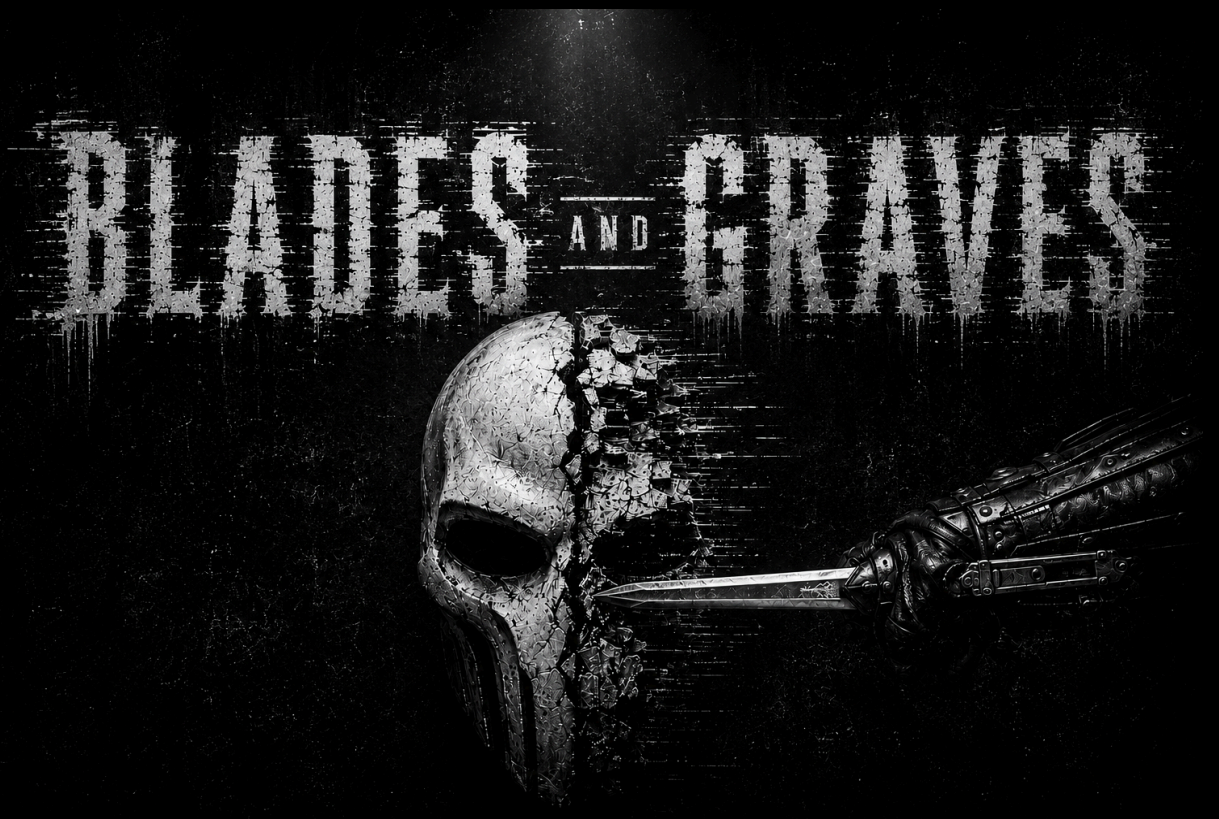



Sebastian's foot slipped on the edge of the building- stupid. A leap too far had almost cost him - could still cost him. He held onto the edge of the old stone building for dear life. He stopped struggling and took a deep breath, locking in. Steadying his feet against the side of the building, he found a foothold and pushed with his feet as he pulled with his finger tips and up onto the roof of the old building.

Xtremis was an old city - ancient. Hardened by time, rather than weakened by it. It had grown in size and reputation, and even as rich oligarchs came to govern it, there were those still willing to stand against them.

Sebastian glanced down at the blades at his wrist - he flexed his wrists and the blades both slid from their leather bracers with lethal precision. Seb lowered his hands and the blades returned to their original place.

He continued on - his destination close-by.

His dark red, blue and grey robes hid him well in the darkness of the night - so well that the two men in the alleyway below never saw him pass. He dropped into the small courtyard, and checked that he was alone.

He was not.

The old man struck out at him, but his injuries made him slower than usual. Less lethal - Seb caught the blade, pushed it aside. The old man stumbled, and Seb caught him, pulling him into the shadows and allowing him to lean against the wall.

“What happened, McGee?” asked Sebastian, as the old man looked up at him,

“Still feelin’ our last fight, boah,” said the old man with a smile, pulling himself up.

“Still? That was… Weeks ago…” said Sebastian.

“You know me - ain’t ever let the old wounds heal,” said McGee, groaning. “Some of us ain’t like you - showin’ up when it’s all glitz n’ glamour… Some of us do the real hard work,”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, and pulled back the old assassin's robes to reveal blood beneath.

“You need to lie low for a while - let the body repair itself,” said Sebastian.

“I know, I know - that’s how you young’uns stay all healthy and the likes,” said McGee. “But while I’m laid up with ma feet on pillows, thems lookin’ to take everythin’ for themselves just keep gettin’ fatter and fatter,”

Sebastian took a deep breath.

“Look, I never claimed to be a hero,” he said. “I told you this before we fought - I’ll do what’s right. But only so long as…”

The old man coughed, and blood leaked from his lips.

“McGee… McGee…” said Sebastian

“Ain’t much time,” said the old man. “There’s somethin’ comin’ for you - somethin’ dark. I faced it before and… It took almost everythin’ I had to beat that boah… And I ain’t so sure you got what it takes to fight it back…”

“I beat you, old man,” Sebastian jibed.

“You ain’t beat the darkness…” said McGee.

And as if on cue - night seemed to close in. Sebastian heard the light feet touch the ground - his senses kicking in just in time to turn around. He saw the skull beneath the hood - heard the flashing of the blade.

But Sebastian was too quick - too skilled. He side-stepped the would-be assassin, and drove his own blade up through the jaw of the man who came to kill him.

“So much for the darkness,” said Sebastian as he turned back to McGee.

“That ain’t him boah - that’s just… An imposter… A decoy,” said McGee, coughing as blood rolled down his chin. Sebastian reached him just in time to stop him sliding any further.

“How do you…”

“I know Graves,” said McGee, with a grin that made Seb’s blood run cold. “And you ain’t met Graves yet…”

And then the fire in his eyes was doused by the very darkness of which he’d been warning.



Hello Graves…

I couldn’t help but notice you seemed a little put out by my reaction to you being named as the number one contender to the Universal Championship - you seemed to believe that there was some kind of slight intended. That maybe, just maybe, that meant on some level I would underestimate you. That I somehow thought that this was a given, and I’d just tick you off some make-believe list and move on to the next challenge. Au contrare, mon amie. I can assure you, my reaction wasn’t one of disrespect.

I just don't have any reason to fear you.

Don't get me wrong - I know who you are. Who can fail to recognise the greatness of Gravy? You've been here in XWF for a long, long time - and in many different forms. I know people like to poke fun at that, but you've got to keep things fresh, right? You stand still long enough, and you petrify. Can't help but wonder if some of the statues out there weren't really erected in the honor of those they liken, but in reality are just those who didn't feel themselves turn to stone. But not you, Graves.

No-one could ever accuse you of standing still.

Let's be clear - you bested me at March Madness. Not only did you go further than I did, but you actually won the XWF Universal Championship - you beat Kieran King. Something I've never done. And though you may have fallen to Scoops, I know what it's like fighting that tough old bastard. Took me three tries to get the better of him - and truth is, I'm not sure I can say I beat him at Leap of Faith. Survived him is more accurate. Point is, I know exactly what I'm coming up against when I face you at Bad Medicine.

But that still doesn't give me reason to fear you.

Everything you are, and everything you've ever been - it's utterly spectacular. From the sublime to the ridiculous - it doesn't matter. If you do something, you do it well. My reaction to you being named as my opponent was, if anything, recognition of the fact that I had the kind of opponent I'd been looking for when I came to XWF in the first place. Time and again, this place presents me with new opportunities to face the very best there is, and if you'll forgive me for saying, you can't blame a man for being a little blasé.

Especially considering everyone I've faced.

And that's not to minimise you - not at all. But facts are facts - in my time here, I've encountered eleven different XWF Universal Champions and I've defeated nine of them. The exceptions, aforementioned Kieran King, and Thunder Knuckles - but I blame Corey Black for that one. If you count people I've faced outside of XWF, I've beaten twelve former Universal Champions. You'll be the fifteenth I've faced. And don't think I'm going to break your balls for losing the Championship to Scoops, Graves. That doesn't matter to me.

It just matters to you.



McGee's death and the warning he'd delivered in the moments before it had sat upon Sebastian's mind. But he couldn't afford to pause and allow it to fester. He had things to do - had to keep moving. The Old Man had used his dying breath to warn him of a threat upon the horizon, but Graves was not the only one.

Which was why he was here.

The opulent apartments of the merchant Sebastian knew as Jessops were not a place he would frequent willingly. He had been summoned days ago and had ignored the call for as long as had been possible. Jessop's brutish right hand had delivered one final, unoriginal warning that Jessops required a meeting. The risk wasn't Struijk's threats, but Jessop's indiscretion. Word of their bargain would cause ramifications Sebastian had no interest in.

As beckoned, Sebastian arrived at Jessop's apartments in the dead of night. The merchant wore an impatient look upon his face along with the silk robe around his body, his nocturnal activities having been interrupted.

Pleasantries had been swift, and mechanical.

"You know why I asked you to meet, I assume?" asked Clemence.

"I suspect it has something to do with our bargain?" said Sebastian.

"Or the lack of action on your side of it," said Clemence as he lifted and dropped a stack of gold coins on the table beside him. It was rhythmic - but more importantly, a show of his wealth. "I grow impatient."

"You? I would never have thought," said Sebastian. He flexed his wrist, and one of the silver blades slid slowly from its gauntlet.

“I grow tired of your nonsense,” said Jessops. “And more-so of your split attention. Especially when I seem to get the minimal share…”

“I have a job to do,” said Sebastian.

“Quite,” said Jessops as a maid delivered a cup of steaming hot tea to Jessops’ side. Always on call. Jessops picked up the cup and gently blew across the surface. “Alas, it would be a shame if that job put the people you care about in danger…”

The blade that shot from Sebastian’s gauntlet did so at full speed this time - this threat much less subtle.

“Say that again…” said Sebastian. “Because I would assume you’re not threatening Betsy - I’ve made it clear that the mistake would be your last, and likely not at my hand… After all she is quite…”

“Yes, yes,” said Clemence, waving his hand absently. “I know your beloved can look after herself - but what of those of the more innocent persuasion?”

Sebastian paused as Struijk picked up a sheet of parchment and handed it to Sebastian - his blood ran cold. It was the address in which his son lived with his grandparents - Benjamin’s mother’s parents. Seb’s hands balled into fists.

“You realise that I could kill you both here and now and never have to speak of this again?” said Sebastian.

“Perhaps,” said Jessops. “But do not make the mistake of thinking I do not have contingencies.”

He sipped tea from his cup as Sebastian climbed to his feet - his jaw clenched.

“I will redouble my efforts,” said Sebastian. “I seek to leave the order soon - and when I do, you shall have my undivided attention.”

“Good,” said Jessops. “See that I do…”

Sebastian turned towards the window - the very window into which he’d entered the room early. He climbed upon the ledge.

“Oh and Sebastian,” said Jessops. “Use the front door next time - there’s a good lad.”

Without another word, Sebastian climbed to the roof - red mist descended over his eyes, and all he wanted to do was run. He reached the roof and looked out over Xtremis - the endless possibilities - and then he felt the body collide with his.

They tumbled across the slate of the roof, and Sebastian almost slid from the building - but he managed to hold on. He saw that familiar skeletal mask, and felt the anger rise in him. Here? Now? Graves reached his feet first, and Sebatsian had to fend off an attack from the ground. Even without having been caught off guard, this attacker was much more skilled than the first.

The real Graves.

Blades flashed through the air and collided, sparks flying between them. He was fast, but Sebastian managed to dodge blow after blow. Graves sliced through the air, and Seb rolled - he saw an opportunity and brought the blade down across the calf of his would be assassin. He let out a yell of pain, and swung wildly.

Seb parried the attack, and sunk his own blade deep into the man’s heart.

He reached up and pulled the mask away - but the face that looked back at him was familiar. An old foe.

“Flynn?” said Sebastian, his breath catching.

“You thought… You’d bested… Graves?” said Flynn, coughing as blood ran down his chin. “No. Darkness will still come for you, Bryce… You can’t run.”

And Flynn fell to the ground, the blood soaked mask falling by his side.

“Who says I’m running?” asked Sebastian, as he turned back to the city at large.



Truth is - I don't care that you lost the Universal Title to Scoops. One thing that's damn sure about every single person ever to hold the Universal Championship before today, is that one day they had it and the next day they didn't - yours truly included. I can take you back two years almost to the day. What should have been one of the greatest nights of my first reign as the Universal Championship - I beat Mark Flynn and Sean Parker at the same… Damn… Time. I should have been rejoicing.

And then Ned Kaye.

To chastise you for losing the Universal Championship would be hypocritical - because I've already lost that title twice as many times as you've had it. But to you? It matters. To you… the why is more important than the what. Because I was listening, Graves… I listened when you pulled apart Dickie Watson. You took his losses, you held them in front of his face, and you told him how his redemption pattern was never truly redemption. It was coping. That was what you said, right? Fall short, explain it, call it growth and perspective…

But it's coping.

But the reality was that you weren't predicting the future when you said those words. You were living them - had been living them already. That very method of dealing with failure had already been played out in your own life. It's funny, because you couldn't see your own reflection while you were preaching. You were too busy trying to show Dickie Watson just how closely you saw him. You were looking at him so hard, you didn't see yourself in the picture you were painting.  Because that's how you dealt with losing the Championship I now hold.

By coping.

By telling yourself you like where you lay when you woke up from the beating that Scoops gave you - that being down is where you thrive. You fell short, explained it away with a simple 'Scoops had the better night', and then reasoned it all away with a soliloquy about how it didn't matter where you landed when you fell because that was where you were always supposed to be. So no, Micheal - it doesn't matter to me that you lost the Universal Championship.

But it sure as fuck matters to you.

Because the problem with dying over and over in a company like this, is that eventually people stop showing up to the funeral. And little by little, every time you wake up in the gutter, you have to ask yourself whether or not trying to cope with restarting from there every single time is really any way to play out a career like yours. Because eventually, the gutter isn't just going to be where you wake up, it's going to be the only place you exist.

And no-one is going to bother to look to see if you're climbing back out again.



"Two attempts on your life - and you're still here," said Dušan, with a smirk. "That's saying something."

"This is serious," said Sebastian. "I'm being threatened by Graves and by Jessops and of course there's..."

He paused, and glanced at his mentor - the Shadow of Death - who smiled back at him from the comfortable seat in front of the fireplace.

"You can say it," he replied, his thick accent not disguising the words. "The threat of me..."

Sebastian tried not to think about the prophecy that existed between them - that Dušan would one day be the one to bring him to his final resting place.

"The point still stands," said Sebastian. "There is much to consider - much to concern myself with. It's not just about me - there's Benjamin to consider. Now that he knows about me..."

"You have a responsibility that you did not have before?" said the Shadow of Death. "Yes - fatherhood has a habit of doing that."

There was a sadness to Dušan's voice - Seb knew his own family had been lost long ago. It was why Dušan had become The Shadow of Death. The Ferryman. Names which struck fear into all those that looked upon him.

All but Sebastian.

“Do you fight with greater confidence because of the prophecy?” asked Dušan. “Because I need not remind you that it does not state that I land the final blow…”

“Perhaps,” said Sebastian. “But I would expect you to be there… When the time came…”

“It would be logical,” said Dušan. “And you assume that I wouldn’t step in to help?”

Sebastian smiled - Dušan had saved his life more than once. But he knew when the time came, his mentor would do his job - loyalty be damned.

“I don’t…” Seb began. But what he wasn’t, would never be heard. Both Seb and Dušan turned their eyes upon the window. A lithe, and weightless something came through the window with a roll, and landed perfectly upon the ground.

The face lifted from the ground, and the head tilted - the reaper-like face that looked at him seemed to assess him, carefully.

“Is this it?” Sebastian asked, his eyes turning to Dušan again. “Is this how it ends?”

The Shadow of Death considered the scene before him, before leaning back into his seat, as if wanting to enjoy the show.

“Let us find out, friend,” he said.

Sebastian growled his frustration, and the blades shot forth from his wrists. He turned upon Graves who made no attempt to land a blow - instead, he cast himself this way and that with almost feline agility. The blows he did land were bladeless and intended to frustrate rather than incapacitate.

“What is this folly?!” Sebastian called as he swung this way and that.

“Entertaining if nothing else,” said Dušan, as he lifted a glass of whiskey to his lips and drank.

Graves, however, kept on with his hit and run tactics - Sebastian growing more erratic by the moment. And then they heard it - the blades slipped forth from Graves’ bracers.

And now Dušan seemed to sit straighter in his seat.

Graves struck - but Sebastian was ready, as if willed by the Shadow at his side. He caught the wrist, and swiped with his own blade. Not a death blow - but a warning. A shot across the face.

And the mask fell away, revealing not the face of a man - but of his protegé.

“What?” said Sebastian, his eyes widening… “Who…”

“Graves asked me to deliver a message,” she said, holding up a note written on parchment. “This is where he will meet you.”

“He must have known delivering this message would be the end of you,” said Sebastian.

“He hoped not - but I volunteered anyway,” she said. “He is worthy of the sacrifice…”

Sebastian released her wrist and shook his head.

“Go,” he said. “Tell your master that I will be there…”

Without another word, the woman backed away, and disappeared through the window from whence she came.

“You may live to regret that, Sebastian,” said Dušan, sinking back into his seat, and lifting the glass to his lips once more.



I know you won’t care, Micheal.

You see yourself as above such trifles as opinions and petty interests. What is it you said? ‘I’m not a pillar, I’m a problem…’. Thing is - problems get solved, friend. But pillars stand the test of time. And I get it - you seem to think because you’ve been here for longer than me, that everything I’ve done is following in your footsteps. The

ruins I moved into belonged to you - but the ruins, my friend, they weren't ruins of anything you built.

They were the ruins left by those who failed time and again since I last held that Universal Championship.

In the year and a half since I held the Universal Championship - many have tried to keep hold, and all have failed. Even greats like Dickie and Keiran and Isaiah. Even you. Because what none of you seem to realise is that the crown sits heavy when you lead an Empire like mine - everyone thinks they have the strength to hold their head up high once it sits upon their brow, but a truly small number have the will and determination to endure.

And you've proven yourself unable.

Your funeral pyre burned as bright as any of them - but there were just so many, no-one took the time to find out all who had fallen. But me? I endured, Graves. And I knew I only had to bide my time before I could return home - and I will do again what I have done before, and I will raise these so-called ruins of an Empire, and I will do so knowing that all that tried in my absence did little to slow the decay that you yourself were unable to hold at bay. Because I don't care that you lost.

I care that you were no better than the rest of them.

So when I said your name with what you thought was disrespect, the truth is that I knew what no-one else could see when they looked at you. What no-one else heard when they listened to you speak. I knew the man they placed before me was just trying to keep on moving so that his feet didn't turn to stone. I knew there was a man afraid of becoming a pillar, because he knew he could never hold the weight of an Empire on his shoulders.

And you knew exactly what was coming.

Because the truth is, Micheal - I don't fear you. But fear and respect aren't the same thing. And in you I saw someone who should have done better, and instead he floundered. And when he did, he excused his failures with a handwave and an easy excuse. And yet, here you are again - desperately trying to claw your way back out of the gutter. Trying so hard to prove that twenty one days was just not enough time.

But the truth, Micheal… Is becoming ever more apparent.

Twenty one days were twenty one days too many.

And I refuse to allow you to have one… More… moment.

I'll see you Sunday, friend.



The message had been clear - the time. The location. There had been no ambiguity - Sebastian arrived as the sun had begun to set behind the Golden Bridge. It was beautiful at this time of night - the setting sun bouncing off the polished surface - it was the perfect setting for what had to come.

In the shadows cast by the structure above, stood a man that by now Sebastian recognised easily. The robes pulled high, and the skull looking back at him. It seemed to smile, that mask of horror. Seemed to show the confidence that Graves had bred through watching Sebastian for all this time.

And now, as they stared at one another, Seb knew for sure that this… This was the Graves that he'd been warned about time and again. This was the danger, and the darkness that he had been told was coming for him.

But none of them - not McGee. Not Flynn. Not Furry. None of them had paused to consider that while the Darkness may have been coming for Sebastian, he had never been shy of digging graves.

And as the shadows drew backwards, the final light of the day, finally casting his opponent in the light that reflected from the Golden Bridge, Sebastian felt no fear. Not of Graves, nor of consequence.

For he was safe in the understanding of everything that had brought him here - and all that there was left for him to fight for.

His blades surged forth from their bracers, and Graves likewise - and as the two began to approach one another, there was a sense of building inevitability that this would be a final battle.

But it would not be Sebastian's final battle.

And as they raised their blades, a smile crossed Sebastian's face.

Only one Grave(s) left.

