He promised to punish himself later for not doing better. His performance had been inadequate, but Xander knew he had it in him to do whatever it took to win this thing.

He slumped onto his stool, amusing himself by watching old man Bill, the boomer bring his hodge-podge rose-flavored abomination up to the judges. He nearly slipped on the egg Xander had purposefully not cleaned up very well, stumbling and almost dropping his awful cake to the ground.

Xander stifled another cruel giggle, understanding that he might very well be the guy everyone hated this season after all, and the smile that slithered across his face then was, for the first time that day, real.

HIGH-FIVED

ROWAN

ROWAN FELT awful for the older man. He'd obviously put his heart into his bake—they all had—and the judges were ripping it to shreds now. Bill's body language had grown increasingly defeated as the critiques went on, seemingly endless. His bake appeared to have caused a few of the judges personal offenses from the sound of the latest feedback.

Rowan found he was having difficulty staying seated on his stool. He felt viscerally uncomfortable witnessing the man's shortcomings laid bare this way, struggling against the ever-present urge to rescue people he felt it wasn't his place to rescue.

He'd noticed out of the corner of his eye that the prior contestant—some guy named Xander who hadn't spoken to a single person except Bill the night prior when they'd all had such a good time getting to know one another—was chuckling almost imperceptibly at the latest bit of brutal feedback the poor old man was receiving. Rowan felt his temper flare at the asshole.

He'd been sitting near enough the night before to have overheard Xander suggesting Bill use rose instead of baking what he'd shown up planning to bake. And now here the guy was, getting reamed for it. Rowan couldn't believe it. And here he'd thought Xander was just quiet or awkward...

"It really *does* taste just like perfume..." Candace continued wiltingly, smacking her lips in exaggerated disgust, poking around at the dry cake on the plate in front of her as she stared into the middle distance, apparently haunted by the experience.

"Not for me. No, I should say not. No, no, no, to *rose*." She intoned lyrically, pushing the plate away, turning her head to the side as though she couldn't bear to look at the thing a moment longer, let alone face the man who had brought her the travesty.

"Dry. Both under and over-baked. Flavors are too strong, and there wasn't enough time between cooling and glazing. It could be better," Eric said flatly, scraping at the melty mess of the man's botched pinkish glaze disgustedly with his serving knife. "Did you forget to preheat your oven?" he added, discovering a gooey pocket of undercooked dough ringing the center of the mistake.

"Yes." the man yipped, unable to meet the judge's eyes.

"I loved it. It's my favorite yet," the comic said lastly. And to be honest, Rowan wasn't sure if that was meant to be a joke, eyes darting to the technically perfect-looking bake Xander had just produced and wondering what it tasted like.

Rowan had even wanted to try a piece of the bundt himself when they'd cut into it at the judge's table, having noted curiously how Candace had seemed to enjoy it so much and

assuming it must have been pretty delicious for her to be so enthusiastic about it.

He'd quietly watched Xander as they'd all baked for whatever reason, observing with fascination the way he'd moved with such calculated precision, the way he pretended not to be paying attention while clearly very much paying attention to everything and everyone. He supposed a part of him envied that precision, himself very much feeling that he was constantly darting from one crisis or failure to the next, finding humor to be the only lifeline that allowed him to string himself along without getting swept away by it all, or worse yet, drowning in it.

Bill's head hung low as he returned to his workstation across the way, dumping his pepto-bismal-colored bake straight into the bin. He sat dejectedly at his impressively filthy kitchenette.

Rowan shot a single, condemning glance at Xander's back before rising uncertainly to his feet to approach the judges. He realized too late that the cameras might have picked up the dirty look he'd allowed himself to sling just then.

Rowan had observed that one of the cameramen had been giving him creeper vibes since the moment that they'd started filming, licking his lips at him suggestively from behind his camera in a way he found hard not to imagine vulgar but doing it subtly enough that he wasn't quite sure if he were imagining it or not. He'd mostly avoided eye contact with the man in response, but he saw now that he was filming him intently with a deranged grin on his lips.

Rowan had rarely met someone he didn't try to like; more often than not, he tended to lose himself nearly entirely in

the pursuit of trying to please or fulfill other people's desires more than he ever seemed to prioritize his own. That was partly what he liked best about baking, well, that and, of course, eating. He very much liked that, too. But right now, what he knew for sure was that he didn't like that camera-man. And found that he didn't like Xander, either.

He cautiously brought his bake up to the judges, trying not to let his nerves show, grinning wildly at them as he approached. At the last minute, for no reason in particular, he had decided to go with a vegan pistachio-cardamom spice cake. He wasn't even vegan. He hadn't even baked anything vegan before that very morning when he'd had the random idea back in the test kitchen, but that was just how he did things. His first and only practice attempt had been delicious, if somewhat dry, and he'd impromptu added a little vegan sour cream today to his mix as he'd seen his blond competitor doing, imagining its place in the flavors he'd concocted in his mind. Ultimately, he was quite proud of the lavender frosting and decorative flowers he'd piped along the base of his whimsically purple cake and felt the whole thing was a good example of what he liked to bake.

In front of him in the aisle, Xander's long, distractingly muscled legs were outstretched, lazily crossed, creating an impasse in the central walkway between the two rows of workstations in front of him now. He did not attempt to move as Rowan approached, either, who responded by flashing his golden-hazel eyes furiously at the thoughtless—or worse yet malevolent, jerk—then raised his eyebrows disapprovingly, shaking his head a little and making a point of stepping around him before finally arriving at the judge's table.

Rowan's big heart was thudding wildly in his chest now. He'd grown up eagerly watching the Annual British Baking Contest with his grandmother each Christmas season when it was released. The woman had been his everything as a child and, even now, served as his sole caregiver at twenty-four. His parents had eloped after he was born, leaving him to be raised by her in the slums of South London, never returning to the tiny flat he'd grown up in even once to see how he was doing, forcing her to work as a cleaning woman late into her 70's. He owed her this and whatever financial windfall it might allow him to provide her.

They'd see him now, he thought darkly, wishing he hadn't allowed his thoughts to drift to them as they had so easily done throughout his life. Before leaving, he'd promised his Gran that he'd win this and win it for himself, not to prove anything to them. She'd always encouraged him to believe in himself, and though he struggled to do so, he couldn't help but smile like a starstruck child at the trio in front of him.

"Lovely," Eric said, his voice smooth as ever. He cut into the cake carefully, piercing Rowan with a bit of his hallmark eye contact before spending equal care carving two additional pieces for the judges to his left and right.

"It smells fantastic," he said, raising the plate to his nose, eyes twinkling. Rowan realized his mouth was hurting. His grin had spread into a full-on smile at being confronted with a childhood hero.

That smile was now sprawled easily across Rowan's handsome, wolfish face—his dark curls of medium-length chestnut hair framing an angular and masculine visage. A hint of boyishness still clung to his smooth olive skin and

plump lips, peering out playfully from behind the ever-present glimmer in his youthful golden eyes, confusing itself as it mixed with the dark stubble he couldn't seem to rid himself of no matter how often he shaved and dark, long eyelashes.

Eric took a tentative bite. And then another. And then he looked at Rowan for a long, hard while as though considering apologizing for over-estimating his cooking skills, rubbing at his chin pensively. Then, to Rowan's total shock, he raised his hand appreciatively, his smile broadening, inviting what Rowan had never once in all the seasons he'd watched and rewatched ever seen: a day one, round one, high-five.

Rowan looked around, stunned, certain it must be meant for anyone but him, as though this couldn't really be. His mouth dangled open dumbly as though he'd just gotten the Christmas present he hadn't been expecting, which was something that his grandmother had miraculously seemed to accomplish with stunning regularity during his otherwise meager childhood. He noted a look of pure hatred plastered on Xander's face as he turned back to accept Eric's gesture after having made certain there wasn't someone behind him who better deserved it.

The robotic smile the blond had been forcing all this time had vanished. In its place, a look of calm, predatory contempt had settled across the delicate face of the fitness model-turned-baker, who seemed to be just then calculating exactly how he intended to dismantle the younger man. Rowan flinched at that look, even as he stepped forward and gave Eric a clammy high five, his hand shakier than he wanted it to be.

“I really wasn’t expecting anything to beat the blueberries, simply marvelous little gems. Of course, that’s why I wrote so extensively about them. I wouldn’t call myself an expert, but some people do...” Candace rambled distractedly to no one in particular, cutting a huge portion off from his remaining cake and grabbing it greedily with her bare hands, flopping it to her side of the table, apparently hoarding it for later consumption. “...but this was truly just sensual.” She crooned with scrumptious finality, licking her fingers loudly one at a time in a dismal and disgusting effort to remove the purple glaze now covering them.

“I told Xander I could imagine him a winner earlier,” the comic started, “but after eating your cake, Rowan, I dare fear that winner may well end up being you instead!” The praise caused Rowan’s cheeks to flare with heat.

He returned to his seat gobsmacked, the tiny sliver of cake that Candace hadn’t managed to claim, alongside the coveted high five, a testament to the fact that maybe he really did belong here, even though he doubted it even until now.

Each year on the show, there was a “youngest” contestant. He knew they never won, which was almost certainly his own fate this year. It had taken him nearly a month to believe he wasn’t being scammed somehow when he’d received the email that he’d been selected for this year’s season. And Rowan expected he’d have tremendous difficulty getting over his imposter syndrome here in the tent.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his apron, observing that one of his shoes was somewhat frayed, the rubber sole separating from the upper suede, and his blush deepened. He had felt a bit guilty that morning when he realized he hadn’t packed

a better outfit for the show, opting to wear his usual black hoody with a plain white T-shirt underneath as he always did.

As other contestants shared their creations, he could feel the hair prickling on his neck as he sensed Xander staring at him from across the tent. Rowan refused to look anywhere in that general direction, instead attempting to eat the remaining slice of pistachio cake as discretely as he could, crumbs spilling everywhere. As he chewed the moist sponge, he appreciated what the sour cream had added to his bake and chuckled, still awestruck that he was actually here in The Tent.



THE MYSTERY CHALLENGE had gone relatively easily for everyone. Today's task was merely a simple batch of poppyseed cupcakes that only Bill managed to struggle to execute. His oven had somehow switched to broil mid-bake and scorched his cupcakes to a cinder. Rowan had seen Xander laughing at that, too. And then, at long last, they embarked on the strenuous journey of toiling away for the three hours allotted for the "Centerpiece Challenge."

It had been grueling. More nerve-wracking than Rowan had reasonably expected. But as with the first challenge, they'd each had time to practice, and each had thrown themselves entirely into the fierce competition now, siloing from one another in hushed determination. The space had fallen into a strained and unsettled quiet, the occasional sound of an egg cracking, a blast chiller closing, a stand mixer here, or the *whir* of an oven fan there the only ambiance under the canopy.

They'd each been tasked to make a layer cake with at least three tiers, no sparing on decor or flavor. Rowan had already presented his delicate, raspberry-champaign variant—it was a replica of the cake he'd made his grandmother on her 80th birthday this past August—frosted with white chocolate ganache, studded with plumb, fresh raspberries and finally flaked with bitter dark chocolate cocoa nibs and whips of edible gold, layered with raspberry pate. The whole thing sparkled.

The judges liked it okay. Regrettably, there was no high-five this time. Rowan felt the odds of winning Baker of the Day growing fainter as he returned to his stool, watching uncomfortably as Bill's latest failure was spat out wholesale by Candace, who for the moment seemed unable to speak at all, seemingly dumbstruck by what she'd just had the misfortune of tasting, leaving the table to cleanse her palette off-screen.

Xander had gone first again this round, producing a towering, triple-chocolate mirror-glazed monstrosity that seemed impossible to pull off given their time limit. Where everyone else had gone for only the three required layers, he'd gone for seven, apparently in a bid to show off or perhaps merely a last-ditch effort to gun for Baker of the Day.

Rowan had become flustered watching the thing erect itself, layer after layer, growing bigger all the while, thick with frosting and creme; that robotic smile remained static as the tall, fit baker hummed along with his hallmark efficiency, never stopping to chat, only occasionally flicking his eyes around the room as though scanning for threats before resuming his work, making the smallest of small talk when

the film crew would come over and the hosts would ask him about this or that aspect of his bake. He'd seemed as uninterested in them as he was in everyone else.

For some reason, though, Xander had been sweating visibly through his sweater for some time. Enormous dark stains pooled under his powerful arms as he worked, and it was the singular identifier that he was feeling any of the strain the others felt. His gargantuan black cake had been laced with what Rowan had to admit was some of the finest sugar work he'd ever seen. The entire thing was latticed with faint whisps of honey-gold caramel crackling that made it look like it was encased in some sort of ethereal bonfire, all the threads weaving together to form a pointed tip at the cake's apex where they wound together into a golden sun.

Rowan wanted to taste that cake, badly, mouth watering despite his new dislike for the baker himself. He watched the judges shovel in bite after bite, the fudgy ganache smearing shamelessly across their mouths. But no high five. And he could tell that Xander was furious as he returned to his station, looking hatefully at his creation like it had betrayed him somehow, dumping it into the trash when he got there to the hushed *gasp* of a few contenders.

The final contestant to present her showstopper was Avanti—a woman Rowan had spent much time chit-chatting with the night before. If he were honest, he'd sort of sought her out on purpose. He knew himself to be the youngest contestant, she the oldest, and he'd felt naturally drawn to her grandmotherly warmth the moment he'd heard her deep, gravely voice and throaty, contagious laugh. The two had shared a gin and tonic and talked about their bakes late into

the prior evening, and he knew he could learn a lot from her.

She had done well during the mystery challenge. The woman, British-born but of East Indian descent, must have been in her late 70s, much like his own grandmother and her decades of experience cooking for her family had made her an effortless expert at all things culinary. She claimed she didn't use recipes or measure ingredients. She called it "cooking from the heart." And what she'd cooked today was nothing short of incredible: a triple-creme, flambeed chili pineapple cake adorned with candied macadamia nuts, layered with sheets of Swiss meringue, and a snow of toasted coconut dashed across its surface. It was a riot of color and texture and it had apparently been the single most delicious bake of the day.

Avanti received the second and final high-five of the day, the most given out this early on in any season Rowan had ever watched. He winked at her chummily as she returned to her station at the rear of the tent, face alight at her accomplishment, seemingly overwhelmed with emotion at her hard-earned success. He couldn't have been happier for her.

But Rowan knew the show was about to transition to the part he'd hated his entire life: the farewell. And he felt his heart flutter with dread. Even though he knew he hadn't come last in any specific challenge, he was still worried about being sent home, however irrational that worry was. He never truly felt like he knew where he stood in life, and this was no exception. His mind flicked to Bill, who had definitely had the roughest day today, and his heart sank for the man, knowing how disappointed he must feel and how

hollow it would be to say, “But what an accomplishment just to be here at all...”

A French woman, Mirabelle, had won the first Baker of the Day immunity. Then they announced which of them was to be the first to leave. It was Bill because of course it was. Candace still wouldn't look at the man, seemingly finding his culinary skills unforgivable and worthy of nothing short of contempt. The other two hosts only made a superficial effort to cheer him up, and the rest of the contestants mostly left the man alone. Xander had even let out a harsh little laugh that he excused away frantically, saying, “Sorry, I was just so nervous it might be me!” before leaving the tent ahead of everyone else, a wake of quizzical and judgmental looks trailing behind him from those who had noticed his odd behavior.

As everyone else cleaned up their stations and filtered out back to the tudor, murmured chatter of today's survivors heading to the village's small pub and celebrating with a pint tempted Rowan. However, he'd made a rather big mess during his final bake and hadn't finished cleaning up yet. And he was still scrubbing away at his cooktop after they'd all left one by one—a particularly burnt bit of caramel refusing to wipe away—grinning to himself about the day. After a while, he found that Bill and he were the only ones left in The Tent. The space felt remarkably empty after having been so full of life and tension just an hour ago, and the sunlight outside was waning and casting moody shadows across the estate now.

“Do you need some help?” he offered gently, seeing that the man very much did. He'd been impotently wiping the same patch of his wood-topped station for the last half-hour,

having eaten half of his “Centerpiece” with his free, bare hand as he did so, apparently catatonic. “I’d love a piece if you can spare some,” Rowan offered, extending a plate towards the man, trying his best to look appetized by the slab of peanut butter chocolate goo that lay deformed, half-eaten on the counter’s edge.

“Really? You do?” Bill asked hesitantly, seeming much less trusting of people now than he had just the night before when Rowan had first met him.

“Yeah, absolutely!” He lied, eyeing the puddle of under-cooked batter oozing out from the middle of the “cake.” Bill handed him some, and Rowan took an intrepid bite of the too-big piece that had been offered him then. “I really get the peanut butter!” Rowan smacked, his mouth thick with the stuff. The man had used straight-up peanut butter to layer the cakes he’d only partially baked, and it did nothing to help him choke down the under-baked muck of the chocolate mess. Rowan desperately wished he’d had a glass of water, looking down panicked at the remaining expanse of his portion. He then forced himself to try to eat what was still on his plate, Bill watching him intently.

“They just didn’t understand the flavors, I guess...” Bill shrugged helplessly. That’s my wife’s favorite cake, you know?” He added a bit defensively. Grandkids, too.” Then, a startling flash of defiant anger before his face settled quickly back into his aww-shucks grandpa routine. “Oh well, I can’t please everyone.” He finished, his voice still terse.

“It’s a good cake,” Rowan lied, tossing what was left of it discreetly into the bin when Bill turned to get another cleaning rag. It was not a good cake; Rowan didn’t quite

know if it qualified to be a cake at all. He grabbed a rag anyway and did his best to stay cheery, determined to help the grumpy man bring peace to the warzone he'd created here. He spent another hour doing so, giving the Bill a brief hug before heading inside to meet up with the others.

THE TUDOR WAS EMPTY, and the others understandably did not decide to wait for him before heading off to the pub. Rowan considered joining them, but the half hour or so it would take him to walk into the village suddenly felt not worth the effort. The day had taken a toll on him.

Rowan meandered into the empty test kitchen; the stainless steel work surfaces and various appliances that gave the space purpose jointly reflected the dim twilight glow that filtered through the room's single, huge window. He noticed then that there was a bright pink post-it note stuck to the giant walk-in refrigerator where the bulk of the cooking ingredients used in the competition were stored; his name scrawled in perfect penmanship across it.

ROWAN,

**YOU CAN JOIN US AT THE PUB IF YOU ARE UP
FOR IT; OTHERWISE, I MADE YOU A PLATE OF FOOD
I BROUGHT FROM HOME. IT'S IN THE WALK-IN,
TOP RIGHT SHELF. GOOD BAKING TODAY.**

-AVANTI

He smiled to himself, realizing he was quite hungry, even after the admittedly unappetizing bites of peanut butter-

something he'd forced down, and grabbed the plate she'd made him with no small amount of gratitude from the shelf within before turning to leave. As he spun around, he almost dropped the heavy plate of colorful food straight to the floor. In the freezer doorway now hulked Xander, and by the look of disdain on his face, he was equally disappointed to find Rowan inside.

"Sorry, I thought someone might have left this open—I figured you'd all left." The guy mumbled in a tone dripping with indifference, brushing by Rowan forcefully in the close confines of the space, nearly knocking the plate he'd just almost dropped to the ground once more—its second near-miss in as many minutes.

"They did, yeah," Rowan said uncomfortably, leaving Xander in the walk-in and putting the plate of various curried meats, vegetables, and rice into the microwave, his stomach growling. Indian food was one of his favorites, and he'd only ever eaten it takeaway until now. "I stayed to help Bill clean up his space." He added, against his better judgment, observing Xander's tan, smooth face for any sign of remorse but finding just more nothing.

"Total slob," Xander said dismissively, slamming the giant refrigerator door and palming a container of eggs in one hand. "What's that smell? Ugh, that smells *terrible*." He said disgustedly, waving a huge hand in front of his face and looking at Rowan like the smell must be coming from him, not the food heating up in the microwave.

"Dinner. Avanti left it for me." Rowan answered coolly, Xander's back was to him now, the man cracking egg after egg into a pan, not even salting or peppering the ingredients. The microwave dinged then, and he considered

leaving the test kitchen to eat his dinner in peace, but this was the only room he'd explored in the old house with a dining table. It was positioned dead center of the vast space. So he sat there quietly, hoping Xander would be the one to vacate once he'd finished scrambling his unseasoned eggs, hoping the smell of spice and curry might drive him away.

But it didn't. Either because Xander didn't feel like letting it or because he was treating this, as he seemed to treat everything, like a game: something to be won. He sat dully across from Rowan at the long table, staring at him blankly as he mechanically ate the yellow mound of eggs a bit at a time, seemingly devoid of emotion.

Rowan grimaced with discomfort, then took a bite of the food he'd been given and was instantly spirited elsewhere. The vibrant tastes and textures filling him now transported him far from the dim confines of this unfamiliar space with this unwanted companion and into the world of story and flavor, each bite exploding across his senses, bright and alive. He felt very much connected to it as he always did when he was graced with food like this.

He smiled, chewing at the potatoes and peas he'd begun to dig into contentedly, noting with disquiet that the blank look on Xander's face had grown darker still as he continued to insert the mush of egg into his mouth. Unblinking and unnerving as ever, he watched on as Rowan experienced joy like it was the worst thing he'd ever seen in his entire life.

PLATES

XANDER

THEY'D EATEN in dead silence. The competitor across from him had taken his time with his stinky plate of whatever, smiling dumbly as he ate. Xander had just stared him down, analyzing the guy for hidden faults or buttons he might later exploit, knowing his intense gaze tended to cause others to buckle.

But Rowan ignored him—mostly. Occasionally, the guy would look up from his plate and arc a bushy eyebrow, mouth twisting into a taunting grin, looking at Xander like he'd just been decanted from a clone vat and hadn't been updated with personality protocols yet. His pile of eggs was gone now. The bland, measurable protein had filled him adequately, and he pushed away from the table, rising to leave, satisfied that they had made one another's evenings at least equally uncomfortable.

"Telling Bill to go for it with the rose was a douche move, by the way," Rowan said, finally.

And there it was. Xander grimaced. He could just tell the guy had some additional beef with him beyond the judgmental eye contact he had dared make with him while he'd done his best to stifle a giggle during Bill's review that afternoon. *Who would have ever expected that the guy who baked shitty cakes with some old woman was a goody-goody?* He thought darkly.

Xander *was* uncomfortable at being found out for his role in all of that, though. He especially did not like the idea of word getting around that he merited extra scrutiny. One-on-one, Xander felt he could handle most people, but he didn't like the idea of a group of them ganging up on him, making life in the competition more complicated than it needed to be, getting in the way of the victory he knew was destined for him.

Xander, still midway between sitting and standing, looked Rowan straight in the eyes from his place across the table. He threw his fake smile back to where he tried to keep it before attempting a casual shrug.

"Are you done with that?" Xander offered spontaneously, noting Rowan's plate was now empty, stalling for time, gritting his teeth at the effort of having to smooth things over now with this idiot.

"Uh, I guess?" Rowan answered, seemingly confused about this change in tac. He clearly expected a confrontation from Xander, not an offer to do the dishes.

But Xander knew better than to deny what the guy had said. Sometimes, he'd learned, the best damage control was knowing when to admit you were wrong. He scrubbed first his, then Rowan's plate slowly and methodically in the sink,

the scalding hot water steaming at him from within its stainless steel basin, not even feeling the heat as it turned the skin of his hands a painful crimson red.

“You’re right. That wasn’t kind,” Xander finally apologized into the sink, the words feeling like poison to him as he said them. He was glad Rowan couldn’t see the very real smile he was certain was on his lips now. Xander found he always smiled when he lied like this. The other contestant’s silence felt like a condemnation, so he threw in an extra, “Hey, I was just nervous, you know? I get overly competitive sometimes...I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the others. I have enough trouble fitting in as it is...” And like all of the best lies, it was partially true.

Xander trailed off, nearly believing his own acting skills. He let his broad shoulders slump as he hung his head dejectedly, turning off the faucet and bracing himself against the counter like he was having a moment of deep reflection—knowing full well that he couldn’t care even if he wanted to, which he definitely didn’t. He’d proven that to himself just today for the millionth time when he’d gotten rid of Bill so easily.

But Xander realized then that he wasn’t *not* having some sort of moment. There had been a part of him back there in The Tent that had faltered a bit when he’d been unable to feel satisfied like he had always struggled to feel satisfied. And he found it kept him from feeling that any of it mattered or was even real at all. And that experience had been disconcerting to some lurking part of him, a shadow he couldn’t fully make out drifting along the edges of his conscious mind, ensconcing the place in unending darkness.

Throughout his life, all Xander had ever seemed to be able to get himself to care about was what other people thought of him, how impressive they found him to be, and almost all of his self-worth had been derived from without as a result. Nothing else had ever felt remotely fulfilling. Nothing. In a fucked up way, he'd spent his whole life crafting a personality—no, an entire existence—where he would never have to confront the rift of dissonance that compulsion created within him.

It was as though the self he forced himself to perform wasn't a self at all but a hologram that only existed in service of its own coopted ego. It was emotionless, unyielding, and cruel, and all the long while of his sad life it had occupied the void where his true self might have formed. It had forced him to experience from afar a life he couldn't ever feel he was truly connected to.

But he *did* feel one emotion quickly and often: anger. And he found himself suddenly furious; at himself, at Rowan, at the fucking judges who hadn't understood the role sour cream had played in his first bake, and at the stupid old man for not knowing better than to use rose flavoring in the first place, at that French woman who had stolen the first Baker of the Day from him and at Avanti who had only left curry for Rowan and none for him. Xander was outraged by all of it. He found himself suddenly fighting against the feral urge to let loose an unending howl, bitter and vicious, an expulsion of all the horrible thoughts that had loped through his mind before he could remember.

After all, how was any of this really *his* fault? How was *he* responsible? Bill had made his own decisions, the same as anyone. They were all there based on their own merit,

weren't they? And if that sloppy idiot didn't know better than to drown his ill-baked cake in fucking perfume, why the hell was that Xander's problem? It was a fucking competition, after all. Kill or be killed.

The plates crashed loudly into the sink, shattering to pieces; his hold had tightened so furiously on the brittle ceramic that he'd cracked the stack clean apart on either side, the remaining fragments still very much gripped in his hands even now, his blood splattering messily into the basin as it spilled from a renewed cut on the palm of his left hand. He looked at it all incredulously.

And then, just like that, he felt better. The urge to scream abated now, his mood returning to level. He eyed his destruction curiously with detached calm like whatever had just happened had been a brief and fitful dream from which he'd arisen even-keeled and ready to continue doing what needed to be done.

And that question of what needed to be done had only ever had a single answer: to win, of course. Because what else was there?

