

“Ancient critics praised [the Iliad’s] ‘*enargeia*,’ which means something like ‘*bright unbearable reality*.’

It’s the word used when gods come to earth not in disguise but as themselves.”

—Alice Oswald, *Memorial*

“If it keeps on raining, the levee’s going to break.”

—Memphis Minnie

It was a warm night in New Orleans, with the temperature and humidity still staying in the low 70’s, even that close to midnight. They crept quietly down Michoud Blvd, keeping close to the cover of night, ready to duck into the groves of trees lining the road should a car pass by or a searchlight from above catch their eye. Neither came — the bayou hummed undisturbed, save for the jolted retreat of a white-tailed deer. As they approached the entrance of what had once been Six Flags Jazzland and saw a light across the broken parking lot, Jonathan Bacchus imagined this was no act of providence. He wanted them — he expected them — he would not be denied.

The entrance sign read just as it had in 2005:

“CL SED FOR STORM”

Grace had unholstered her pistol before they crossed the barriers preventing thru traffic, checking the cylinder of her S&W Model 19. As she walked, Jonathan heard the jingle of reloaders in her jacket, sheets of bunting stuffed between them failing to

muffle the gentle rattle of the readied rounds. The Beretta M9 under his shoulder felt heavier than usual, and with each step down the path, he clenched it tighter to his side, quietly cursing the gossipy gravel beneath his feet. The paved parking lot was no different; no matter how soft he strode, each step seemed to echo throughout the stillness of the bayou surrounding them, until upon the lip of the floodlights' glow he'd abandoned all pretenses. Just past the turnstile, a tent had been erected — the light beckoned them in, accompanied by the faint but unmistakable tune of "Right Here Right Now" by Jesus Jones.

The song was louder and lights were brighter upon stepping inside — they always are when leaving the shadows for a space designed to illuminate every nook. They'd been deliberating in donning their sunglasses before entering so as to shield themselves from that shock, but it was a second sight inside, more bright and unbearable, which froze him in place..

It wasn't the sight of the remote controlled turrets aimed directly upon them, each affixed with a Mark 48 — it wasn't their host, Derek Cook, who'd dressed to the nines for the occasion and bared his teeth in a wicked grin — it wasn't the wooden folding table which lay before him, strewn with every conceivable armament from a butterfly knife to a bazooka — it wasn't the stacks upon stacks of televisions looping countless hours of CCTV footage from VLI's previous escapades.

It was the figure of a small, thin, blonde woman — shaking like a leaf, eyes wide with anguish, and bound to a chair and gagged around her mouth with cruel lengths of duct tape — which froze Jonathan in place. As the woman in the chair was unmistakably Ruby Goldhirsch.

"Ah, *ah, ah,*" Derek's voice rose in a mocking lilt as his hand rose, a remote clutched daintily in his fingers, "*No sudden movements, or I'm gonna be eatin' chili tonight. Con carne.*"

He snickered at his own joke before lowering his hand, and as though in response, Grace lifted hers to Jonathan's shoulder. Assuaged, Jonathan stepped forward.

"What are we doing here?"

"I thought you wanted a *hunt*," Derek replied, his voice dripping with mocking venom, "What's wrong? Don't like when it's not on *your time*?"

"You want to play a game."

"A game, a hunt — you're one of them *wrasslers*, yeah? Don'tcha wanna have a **match**?"

Neither Jonathan nor Grace responded; the bile in their throats prevented it. Their host pressed on.

"Simple rules: you pick a weapon, you fight. I give you the count of 'Fifty Mississippi' to hide, then I seek. Acceptable?"

"Why the **hell**," Jonathan snarled, "Should I *deign* to play this fucking little game when you've already—"

"**SHUT UP!**" Derek roared, slamming his fists on the table, "**SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!** *You* don't make the **rules!** You *made* the rules until **this point**, and it got you **here!** *You wanted this!* So either *play the fucking game* or this ends **now!**"

A few strands of hair had fallen from his head in his rage. But when Jonathan and Grace stepped forward, inspecting the weapons laid before them, Derek composed himself with a smile and slicked them back into place.

"I've got a Smith & Wesson revolver on my hip," Grace stated, pushing back her coat to reveal the firearm, "I'll keep it."

"Beretta M9. Shoulder holster. Same," Jonathan continued after her, opening his coat to reveal it, but then being sure to lay his tape recorder on the table, "I'll come back for this."

"Bold move, Cotton, let's see if it pays off," Derek remarked with a scoff, "What's that, an audio diary?"

"Something like that."

"Right. *Something like that*," Derek sneered before turning to the exit flip and smiling, "One Mississippi."

Just beyond the threshold, Jazzland awaited. In the distance, lights upon the ferris wheel crackled and sparked, the rusted and waterlogged machinery slouched to life under the moon as the groan of metal joints and hiss of decrepit pneumatic pistons rose like a howl. Neon eyes and rust-covered teeth awaited Jonathan, the only encouragement being the rhythmic counting of the hunter at his back.

And thus he stepped over the threshold and into *The Lion's Den*.

[• REC]

I don't hate you, Sebastian. Isn't that a way to start this all off, after all that we've been through over the past half or so

year. You were not but a few months into your reign and had just completed your very first defense when I struck at the Revelry, staring into your eye with a smile on my face as I put the bullet in your head and made my intentions clear. Over the days since, I made my intentions clear and bided my time, not content to shove my way to the front and at peace with any obstacles, whether Ned Kaye or Kieran King or Charlie Nickles, that could cross my path.

My choice. **My** path. **My time**. Afterall, Rainbow Road wasn't built in a day.

And in the time I took, I allowed you the opportunities to avert this disaster. I kept my eye on you, studied you, judged you, and prayed – and I mean **prayed** – that you'd give me an excuse to stay my hand. Because as almost a year has passed since you summited the highest heights of XWF – in fact, just five days over the anniversary of your XWF Championship victory – I've learned a great deal about Sebastian Everett-Bryce. I look at you, Sebastian, and I see a man cut from my very same cloth, someone who's glimpsed an evil in the world and has set about standing up to it. I see in Sebastian Everett-Bryce a man who will keep his friends closer than his enemy, even to a fault; a dashing, charismatic little rogue with an assured smirk and a soldier's swagger who can inspire those at his side to fight to the bitter end. All of these qualities should be, and are, things I consider admirable.

The world *needs* the idea of Sebastian Everett-Bryce, and the XWF needs it even moreso. As the very roots of this company rot from the encroachment of fiends like Madison Dyson, Charlie Nickles, Kieran King, and Yelena Gorgo, you *should* be the vanguard. And I didn't just want you to be that, Sebastian – I **needed** you to do so. I've never been anything less than honest and anything less than straightforward, from the first strike to the last word: I expect better of you because you, yourself, demand to be seen as the "Best. In. The. Business."

Wish granted, Sebastian.

I gave you exactly what you wanted and exactly what that treatment entails.

You wanted to be the Goliath? I would be your David.
You wanted to be Emperor? I'd be your insurgent.
You fancied yourself as a Great Detective? Very well, I'll be
your Moriarity.

No matter my discomfort with the fit of the black hat, I donned
it for you, as per your request. And I did it because while I
heard Your Excellence's edicts, I saw no resolution. For all of
your bombast and heraldry, Sebastian Everett-Bryce was naught
but a golden statue, shining brilliantly in the sun...

but ultimately *hollow*.

Why are we here? Because while I *believed in* Sebastian
Everett-Bryce, I did not **believe** Sebastian Everett-Bryce.
Because upon inspection, I scratched to see how deep the gilding
lay. Because while satisfied in my disappointment, still find
myself charged with vandalism.

You did this. You wanted this. You sought this.

I don't hate you, Sebastian. I can **despise** your artifice
without succumbing to simple hatred.

And therein lies the difference between us: when the devil
demands his due, I'll walk confidently forth to my fate, not
rage against the machine for any damage done sticking my hand in
its gears. I wear my scars on my sleeve: every single one given
to me by Bourbon, Nickles, and Dolly or any of the others
before. And I'll make no excuses.

You did this. You wanted this. You sought this.

I did this. **I** wanted this. **I** sought this.

And as I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I **will**
fear no evil.

The explosion ripped through the front of the former gift shop they'd taken shelter behind, sending shards of the roof soaring into the air and causing windows in the back to burst, raining glass and fire upon them. The assault produced a loud roar, loud enough to send a ring through their ears and barely blot out the shriek of the decaying P.A.'s as they belted "Livin' in the Sunlight, Lovin' in the Moonlight" by Tiny Tim.

"Was that a *fucking rocket launcher?*" Grace screamed from behind the arm held before her face.

"That wasn't *'Fifty Mississippi'!*" Jonathan replied.

"*Priorities!*"

Derek's howl of delight cut above it all, followed by the rattle of machine gun fire and the gleeful splash of his boots through the puddles. Grace had separated quickly back to the shadows, and unable to locate her, Jonathan spied and headed towards the silhouette of a Scat-A-Bout just thirty yards away. One shot ricocheted off a light post behind him — another put a hole through a metal trash can enclosure to his left — hurdling the safety enclosure, he ducked behind one of the cars, his gun readied and chest heaving.

When he rose and leveled his weapon, Jonathan could see the faint outline of his adversary on a nearby rooftop, and with a trembling hand, he fired off two shots.

"*MISSED ME, IDIOT!*" belted a voice over the P.A., "*But I seeeee yooou.*"

The lights on the Scat-A-Bout flicked on, the stock carnival music swelling from the cars as the ride gave an ominous creak and hum. Jonathan rolled forward as the arms lurched forward, the cars beginning to turn like a flail. Another series of shots ricocheted around him, one pinging off the ride before striking a light post before a

second struck with white heat across his lower thigh, causing the unmistakable feeling of warmth to run down his ankle.

A glancing blow, he thought through gritted teeth as he pulled himself once more over the gate, *Nothing more*. But in the distance, he could hear a war whoop of delight from Derek Cook as his pursuer victoriously emptied a clip of ammunition into air, followed by the clatter of a discarded Kalashnikov that bounced down from the roof to the illuminated ground. The P.A. began to play “It’s Raining Men”.

“What’s wrong, *Sherlock*,” Derek’s voice boomed once more over the P.A., “Your little pea shooter not big enough and don’t know how to use it?!”

Jonathan ran. He ran until his legs ached and his lungs burned, his eyes searching for somewhere — anywhere — to find shelter. *You wanted this*. Beneath one of his feet, soaking into his sock and pooling deep in his boot, a puddle has begun to form. *You asked for this*. The entrance alcove of a freestanding bathroom offered some promise of respite, but no sooner had he crouched down then a rifle round ripped into the tiled wall just dangerously above his head, spraying shards of shrapnel down upon him. *You deserve this*. The porcelain slashed into his scalp as he moved once more, pulling the metal door open to hold before him as a shield, but when three more rounds seemed to easily penetrate it and come closer still to striking true, he abandoned that post for the nearby brush.

“YOU WANTED THIS,” Derek’s voice roared over the P.A., “YOU SOUGHT THIS.”

It was just past the bramble when he saw the edge of the property, the fence broken open. Behind him, a harsh searchlight scanned the thicket.

You could flee, the voice in his head offered, Leave them all behind. Grace, Ruby, Olive, VLI, XWF. He'd win, but he'd be satisfied. He wouldn't pursue. He'd gain the victory, but you'd keep your life.

And at that moment, Jonathan hesitated.

He thought hard for them all — his only swerving
— then he rose.

And in the tent by the entrance, Ruby Goldhirsch watched on the CCTV as Derek Cook tossed aside his M24 sniper rifle and drew his Glock, grinning as he leveled it at his cornered prey, making sure to manually cock the slide back once to be sure. He'd removed the tape from her mouth before leaving, allowing her sobs to go unobstructed as they had for almost the entire past thirty minutes. And as he stalked towards her fiance, just as she had done intermittently over the past thirty minutes, Ruby closed her eyes and tried to scream loud enough to drown out of the sounds of **The World**.

[• REC]

But make no mistake, Sebastian: while I may not hate you, I **do** despise you. I despise that little tip of your cap you've given every opponent, the smug smirk on your lips as you'd give every speech. I despise the mythologies you weave, the grotesqueness of their contradictions, and your seeming obliviousness to them. I despise the way you talk about yourself, talk about others, and talk about me.

But most of all? If there is one thing I could say borders on "hate"? I **despise** that we *know* there's that little voice in the back of your head that's told you everything I've ever said.

And that you think acknowledging its existence is penitence towards absolution.

Poor little Sebastian, the kid with a crooked ol' dad and dickhead therapist. *Wahh*, Sebastian's got anxiety and insecurity which makes him feel lonely but also push away his loved ones. *Boo hoo*, he's just trying to keep this business and I have to go make it personal. *Sebastian, Sebastian, Sebastian*. Won't anyone, *besides* Sebastian, think about **Sebastian**?

You self-absorbed, spoiled little *fucking* **brat**. It's so nice to have it be all about you until it **is** all about you, huh? Everyone wants to be the center of attention until they find out what it **really means**. Oh sure, you have that voice in the back of your head, but when you look out to the world, you expect to be told "it's not true". And when the response is, "maybe it has a point," your only reaction is blind, idiot rage.

It was never about being a paradigm of virtue, it was about being a paradigm, period. It wasn't about beating the challenger, it was about being the champion. It wasn't for The People, it was so they would sing your praise.

And where you have the luxury of keeping things "business", I'd love to ask you just how I am to keep "business" in regards to Madison Dyson *mocking my first partner's homelessness and drug addiction*? How am I to face Tatiana Jolee's open desire to *deliberately injure me* for daring to speak against her, or **YOUR** stated objective to **end my career** for playing business in a way **YOU** don't like.

Sebastian Everett-Bryce: ten degrees benevolent in good times, ten degrees malevolent when it affects him personally. Scratch a liberal and watch a fascist bleed. Show me a hero, and I'll *write you a tragedy*.

Where **is** Sebastian when the tigers break free? Where is **he** when the barbarians are at the gate? Where's he when **someone** needs to check under the bed, when **someone** seeks to put scorpions in a babe's cradle?

Tipping his *fucking* hat. Saying "better luck next time".
Letting them off.

Imagine carrying this company on your shoulders for almost a
year only to show you don't have a spine.

You've stared down the barrel of your fathers gun. You've *bled*
for this business. In mere days, we will be stepping into a
steel and iron chamber of death. But in spite of all of this,
Sebastian, make no mistake: you are a **goddamn fucking coward**.

The only question that remains is when everything you stood for
falls, *where will **you** stand?*

Life fell out beneath Jonathan as the sound of the shot rang out through the air. At first, he wondered if this was what The End was like — that sense of downward gravity, the feeling of confusion as one hurtles through space, the sense of security and warmth with no pain. But when he hit the ground, the shock of impact assured him that he'd suffered no injury nor taken no damage. And the pressure atop him, as well as that flow of the red red kroovy couldn't be his, as no pain in his chest accompanied that still searing gash in his leg. The pressure left him in the form of 135 lbs rolling off him and to the side. Grace Leary lay in the mud, staring upwards, a hole in her lower left abdomen which seemed to bulge unnatural upwards. The blood which had spilled from the front of her shirt and now began to flow down and saturate her back, seeping through into the damp bayou earth beneath them. And as he stomped forward through the brush, Derek Cook screamed in rage.

"Bullshit! That's *cheating*! You weren't *supposed* to get some 'Power of Friendship' crap!" he snarled, now firing wildly as he advanced, causing branches to burst and mud to splatter, a few additional rounds striking Grace in the leg and arm.

As he trundled forward, he swung his arm wildly, striking Jonathan with the barrel of his gun before looking down at his unintentional prey.

“Those turtlenecks are unflattering as fuck. Bitch looks fat.” he remarked with a scoff, before turning and leveling the gun, “But now it’s you and me, hermano. Last words?”

Jonathan stared at him, his gun laying in the mud at his knees. His eyes went to Grace first — the wound in her side, the blood on the ground, her eyes staring up at the sky — then they went to the gun and how *just* far it was out of reach — and then they went back to his adversary.

“Fifteen.”

“I don’t know what your Gematria bullshit means,” Cook snarled, “Pretentious dumbass.”

And then he pulled the trigger.

And it clicked.

And then

The Word

Derek had hardly understood what had happened before Jonathan's bullet ripped through his skull and finished the match.

[•REC]

You were the chosen one, Anakin. You were the man who sought to bear the belt for validation. If this is business to you, you understood and accepted the risks when you entered into partnership – you knew what was at stake. You sought to be an example and demanded to be treated as such, talking through one side of your mouth to The People while talking out the other side to The World.

How *dare* I call you out on that. How *dare* I not let you have your cake and eat it.

And as we've stood face-to-face in every instance, and I've taken you to task, you have **never** rebuked my words. You have **never** defended yourself or looked inward. You've **never** apologized for ***your*** complicity.

"What about you, Jonathan? You're just jealous."

What ***about*** me, Sebastian? What about the sacrifices ***I've*** made? What about the licks that I've taken – the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ***I've*** endured? What about the burdens I've borne, the battles I've waged, and the things that I've lost? As you've nursed your ego, gazed at your navel, and plugged your ears to drown out any voice but your own, ***I've*** been here to pick up ***your*** slack, clean up ***your*** mess, and pay for ***your*** sins. I have shouldered ***your*** debt, and now ***I*** have come to collect.

You are **twice** the athlete I am. But you are **half** the man.

The World is not black and white, Sebastian; we both know how dark it can be. But I dream it in color.

The World does NOT revolve around you. But it has burned in
your wake. And I'll spill myself red upon it to excavate it
from under that gray lair of ash.

You did this. You wanted this. You sought this.

You've prayed to me for absolution. And I'll be here to answer.

You made this bed.

So *lay in it.*

The blood's on the walls.

So *you might as well just admit it.*

Remember that Darius cast Daniel into the lion's den not out of
joy or malice but because Daniel forced his hand. And in the
morning, having not eaten or slept, Darius rushed to the cave
and threw back the stone in trepidation, only to be relieved
that Daniel's faith had found him salvation.

Should you emerge, Sebastian, are you ready to face The World
you left behind?

I don't think it's worth considering —
I don't believe that you have the faith to endure.

The wound wasn't fatal, but it had been ugly. He'd been correct in his guess; Grace
weakly reached up under her turtleneck and withdrew the waterlogged phonebook. It
had been just enough to absorb the hollow point's impact, but not without ripping into
the side of her flank.

“We’re even,” she hissed as he pulled her to her feet, and as the sky opened up and rain fell upon New Orleans, it did its best to clear the trail of blood in their wake. Even so, it was not enough. Just as in anywhere that VLI had taken to task, the blood always seemed to trail.

Derek Cook lay dead, his brains seeping into the ground below as he stared up in the same rage he’d felt in his final moments. But there was no time left to respect the dead, not that he’d want it, nor to reflect on the steps which had led them all to *The Lion’s Den* — this, too, had come to pass. The gloves and the mask were off, the cards were on the table, and the truth would set them free.

In the tent, Jonathan used a knife from the table to cut Ruby free. She collapsed into his arms, weak and sobbing as he held her close, watching as the blood of battle stained the white satin camisole she wore through mere contact.

“It’s okay,” he whispered to her softly as he stroked her hair, “I’m here. It’s me.

You can trust me.”

But she never ceased sobbing, and in reply she furiously shook her head.

“No, you’re not,” she said,

“I don’t even know who you are.”