

THE STORY OF DEATH

Overshadowed, overshadowed, overshadowed.

That's the story of this next Championship defence - not for me, but for the two men who seek to take what I have. For Adeyemi, it is the story of a man who one year ago walked into this very event as the XWF Universal Champion, only to lose that championship to his friend and partner. His year-long story of redemption overshadowed by the rise of a new order in the company he has called home. A new Empire. Even your reward for victory at War Games has been overshadowed by the existing rivalry between Jonathan and I

Prince Adeyemi. Afterthought.

And for Jonathan Bacchus, well, truth be told everything of note that you've done has been overshadowed one way or another. Your victory for the Empire State Championship, overshadowed by the revelation of the Triumvirate. Your appearance in Triad, overshadowed by the performance of your partners. Your debut here, in XWF, and your quest to finally launch your rebellion at my expense, all put on hold by your failures, and shrouded by the false notion that we're on your timeline.

Jonathan Baccus. Salesman.

After everything you've both accomplished, you have to wonder why the crowning moment of the last year for both of you, is the chance to step into the ring with me.

The Rebel, the Wayward Prince and the Emperor of Chaos.

What a trio we make.

December 1853 - Volyné, Bohemia

Heavy rain had been falling for the last seven hours, and the banks of the Volyňka had been steadily rising all day. Dušan had planned to stay inside where, it was dry, but the rising water had made him nervous. When the rain had started to fall, he had hurriedly tied up his small fishing boat, but as the rain had begun to fall harder, he had started to worry that perhaps his knots had not been quite strong enough. That fear is what had driven him out into the torrential rain, trying to hide within the treelines, as the rain poured and plastered his grey hair to his head.

He moved one tree at a time, trying to avoid as much of the rain as possible, but it was to no avail. Dušan was soaked to the skin. Despite his age - now into his sixties - Dušan was fit and healthy, mostly due to fact that he would wake before dawn to head out onto his boat to catch fish for the day.

Then he would head into the town where he would spend his days mending clothes. He was well liked - and was often asked why lived alone. He never answered. Afterall in a town of three thousand people, it was unlikely that there was anyone who didn't know his story by now. He'd married his first love in his late teens and they had lived together in a small home that he'd built, outside of the town, near to the river. Dušan had been happy, with dreams of opening his own Tailor shop.

One night, he'd returned home to find a note from his wife to tell him that she had left. There was no explanation, save for the fact that she had grown to want more from life. It had left him with a burning question for three decades

Why?

As the years passed, his heart stopped yearning for the girl he'd met in his youth. Instead, it had hardened and grown cold. No wife, no children, no family at all. Nothing to tie him to the world save for the dream that one day he'd open his shop in the small town he called home.

Even that hope had passed him by.

All that he had left was his home and the small boat. Which he could now see floating away from the river bank. The water had lifted it until the ties had come loose.

"Damn you," he said beneath his breath as he waded out into the river. The water was bitterly cold, and his teeth were chattering before it reached his knees. He lunged in deeper, and felt the current catch him. This was good, he thought, he could use the power of the river to bring him to his vessel.

But the current was too strong, and he approached the boat too quickly. He raised his arms to catch hold, but he merely collided with the hull and bounced away. The water tossed him, until he found himself tangled in the branches of a fallen tree. He held on for dear life, as he caught his breath and turned to see the fate of his boat.

As it surged towards him with the speed of the raging river.

He felt the bow of the boat collide with his face, and his back press deeper into the branches. And all went black.



Finally, the Revolution can begin.

Or something to that effect. But let's be realistic here Johnny - when it comes to you and I, you're out of your depth. You've BEEN out of your depth at every single opportunity you've had to face me. It's why you've been so gun-shy since the day you finally showed your face in XWF. It's why you've hidden behind your delusions that the time and place that we'd finally face would be set by you and you alone. And yet, here we are, finally face to face.

And you had to bring a friend to the party? I'm disappointed.

Because that can be the only explanation for why Adeyemi is here too. This is your time, right? Your choice. Your calendar. This is the moment you carefully curated to finally get me where you wanted me. And to give you the best chance to do so you needed to bring a distraction... Someone who perhaps, might take my scalp, and allow you to pick the bones and claim that you did what you proclaimed to here for all along.

That has to be the only explanation.

Otherwise, you have to finally admit that you weren't in control at all. Ever. That when Ned Kaye won at Leap of Faith, he stole your path to get to me. When he and I faced one another at Relentless, we took away the spotlight you wanted. And then... You just weren't worthy. Instead, you stole your way into a shot that should have belonged to Isaiah alone. He won at War Games while you played elsewhere. He earned the opportunity.

You, the Revolutionary, are taking the chance you never earned.

How disappointing.

But that's the story of Johnathan Bacchus, am I right? All pomp but no circumstance. I look forward to hearing the pretty words used in an attempt to inflate your relevance. Only to see the wind leave your sails when you have to actually accomplish something.

Moriarty you may be - but this is yet another Reichenbach Fall.

And I'm not sure you'll survive this time.



His eyes flickered open -no longer feeling cold nor wet. Quite the opposite in fact. He could hear the water trickling by. He found the sky to be the brightest blue, and the grass had never felt softer beneath his back. He pushed himself up, waiting for pain to hit, but it did not. Instead, he felt as though every ailment of his age had left him entirely.

“Do not be surprised - but it is both a blessing, and a curse,” said a voice. Dušan jumped to his feet, and turned around to find a woman in a black cloak sitting upon the trunk of a fallen tree. She pushed back her hood. It was her eyes were what he noticed first. They were a brilliant shade of blue. Then her hair, as black as pitch.

“How long was I unconscious?” asked Dušan, looking around. The river appeared calm, as though the banks had never broken - how could that be?

“Hours. Days. Weeks. Perhaps years - time is... Strange to me,” said the woman. Dušan had no patience for riddles.

“Speak plainly. Did you pull me from the river?” he asked.

“I did not,” she said. “Do I look like the kind of person who would pull a man from a river?”

He assessed her again - her cloak was pristine. Dušan shook his head and she smiled at him.

“I am sorry,” she said. “Truly.”

“Is my boat damaged? Where is it - it could be repaired,” he said, looking around for any signs of the vessel. “Please - I need to find my boat.”

“You do not,” she said, sympathetically as she stood. “You won’t be needing anything anymore...”

“What are you talking about?” asked Dušan. He could feel his temper quickening, his heat rising.

“My name is Morana,” she said. The way she said it was utterly matter of fact - but he knew what that name represented. He blinked at her and then began to chuckle. Entirely unphased, she smiled back at him and continued. “And you are Dušan Horak.”

“I am to be impressed that you know my name? Everyone in the town knows my name. The poor widower who lives by the river. So lonely. So sad,” he spat on the ground and waved his hand in the air, he turned and began to walk down stream. But with every step, the light began to fade, the chill began to grow, and the sound of the river became more violent. He paused and slowly turned his head back to the hooded woman. She wagged her fingers to him in greeting illuminated by a sun that did not touch him.

He took a deep, steadying breath, before returning towards the warmth and light.

“Who are you?” he asked.

"I am Morana," she repeated, "The Goddess of Death,"

His blood chilled at the confirmation - he swallowed hard but found his voice.

"And what do you want from me?" Dušan asked. And for a moment, there was a look upon the woman's face that he hadn't expected. Pity.

"You know the answer to that," she said, her eyes drifting towards the river. As he followed her gaze, the sunshine broke at the bank, and Dušan dropped to his knees. A body floating at the water's edge, surrounded by the remnants of the stupid little boat he'd tried to save.

"I am dead?" he asked, and felt stupid for doing so. For hoping for comfort from the goddess of Death. But as if sensing his need, she reached out and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Close," she said quietly. "But there remains hope."

"What hope is there?" he said, looking at his own corpse. "My body is broken - my life is spent."

"You have a choice, Dušan. You may choose to accompany me, and I will escort you across the Smorodina to live out eternity in Nawia. Or, you may choose to face me in a game. Victory will return you to your body - you may not be fully healed, but you will have a chance at life," she said calmly.

"And if I lose?" he asked - he recognised the pessimism before he saw it reflected back in Morana's face.

"You know the answer to that, my friend," said Morana. Dušan's skin pimpled as the cold chill ran up his neck - eternity with a soul that would never rest. Ghost. Demon. Whatever you chose to call it - he would never Nawia.

But would that be much different to the life he led? He was all but a ghost - unfeeling, unloved, without family nor friend. Would it really be such a sacrifice in exchange for the chance to live again? Perhaps he could change his ways - to open his heart. But to do that he would need to survive.

"Choose wisely," said Morana. "For your choice is final."

Dušan looked to the body that languished in the water, and did not see the body of the man he had been, but the time he'd wasted. He wanted to live again - to find a purpose.

The Tailor-shop he'd always wanted.

"I wish to play," he said. "I wish to win back my life."

“You understand the consequences?” Morana offered - and Dušan nodded solemnly. It was a risk he was willing to take.

Morana nodded, before reaching into the folds of her cloak, before plucking out a stick with a thin wisp of white material tied to the end.

“Choose your vessel,” she said calmly.



We're the choices we make, isn't that right Isaiah? Can I call you Isaiah? I'm going to call you Isaiah.

Everything you've done, every choice you've made since the day that Ned Kaye pinned your shoulders to the mat a year ago, has brought you to where we are today. You were the first real test of my new reign, and I yet another trial for you to face on your path back to redemption. But that doesn't change the outcome. The simple fact that our first contest was thrust upon the two of us doesn't do anything to change what was written in either of our stories.

Sebastian one, Isaiah zero.

I know, I know - it's a little crass. But I'll be forgiven for allowing myself the chance to purr at the memory of putting a former XWF Universal Champion to the sword. Because you are a true great, Isaiah. You proved that at War Games. I wasn't surprised to see you stand victorious at the end of that night. Because for men like you, events like War Games are truly perfect.

Men for whom every day is a fight.

I won't bore you with comparisons between you and I, but we both know the similarities. Our struggle comes from men like Jonathan who believe we don't deserve what we have because we don't live up to his notion of who or what we should be. We don't play by his rules and we don't align ourselves to his standards. We choose our own path no matter what men like him think. We forge our own way, no matter how they sneer in our direction.

We make our choices. And will live or die by the consequences.

For you, the choice was to come for me again. I can respect that - it takes courage to face that which you have failed, and try again. I've been there, and I've slain the demons that sat upon my shoulders. I've faced those who I thought insurmountable and scaled their challenge. This is your chance, your opportunity. If you do this, you'll be reborn into greatness.

But if you fail yet again, Prince? Isaiah may be all that's left.

And I'm not entirely sure that you'll be able to live with that.



“I do not understand,” said Dušan, looking at the stick in her hand. “What do you mean?”

“The game is Sticks - choose your vessel and we shall race,” she said. Dušan couldn’t believe his ears - a child’s game would decide his life. A game in which each would choose a stick and toss them into the river - the first to cross a line would be the victor. He nodded at Morana and began his hunt - the key was the smoothest stick possible.

After a moment of searching, he found his quarry - he removed the bark, before he turned and presented his vessel. Morana smiled and tied a small clipping of black material around it - not that it was needed. the two were as different as could be.

“I shall toss them both in to begin the race, and we shall watch from the bridge,” she said calmly.

“But the bridge is down river - however will we get there before the sticks?” he asked. Morana smiled as she tossed them both into the middle of the water. She stepped towards him and placed a hand upon his arm.

It felt like flying, but also like rolling down a hill as the world compressed him from all sides. Before he had a chance to truly identify the feeling of traveling in this way, he found himself standing upon the bridge, the two sticks traveling towards them. He looked over the edge just in time to see his disappear beneath the bridge first.

“Yes!” he yelled in triumph - and as he crossed to the opposite side. But when he looked down... “... No...”

It was the knobbly stick with the white cloth that appeared first.

“I am sorry,” said Morana. “I am truly sorry.”

“You are not,” said Dušan. His life and his soul were forfeit and all she could offer were truthless platitudes.

“I do not choose who dies,” said Morana, “It is my job to carry those who choose to pass to Nawia, and to play the game that seals their fate. But it is not I who chooses the who or the when.”

“And do you love your role in this world?” he asked.

“I enjoy taking consented souls to the realm beyond - those who have made peace with a life well-lived. Days like today, however, they plague me. I have lost count of the number who have fallen to their knees before me and begged for another choice,” she said.

“And have you ever given them one?” he asked.

“There is no other choice,” Morana said calmly. But as her sapphire eyes, looked into his, her breath caught. “Or perhaps...”

“What?” asked Dušan. “What is it? What can be done?”

She turned from him and looked out to the river - the river in which effigies of her had been drowned throughout hundreds of years before she and her fellows became little more than myth.

“What can be done?” he asked again, reaching and taking her hand.

“There is a choice that can be made - should we both agree,” she said. “It is not a choice I would wish upon any, but one that I understand.”

“What is it?” he asked, his frustration at the unanswered question between them.

“I may offer you the chance to replace me - to ferry me to Nawia. My reward for my devotion to this cause. But in taking me, you agree to take my place and be the ferryman. To play the game with those who are not ready to walk away from life. To damn those who lose to eternal misery.” said Morana.

“And if I accept, what is to stop me from offering this same choice to the next who plays this game?” asked Dušan.

“Nothing but your conscience,” said Morana, with a smile. “I too thought that would be my way out - however I have been doing this for milenia, and I have never once had the nerve to offer this chance to another.”

“Why now?” he asked.

“I am tired, and you strike me as the right person to replace me - that is not a feeling I have had before,” said Morana. “Some who came before me were cruel, and delighted in the demise of others - I wish not to face Nawia in the knowledge that the one that replaces me takes pleasure in the death of good people.”

Dušan closed his eyes and turned to look out over the river - it was a choice between an eternity roaming the earth without rest, or spent helping those who had only difficult choices, to make the right one. One thing was for sure. No matter what he chose, his life was over. All that mattered now was what he would choose to do with his death.

“I will take you to Nawia,” he said, his eyes closed tightly. “I will take your place.”

He felt her fingers slide over his hand as she squeezed it tight.

“You will be the best of us, Dušan Horak,” she said as he felt all of the warmth of her hand transfer into him. A kind of power that he could never have known existed before. And as he stood before

her, Morana's beautiful cloak changed into the drab, dark rags that she had worn on the day of her own death. And where Dusan's dirty, unkempt clothes had once been, they were replaced with finery. He reached up to touch his hair, which was now pushed back over the top of his head. He brushed the moustache that now stood proudly and perfectly manicured across his face.

"Call me Death," he said, with a smile, as he held out his hand to escort Morana to Nawia.



Do you want to know the truth, gentlemen? I'm sick and I'm tired. I'm sick and tired of being everyone else's excuse for why they can't get what they want. I'm sick and tired of being everyone's reason when they don't feel like they're getting the recognition they deserve. I am sick, and I am tired of being the first name on everyone's lips when asked the question "Why can't you catch a break?".

It's getting old.

Your failures are not my fault, nor are they my burden. They belong to you, no matter how hard you try to lay the blame at my step. It's not for me to absolve you of your mistakes, and make good on your failures - it is for me to take your mistakes and your failures and turn them into my success.

Another victory.

I will not be blamed when you fall short, but I promise I will put my boot on your neck and reap the rewards that come when you can't quite match up to the fantasy you create when you spin your clever words and sell your snake-oil. I will stand over your broken and defeated bodies and hold my hand proudly in the air.

One. More. Time.

I'm done apologising for being better than those who stand before me. I am done pretending that everyone I face is on my level. You two are two of the best in the world at what you do, and almost anyone would have good reason to doubt their chances.

But I'm not anyone.

I'm Sebastian Everett-Bryce.

And I'm the Best. In. The Fucking. Business.

And this Sunday, I'll remind you both one more time. And I'll make that memory stick.

See you there, fellas.



December 2024 – London, England

“So you just... guided her to the afterlife and took her job?” asked Seb, one leg crossed over the other, a glass of whisky in his hand. The fireplace at the Merovingian was roaring, and across from him, the pristinely dressed and manicured man in his sixties held a glass of his own.

“I did,” he said calmly. “And then I started my new life – as who I am today.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” asked Seb, leaning forward in his seat.

“Because I want you to make the right choices – when the time comes,” said Death.

“Right – when you come to ferry me to... Where do people go when they don't believe in omnipotent beings in the sky?” asked Seb sarcastically.

“Somewhere restful,” said Death with a laboured smile. He took a sip from his glass. “But should you chose not to go to whatever place brings peace to your soul, then I want you to know there is another choice. A choice in which...”

“I replace you?” asked Seb, before pausing long enough for the laughter to burst from him. “You think I'm going to become the new you? Don't get me wrong, the threads might be worth it, but an eternity of... This?”

“What I do is important – and it requires the right kind of person,” said Death.

“Yeah, well you can count me out,” said Seb. “Because I'd rather get stuck haunting strangers for the rest of eternity than do what you do.”

Seb slowly climbed to his feet.

“You can take your choice and shove it straight up your arse, *Dušan*,” said Seb, as he fastened his jacket and shook his head before he walked away.

The old man lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip.

“Call me death,” he said, as he watched Sebastian leave.

 **THE END** 