

BLOOD AND WINE

It had been almost two weeks since Kinsey had seen Sebastian - since anyone had seen him at all. He'd been tweeting, and travelling, but he'd barely returned any calls or texts from her or Grant or Anabel.

She knew some of the truth - what little she could pry from his closest confidantes. He'd had a plan. A plan that was meant to end with his father losing everything, but something had gone wrong - so wrong that suddenly, Sebastian was doubting everyone he'd trusted just a couple of weeks earlier.

Everyone, including her.

She climbed out of her car and closed the door behind her - she didn't even know whether he was home. The house in Chelsea was the last place she'd have expected to find him, and yet it was the only place she could think to look that she hadn't checked already. She pulled her jacket closed and held the keys that Anabel had given her tightly in her hand. She began to walk the steps up to the door and slipped the key into the lock. Turning the handle, she pushed inside and closed it behind her.


"Hello?" she called into the darkness. The house felt empty. It felt dark and unlivid in. As if no-one had stayed here for a long time. "Seb, are you home?"

She started to walk towards the drawing room, glancing up the stairs for any sign of life. She cast a look towards the dining room, but it

was dark and unused. The rooms were clean, not an item was out of place. Finally, she reached the drawing room and stepped inside.

"Where are you, Sebastian?" she asked the room.

"Right here," said a voice from the darkness. Kinsey screamed. A lamp flicked into life casting light upon Sebastian Everett-Bryce. "Hello Kinsey."



Hello Dio - I've been looking forward to this.

I've been unwaveringly honest about myself since I joined XWF - my fears, my doubts, my failures. I've not hidden from the weaknesses that make me human, because those weaknesses fuel my strength. My failures do not define me, but my reactions do. And so, when Mark Flynn's arm was raised in victory in my first one on one contest here, I didn't complain. I didn't focus on how or why. No - I walked into March Madness and I beat Ned Kaye for the XWF Universal Championship.


I became an overnight legend in this company.

So when I say I'm looking forward to this, I mean it. It's not that I don't have the same fears and doubts that I've had all along, I do. It just means that you, Dionysus Berget, are precisely the kind of challenge I came to XWF to face. You, Dio, are proof that this company isn't about favourites or familiar faces. You're sure fire evidence that hard work and dedication are rewarded over status.

An example of the new XWF if ever there was one.

So yes, I've been looking forward to this. To see how you'll react to being given the opportunity to shine when the spotlight is brightest and your stock is at its peak.

I have to ask, Dio, are you ready to become a legend in your own right?



There was no welcome upon Sebastian's face - he'd seen to that. The woman standing in the doorway had betrayed him. He'd known about it for two weeks and had been unable to find a way to confront the fact. And so he'd avoided it - travelling to Charlotte, Chicago, Nepal before finally returning to London.

It had all gone so terribly wrong - the plan had been simple. Sell out his father to Kinsey's father-in-law in exchange for him allowing her to keep custody of her son thus, removing his father from power. Everything had aligned perfectly. All up until George had betrayed him and aligned with his father.

In the weeks since, Seb's access to anything related to Everett-Bryce Holdings had been revoked. His position was, at best, ceremonial. Grant had retained his position as CEO - whether because he too had betrayed Seb, or because his father hadn't decided how to punish him yet was unclear.

Anabel had left - but was it real? Or was she actually still on the inside?

The only thing he knew for sure was that the woman who stood in front of him - a woman who was supposed to be his friend and, for fleeting moments, a potential future, had actually betrayed him. Their entire renewed friendship was based on an order from her father-in-law.

And yet, here she was.

"You fucking scared me," she said, her hand against her heart. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Because I'm tortured and mysterious, don't you know?" said Seb.

"You're dramatic is what you are," said Kinsey as she started to pull off her jacket.

"No, no... No need for that, you won't be staying," said Seb.

"What? Why?" asked Kinsey. "You can't tell me you want to sit here wallowing in self-pity because your plan failed?"

"That's what you think I'm doing?" asked Seb.

"I think that's exactly what you're doing - it can't be as bad as you've made it in your head," said Kinsey.

"Oh really? And if I told you that I'd wrapped George up into my plan, would you still suggest that I was overreacting?" Seb asked, swirling Scotch in his glass. He watched the liquid swirl to avoid her eyes. His voice was cold - he could hear it, but he didn't care. She deserved it.

"Wh... Why?" she asked, her eyes shining with the light of the lamp. "What does George have to do with..."

"I told him I'd get him my father's company in exchange for him backing off you about Benjamin," said Seb calmly, a smile on his face that never reached his eyes. "But instead, he betrayed me, aligned with my father, shut me out and told me he plans to take Benjamin off you anyway. I was utterly outplayed."

"Wait, you brought my SON into your crazy fucking scheme?" Kinsey asked, her eyes widening with anger. There was the fire he'd remembered from their youth. The girl who had almost knocked him out cold when she'd found out he'd been the one to take the parking brake off her mini and let it roll into the duck pond at her home. He smiled, genuinely. It didn't help her anger. "How fucking dare you..."

"You asked me to try and fix it," Seb said, climbing to his feet. "And so I tried."

"I told you to talk to him! Convince him you weren't a bad person! Instead you enlisted him to get revenge on your father and now I'm going to lose my son," she snapped, stepping towards him and shoving him in the chest.

"Que sera, sera," Seb said coldly, draining his glass.

"Why are you being like this? Don't you see what you've done?!" she snapped.

"What **I'VE** done?" Seb snapped - the smile was gone from his lips now. "Tell me, Kinsey, because I've always wondered... How did we manage to bump into one another in the middle of London?"

"... Wha... What?" she asked, and suddenly her anger was all gone. "I don't know what you're..."

"Curious, because in a city of nine million people, I happened to run into one of my closest childhood friends just days after I lost

everything. Some would call that fate, others would call that coincidence, I would call it... Planned." said Seb.

"Seb... I..." Kinsey began.

"Save your excuses - I know," Seb sneered. "George couldn't wait to tell me that the whole reason that you're in my life is because he made a deal with you to get to me and my family. So... If anyone is to blame for what might be about to happen with you and Benjamin, find a mirror and take a good long look."

"That's not... It isn't like that," she said, trying to walk towards him, but he held up a hand. She stopped, and pressed her hands together. "Please - listen to me. He told me to do it, and I did, but then I told him I wasn't going to help him anymore. That's why he threatened to take Benji away from me - and I told him I didn't care. That I COULDN'T betray you."

"Yes, I'm sure," said Seb rolling his eyes.

"Seb, I mean it, please..." she said, and tears stung her eyes now. "Please, everything that's happened between us these past couple of months has been real. I'm... Mad about what you did, but I don't want to lose you... I want us to find a way to fix this, together. The two of us..."

"There IS no us, Kinsey! You need to get that through your head, I've been trying to find a way to tell you this for months. You and I aren't going to happen - there's no length of time to wait for me to be ready. I don't want it. I didn't before, and I certainly don't want it now that I know you've been fucking lying to me!" he snapped. She stepped back, feeling his anger wash over her. "You were never my friend. You're just the same as everyone else."

"Right," she said. A cold mask covering her tear-streaked face. "Then I'll go. Good bye, Sebastian."

She waited for him to say something, anything. And when he didn't, she turned without another word and started towards the door. Within a matter of moments, guilt swelled within him. Maybe he'd been too harsh with her - they'd both made mistakes.

"Kinsey," he called. But as he did, the door to the house slammed. "Fuck..."

He placed the glass on the table and jogged through the house. He pulled it open as he saw her round her car and pull open the door.

"Kinsey, wait. Come back inside, we can talk about this," he said. She flashed a vulgar gesture in his direction. He almost laughed at it as he jogged down the steps. He reached the car and tried to pull open the passenger door but it was locked, he crouched. "We're both angry, we've both fucked up. But I don't want you to drive away, not like this. Come inside and we can work out where we go from here."

"There's no-where to go, Seb," she said, through an open crack in the window. "You made your position perfectly clear - there is no us. There won't be. I'm not wasting another second on someone who feels like that about me. I just... need to go."

"Kinsey, just... Wait..." Seb said, but the window closed. And as she jammed her foot against the accelerator, the wheels of the car began to spin, and he managed to jump back out of the way as she sped off and away from him.

He reached up, his hands on the back of his head. He'd said things he didn't mean - he'd been hurt, and angry. Yes, because she'd betrayed him, but mostly because for the first time he'd seen an ending for the two of them. A happy one. Where perhaps they could have become us.

And they'd managed to fuck it up all over again.



Opportunities like this aren't handed out for free - chances to be great don't just leap out from behind corners to present themselves.

There are some who will be given chance after chance only to repeatedly piss it up the wall knowing that they'll get another shot sooner or later. But those people are few and far between - for people like you, Dio, people who have had to scratch and claw for everything they have, opportunities like these aren't to be squandered carelessly.

Who knows when a chance like this will ever come around again?


Make no mistake, you've earned this. Despite what nay-sayers and critics say, you earned this night that was created in your image and in homage. You earned the right to design your own event filled with

all of the fun and frivolity of a Symposium in which you are the guest of honour. But most importantly, you earned your shot at the Universal Title.

My Universal Title.

You earned that right by stealing the show at Fire and Ice - and on that night the world changed for forever for one, Dionysus Berget. And then, just two short months later, Sebastian Everett-Bryce would arrive in XWF and change the world all over again. Yes, Dio - you earned everything that's coming to you at The Revelry.

Unfortunately, that includes a loss to yours truly.



Seb's phone was vibrating on the table in front of him. He blinked and groaned. After Kinsey had left, he'd tried to call her but to no avail. Eventually, she'd turned her phone off, and Seb had fallen asleep on the uncomfortable couch.

"Whaaaaathefuuuuck..." he said as he reached for his phone. It was a number he didn't recognise.

"Hello?" he asked as he sat up.

"Sebastian?" came a voice from the other end of the line. "*Is that Sebastian?*"

"It is, who's this?" Seb asked, his blood suddenly chilling, the tiredness lifting suddenly.

"*It's David Windsor, Kinsey's father,*" he said.

"Is everything okay?" Seb asked. He'd never been called by Kinsey's father before.

"N.. No. No it's not." he said, and Seb climbed to his feet. "*There's been an... accident.*"


"Where are you?" asked Seb, putting his phone onto loudspeaker as he sent a text into a group that merely said 'SOS'.

"The Chelsea and Westminster hospital," said Kinsey's father. "You should be here."

"Be right there," said Seb. He hung up the phone as both Grant and Anabel had replied asking what was wrong, despite the early hour.

'I need to get to Chelsea and Westminster hospital - now.'

And to each of their credit, neither Grant nor Anabel asked another question. They just made their way to him.



I know things between the two of us haven't been exactly how everyone expected - after all, two great warriors destined to fight over the grandest prize on offer in this business arguing over charcuterie probably wasn't on anyone's 2024 bingo card. But they don't understand like we do, Dio - this isn't about vengeance or hatred or jealousy. This entire match will be about one thing and one thing only.


Who is the better man?

We had a taste during Triad - fleeting moments where the two of us have faced one another. When Vhodka turned her back on you, and Matt Knox failed me. When you watched from the Tear filled pools of Angkor Wat when I walked away victorious. Yes, we've had the spark of something great between us, Dio, and now we finally get to answer that question that both of us has wanted to know the answer to for months.

Who is the better man?

And that's the real reason I've been looking forward to this - not just because you're a new challenge and the kind I've been waiting for since the day I signed on the dotted line, but because this is yet another itch in my brain that needs to be scratched. Chaos vs Revelry. Catalyst vs accelerant. Emperor vs God.

Just who is the better man?



Sebastian arrived at the hospital less than an hour later, Grant and Anabel following close by. Seb made his way through the various hallways until he found Kinsey's parents, David and Nicolette. The moment he saw them, he knew things weren't looking good. David was old school - strong and calm with the proverbial stiff upper-lip. But his eyes were red, and his lip quivered the moment he saw Seb.

If that hadn't been enough to scare him, the look on Nicolette's face would have done the trick.

She pulled Sebastian into a rib-cracking hug, and thanked him for coming. He did his best to keep the guilt from his eyes as they told him what had happened. For some reason, Kinsey had ignored a red-light and in doing so her car had collided with another at speed. The ensuing collision may have been less damaging, except that her car had been knocked into the path of an oncoming bus that hadn't managed to stop in time.

The result was catastrophic - it had taken emergency services almost an hour to cut her out of the wreck and by that point she'd lost an awful lot of blood.

Seb held himself together until he was led to Kinsey's room - he looked through the small window and something inside him shattered. His legs went weak and he held himself up against the wall. She looked so small in the bed - bruises all over the little skin he could see, with tubes and wires everywhere. Her face was purple from having collided with the steering wheel or the window or god knows what else.

The brace around her neck made almost unrecognisable.

The doctors had explained that whilst surgery had gone well and they'd managed to stop the bleeding, she was still critical. There was a long, long path to recovery.

Back in the seating area, Seb was staring at the ground. He hadn't spoken to anyone since seeing her lay there. David managed to convince Nicolette that they should walk, perhaps get a cup of tea - the British fix for just about anything. They left Seb alone with Anabel and Grant.

"Its my fault..." Seb said.

"What?" said Anabel. "Don't say that, you didn't do anything..."

"I hurt her. Badly. I said things I didn't... Things I never meant. And she left angry and upset. I should have made her stay, if I had she would never..." Seb began.

"You didn't do this, Seb." said Grant, placing a hand on his shoulder. "She made a choice. If we could change it, we would, but we can't. But you can't take this on yourself."

"If I'd been able to love her like she wanted me to... If I'd even been able to say it out loud..." Seb said.

"She wouldn't want you thinking like that - and when she wakes up she'll slap you for even considering it," said Anabel.

"I can't help it... I just know that..." Seb began, and then...

It's all your fault.

"You can't keep saying that," said Grant.

Yes you can, because it's true. Another one who loved you left broken.

"She needs you to be strong for her, to fight for her," said Anabel.

She needs you to leave her alone. She'd be happier that way. Healthier. They'd all be better off.

"Her parents need you too, they need you to show them that you believe that she'll be okay," said Grant.

Maybe they need to know what really happened - do you think her mother would still hug you if they knew?

"I think you just need to..." Anabel began.

"Shut up! Stop it! Just fucking stop it!" Seb shouted. Anabel and Grant started, and the voice in the back of his head began to chuckle. He closed his eyes tightly

Shut up. Leave me alone.

No reply came. Seb opened his eyes, followed by his mouth to apologise. But as he did, he was interrupted by a sudden burst of beeps, shouts and footsteps. Seb turned towards Kinsey's room to see doctors rushing inside.

"Fuck... No..." Seb said. He turned and ran towards the room, but as he did, the hospital staff blocked his path.

"Sir, you can't come in - we need to give the doctors space to work... Please..." said one of the nurses.

"Let me through - I need to get through, she needs me, she fucking needs..." Seb paused. The words dying in his throat - everything felt as though he was under water, time slowing down.

As the hospital staff moved in and out of the room, Seb's eyes landed on one person who didn't fit at all.

A three-piece indigo suit, matching tie and a white shirt. Silver hair slicked backwards and his perfectly manicured moustache twitching into a smile that he flashed in Sebastian's direction as he left Kinsey's hospital room.

He raised a hand with a mocking wave as he turned and walked away from the scene.

Death.

"No! NO!" he yelled. He continued to fight until he broke through the staff. He wanted to give chase. To follow. But as he reached the door to Kinsey's room, all of his desire to follow Death disappeared. He watched as the doctors tried to bring that incredible, smart, funny woman back to life.

And as the chaos gave way to a single, monotone beep, Sebastian dropped to his knees and let out a howl of pure agony.

Kinsey Windsor was dead.



In just a few short days, we'll have the answer, Dio. But allow me to be frank - the answer to that question is unknown in practice only. The result is, without doubt, inevitable. I've lost enough this past year - I've lost more than I care to recount and when you step into that ring this Sunday night, when you fight me throughout the Bohemian Grove, you won't just be fighting a man who wants to win, but you'll be fighting a man who refuses to lose.

I just can't.

And that puts you in the worst of bad situations, because this is your event. Styled, profiled and created for you. This is the chance of a lifetime, with all of the odds in your favour. A home field, an event of your creation, a night designed to be a celebration of all that is Dionysus. But here's the thing, Dio. I'm going to borrow a phrase once spoken to me by a legend of this company. This night, this event? You're living the dream, my friend.

And I just love crushing dreams.

Right about now, I'd usually start talking about my Empire and how it continues to grow, but this night isn't about the evolution of an Empire, it's about preventing the beginning of a dynasty. Because I believe in Dionysus Berget, and I believe that it's only a matter of time before you begin to rule your own corner of this world that we all live in.

Yes, I believe in Dionysus Berget. But do you?

This night may be styled for you, Dio. But at the end, it will belong to me. I hope when we come through the otherside, you'll accept the handshake I offer you, because I will shake your hand in the wake of my victory. I respect you and everything you've done to get here. I respect the man behind the myth.

But I just refuse to let anyone take anything else from me.

I've lost enough.

I'll see you this Sunday, friend.

And I'll raise a toast in your honour once we're done.



Hours, days, weeks later - time had lost all meaning - Sebastian found himself back on that couch in his parents home, replaying the last twenty four hours over and over in his head.

In two days he had to be in California to defend his XWF Universal Championship - he had no idea how he could even think about competing right now. He couldn't think of how to live right now.

So you failed her - and now you're going to give up?

Please stop.

You're the reason she's dead, and now you're going to wallow in self-pity.

Enough.

It should have been you, not her.

I... I know.

"Then do not waste the chance you have been given," came an Eastern European voice that filled him with fury. Seb climbed to his feet, and spotted a figure across the room. He picked up his glass and launched it at him. But when it smashed, it was not against the face of the well-dressed man Seb knew as Death, but against a mirror.

You will fail her again.

"No," he said, with a settled, grieving determination. "No I won't."

END