

A man is seen from the chest up, looking out of an oval airplane window. The window is dark, and the man's face is partially illuminated by a light source from the left. Outside the window, a bright light source, possibly a star or a distant city, is visible against a dark, starry background. The word "MISCONCEPTIONS" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image, partially obscuring the man's face and the window view.

MISCONCEPTIONS

Was this a good idea?

That was the question that had been playing over and over in Seb's mind in the four weeks between Christmas - when Seb had invited Sloane to be his plus one at the wedding of his friends Tasha and Grant - and today, when they'd both arrived at O'Hare ready to fly to Ireland.

He'd questioned whether he should be attending the wedding - it was two days before he had to be in Antarctica for Christ's sake. But he knew what it looked like if he'd invited her and then decided at the last minute that he wasn't going. He'd look like he was running again. And he couldn't keep running.

Besides - it wasn't fair to Tasha and Grant for him not to turn up after they'd made it so abundantly clear that they wanted him there. So - at the wedding he would be, before making the long trip to drop Sloane back off in Chicago, before flying south for his showdown with Isaiah.

What the fuck was he doing?

"You know, this trip would probably be a little more fun if we actually had a conversation or two," said Sloane, dropping her latest book onto the seat next to her and flashing one of her 'I'm going to get my way' smiles at him. "Or did you literally only invite me to annoy Tasha?"

"Of course not," Seb said, shaking his head. He turned his seat around to face her, and forced his face into a smile.

"Ouch," she said. "That looked like it hurt - you okay?"

"What did?" he asked.

"The amount of force you had to put into making your face look... I want to say happy, but if that's happy, I want no part of it," she said. Seb rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine. Thank you so much for caring," he said. "Was there something specific you wanted to talk about?"

"Sooooooo many things - the current political landscape in America, the rise of AI and whether it's likely to trigger a third world war and/or excessive use in movies, whether you think Tasha's cheated on Grant yet, why you're so intent on breaking up what is a seemingly successful tag team..." Sloane said, counting off on her fingers as she went.

"I'm sorry, you think I would know whether Tasha has cheated on Grant, and would still be attending their wedding if I did?" he asked.

"I'm just saying - she has history," said Sloane.

"Yes, but knowing Grant's... reputation... I don't think she has much need to cheat on him, now does she?" said Seb. Sloane blushed.

"Yeah, well, she cheated on you," she said. Seb opened his mouth to answer, but tilted his head instead.

"I'm not sure whether that was supposed to be a dig, or a compliment..." said Seb.

"Neither! Or...Both... I don't know," said Sloane, her eyes widening. "I'm just saying, I don't think... She'd have had many reasons to cheat on... you... either..."

"Is *that* what you're saying?" Seb asked, his mouth curving into a smirk.

"OhMyGodCanWeJustTalkAboutThelsaiahThingPlease?!" said Sloane, her mouth working faster than Seb's ears. He smirked.

"What you need to understand about that is..." Seb began, but as he did, the door leading to the cockpit opened and the captain stepped out. "Everything alright, Chris?"

"Not exactly," said the Captain. "Nothing too serious, but we need to land - we've got a few warnings lighting up and we need to get them checked before we can fly any further."

"Alright," said Seb. "Land where?"

"Makkovik," said the pilot.

"... Where the fuck is Makkovik?" Seb asked.

"Newfoundland," replied the Captain, as he turned back towards the cockpit.

"And what exactly is there in Makkovik?" asked Seb.

"Well there's an airport," said the Captain. "And about 350 people..."

"Brilliant," said Seb, glancing over at Sloane, who was giggling. "Absolutely fucking brilliant..."

There is a misconception between us, Isaiah. One that I feel must be addressed right at the beginning of this particular tale – a balance that must be redressed. Because I refuse to allow you to walk into this match between the two of us with any preconceived notions of how and why we got to where we are today. And I'm not talking about the two of us as former Tag Team Champions. I'm not even talking about how we ended up with you coming out to help me when I told you and everyone else I didn't need it.

I'm talking about Sebastian Everett-Bryce and Isaiah King as opponents.

The misconception being that, I don't respect you. I hate to burst your little hate bubble, Princeling. But the reality we face is that this couldn't be any further from the truth. In fact, I think I've gone out of my way to show you respect. Even after you beat me to take away the Universal Championship, I tipped my hat in respect. A fact that you conveniently forget when you make yourself the victim in our story – when you choose to instead focus on my single-mindedness as it concerned our mutual opponent at last year's Snow Holds Barred...

You took offence that Jonathan Bacchus was the target of my ire.

But allow me to clarify what you should have known from the beginning. I had no animosity towards you – in fact, in my opinion, you were the right man to walk out of that Triple Threat with the Universal Championship. You were dialled in, whilst I was distracted. You wanted the win. Bacchus and I wanted revenge. So when I focused my own anger at having lost, it wasn't aimed at the man who showed up to work to win the prize that we should have all been focused upon.

It was personal with him – it wasn't with you.

I tell you this, not because I want you to take things easy on me, Princeling. And definitely not because I hope we'll walk out of the other side of this contest as anything but two people who once knew one another. I tell you this, because I refuse to allow you to use your misplaced righteous indignation as fuel for battle, because I refuse to let you make yourself into the kind of martyr you need to be to give yourself any chance of victory.

Because that's what your little pity-parade is all about – the fact that you can't get your dick hard unless you're mad at someone.

And I refuse to be your Blue Chew for this fight.

"Alright," said Seb, hanging up his phone. "Luckily, it's a slow visitor day, and Anabel was able to secure all five rooms at Hotel Makkovik – it's your lucky day! So that's enough rooms for all of you,"

"All of... *us*?" said Sloane. "What about you?"

"I'll stay here on the plane," said Seb. "There's a bed and everything, I'll be fine."

"Or you could come with us, and hang out," she said. "You know, like a normal person."

"Also, there's six of us," said the Captain.

"Yes, well, you gents will have to share – let the ladies have their own rooms," said Seb.

"We can share," said Carla – the lead Flight Attendant. Gemma and Rebecca both nodded. "That way you can come too and..."

"Or you five can take the rooms and get a good night's rest for a long flight tomorrow, and I can stay here and keep your boss company," said Sloane. She turned her head to Seb. He rolled his eyes again.

"Sure, you can take the bed, I'm sure I'll be perfectly comfortable on the couch," he said, rolling his eyes. "Are they going to work on the plane tonight?"

"At some point, yeah – we have our engineers flying up. They're only a couple of hours behind – they should be able to check everything over and give us the okay for wheel's up in the morning. We'll get back at six am and try to get a head start on..." said Captain Chris.

Seb held up his hands.

"Relax, Cap," he said with a smile. "No rush – we were heading out a few days early anyway. The wedding isn't until Friday. Rest up, sleep in, go and visit the..."

Seb cleared his voice and looked down at the text from Anabel.

"... Museum... Oh... That's it. There's a museum..." said Seb.

"I think maybe we'll just watch some movies..." said Gemma. Seb smiled, and glanced at Sloane.

"Yeah, us too," he said.

A few minutes later, the Co-Captains and the flight attendants were being driven the short distance to the hotel, while Seb and Sloane retreated back up into the plane, where Seb pulled up the steps and shut the door.

"So," said Sloane, "You mentioned movies?"

"Sure, Chaos," said Seb with a smile. "If you want to Netflix and chill, we can do that."

"Sebastian!" she said, blushing again. Seb chuckled. Sloane quickly flicked on the TV and began working through the copious options – every one she lingered on making Seb groan internally.

"You know, if you're going to make me watch Legally Blonde AGAIN I'm going to need to crack open the liquor cabinet," said Seb.

"Or you could just talk to me about you and Isaiah," Sloane said. "About what's going on inside that head of yours?"

Seb paused and turned to look at her again.

"Legally Blonde it is, Chaos," he said, before pulling open the fridge, pulling out a bottle of champagne and grabbing two glasses.

If you want something to be angry about, buddy, it's going to have to be something other than that chip you carry around on your shoulder. Because this, between you and me, has never been about respect. I don't hate you, I don't even dislike you. I'm just frustrated *by* you. Frustrated about how everything either of us has done in the last year and a half has been boiled down to this one, single idea that the issue between the two of us is about the fact that *I* disrespect *you*.

But more than anything, I'm frustrated by your duplicity.

Because for all your anger and rage about what you think you're owed in terms of respect, the truth is, you're a hypocrite. Because when I sit back and think about it, for you to believe that the issue between us is just a lack of respect, that has to be because you're projecting how you feel back at me. For you to think that we got here because I don't give you the respect you deserve, that has to mean that you have less respect for *me* than *I* deserve. You're the one with the problem – not me.

Because for me, this isn't about who respects who. It's just about who's better.

And the fact is, without all that bitter anger about being overlooked, and being bypassed, you don't have the heart, the soul or the stomach to beat me. You proved that at War Games when I took *YOUR* half of *OUR* Tag Team Titles. You may have been the one focused on the prize at Snow Holds Barred, but the only reason you won that match was because you thought you had to prove something – not to yourself.

But to me.

And now, here I am, telling you that you already have my respect... So... What exactly are you fighting for? You'd best work it out sooner than later, Princeling, because

without something to cling onto, your hopes of beating me on Sunday are drifting away on a current you can't swim against.

Because without all that impotent rage, Isaiah, who the fuck are you?

Seb hadn't been focused on the movie - when the credits began to roll, he realised he'd barely taken it in save for a few tertiary smiles when he knew Sloane had been looking at him - she had thoroughly enjoyed it though, as she always had. Though, the fact that she'd drank three quarters of the champagne with just pretzels, Nerd ropes and sour patch kids in her stomach had probably elevated her enjoyment.

She was slumped low in her seat, when her eyes turned onto Seb.

"So why are you and Isaiah fighting again?" she asked.

"Really? Now is when you want to get deep and meaningful?" Seb asked.

"As good of a time as any," she said with a smirk. "I'm serious, Seb - you could still stop this."

"I don't want to stop it," Seb said calmly. "Isaiah has been a thorn in my... No, strike that, he's been a pain in my arse for the last year. I'll be happy to finally cut him out once and for all..."

"See, I don't believe that," said Sloane, taking another sip of champagne.

"Oh of course you wouldn't," said Seb, getting to his feet. He had nowhere to go, but he just needed to move.

"I don't," she said. "I think he's just another... thing... that you're trying to cut yourself off from."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Seb asked - knowing exactly what it meant. Sloane pushed herself up, the champagne making her bold.

"You've spent the last couple of years quietly snipping every string that connected you to things and people you love - I still can't work out why you're so intent on being alone buuuuut... You are, and this thing with Isaiah is just another excuse to try and cut yourself off from the world. Because you're Seb - and you don't need anyone," she added. That last sentence had come with an impression too - and in his annoyed state, Seb refused to admit... It was pretty good.

"I'm not going over this again," said Seb.

"Of course not, why would you?" she said. "Why talk about anything real when you can just make sex jokes that you're never going to actually follow through on..."

"... What?" said Seb, his eyes blinking.

"Nothing, Sebastian," Sloane said, finishing off the glass she had in her hand. "But my point is the same as it was at Christmas - you're trying to cut yourself off from everyone. Even Lucy - when was the last time you actually saw your BFF?"

"I don't think you're one to judge the status of the relationship with *my* best friend, do you?" Seb said. Sloane opened her mouth to speak. But instead, she just looked... hurt. "I'm sorry... That was unfair..."

"No, it's fine," she said. "I should probably...."

"Chaos," Seb said, reaching out and gripping her wrist - not hard, but enough to make her face him. "I mean it - I know I'm a dick, but even for me that was a shitty thing to say. I'm sorry..."

"It's fine," said Sloane, the tears seemingly lifting from her eyes. "I think maybe we should get some sleep..."

"Yeah," said Seb. "You take the bed, and I'll sleep on the couch."

"Oh don't be a dummy," she said. "It's a big bed, and we're both adults."

"I'll be fine out here," he said.

"No, you can sleep in the bed, or I'll sleep out here... Just give me a minute to get changed... Oh... Shoot!"

"What?" Seb asked.

"All my clothes are in my case in the hold - I don't have anything to sleep in..." she said.

"Just sleep in your clothes?" Seb said.

"You can't actually expect me to sleep in jeans..." she asked. Seb chuckled, before reaching down into his carry on case and pulling out a spare shirt.

"Here," he said. "You can wear that."

"Thanks," said Sloane, before disappearing into the bedroom. Seb began to clear up the dishes and the packaging. As he turned off the TV he heard the door to the bedroom open and he turned.

Sloane stepped out, barefoot, his shirt looking like a dress - and a thousand memories that he'd tried to forget came flooding back.

"I just wanted to get some water... In case I wake up," she said. Seb nodded and she filled a glass from a bottle in the fridge. "Like I said the... Bed is..."

"The couch is fine, Chaos," he said. And for a second, he could have sworn he saw a hint of disappointment. She nodded, and stepped back inside the bedroom, closing the door.

Seb bit his lip. His heart was pounding in his chest.

He couldn't do it - he couldn't follow her. Soon Death would return, and he wouldn't put her through the pain of losing... What? He didn't even know what they were. Or what they could be...

"Fuck it," he said, as he strode towards the door and lifted his hand to knock. But as he did...

But what if it's not what she wants?

A shadow moved beneath the doorway. His hand stopped mid-air. He lowered it, and rested his head against the door.

"I'm sorry... I can't..." he said quietly. And the strip of light at the base disappeared.

And he honestly wasn't sure if what he felt was disappointment or relief.

He needed a fucking drink.

See, that's the part you're just not ready to face, Princeling.

Because this isn't just about the win or the loss, it's about what you need to believe if you're going to keep standing on business the way that you do. Because you need a reason. Something. Anything. Some kind of slight or disrespect. Something on the outside that you can point at and say *this is why*. Because without that, without something to push up against, that fire in you starts to die out.

And you know I don't fight that way.

I don't need your disrespect to give this meaning. I don't need to be wronged, or slighted to do what I do better than anyone else on this planet. That's what's truly different between the Emperor and the Prince. Not ability, not legacy, not even ambition. It's that I can live with what I am when that bell rings. Win, lose or draw.

But can you?

Because when you strip away the anger, the grievance and that story that you tell yourself, all that's left is the one thing that neither of us can run away from. Not our fathers, not our own internalised bullshit. Just our own reflection in that mirror. Not whether we like what we see looking back at us, but if we can live with who we are despite everything we know is going on behind those eyes.

And whether you like it or not, that's the only judgement that matters.

Seb awoke the next morning, and found himself face down... on the bed? That hadn't been where he was supposed to sleep. He rubbed his eyes and rolled over, checking his phone to see that it was almost nine. He cleared his throat and climbed out of bed, pulling his shirt back on and pushed open the door to the main cabin.

"Morning," said Sloane with a smile on her face. She was fully dressed in brand new clothes from her case which now sat on the seat opposite her, and eating an acai bowl. "Sleep okay?"

"Not well enough apparently," he said, rubbing his still tired eyes. "You?"

"Took a little while, but I got there eventually," she said. Seb smiled. He could see the mask she'd slipped on – whether for him, or for everyone else, he wasn't sure. But he was grateful that she wore it – at least for now.

"Good," he said, before glancing at Gemma. "I thought I told all of you to take your time this morning."

"Well, seeing as there is literally nothing to do here, we didn't see much point sitting around in the hotel," she said. "So we came back, fixed everyone's breakfast, and the engineers got your cases out of the hold so you could change clothes."

"Good," said Seb with a smile. "I did have a spare shirt, but *someone* commandeered it,"

"Good thing I realised you might want it back, because if these guys had hopped back on board while I was trying to work the coffee machine just wearing that, I might have died," said Sloane.

"Just the shirt?" Seb asked, with a slight sparkle in his eyes. "Well if I'd known that, I may have reconsidered the offer to share the bed with you..."

He offered her a wink, and Sloane's cheeks went pink.

"To sleep!" said Sloane, looking at Gemma, before snapping her eyes back to him. "Sebastian!"

Seb chuckled, Gemma did her best impression of someone who didn't hear a word that either of them had just said.

"We should be good to go in the next twenty minutes," said the Captain, popping his head around the cockpit door. "Should take around five hours to get there."

"Thank you, Cap," said Seb with a nod as Gemma handed him a fresh cup of tea and a plate of crumpets.

"And here I thought the stereotype of tea and crumpets was just a terrible misconception," said Sloane.

"No, Chaos – that one's true," said Seb with a smile. "Some things are just as they're supposed to be."

"Mmm," said Sloane, with a hint of sadness in her voice at the notion.

"But maybe not everything," he said. The sadness lifted from Sloane's face, as the plane engines fired into life.

You built yourself up as the underdog – the one who was always being looked over and looked past. Every single major moment of your career has stemmed from the fact that you were angry and bitter at the world. Every single one of your major achievements has come off the back of you sneering at someone you think wronged you. Your father. The partners that walked away and left you behind. Bacchus for wanting to destroy me. Me for not acknowledging you.

But when you don't have that, you have nothing.

You proved that when James Shark took the Universal Championship off you at the first attempt. You couldn't be angry and bitter at him, could you, Isaiah? Because who he was, is who you claimed to be. If anyone was overlooked and ignored it was the man who you stood across from when you defended that Universal Championship the first time. So when you couldn't be indignant, you couldn't be effective. And just like that, the would-be King couldn't hold on to his throne.

You couldn't even convince yourself that you were worthy of the crown.

See, that's what makes us similar, Princeling – for all our big talking and clever words, it's never our opponents that tear us apart the most. It's that reflection in the mirror – it's the look in our father's eyes. I've tried so hard not to judge myself by my father's standards, but we both know how difficult it is to step out from the shadow cast by those who came before us. I think that's why we worked as partners. I think that's why we worked as Exiles. Because we're both trying so hard to get away from what we see of ourselves when we look one another in the eye.

But that was then, and this is now. And do you know the difference between us, Princeling?

I don't need to blame anyone else. I don't need to hate you to beat you. I don't need to resent you, or feel bitterness towards you. My fuel comes from what's inside me. It comes from trying so hard not to become the one thing I fear I'll one day be. I used to think that was my father – I used to think it was a failure. But my biggest fear, Isaiah, is that one day I'll wake up and I'll have become something even worse than all of that.

It's that I'll become you.

And I don't think I could stomach that.

Maybe once we've finally gotten this out of our systems, we can just forget one another exists.

But before all that, there's work to be done.

And misconceptions to shatter.

See you Sunday, friend.

THE END