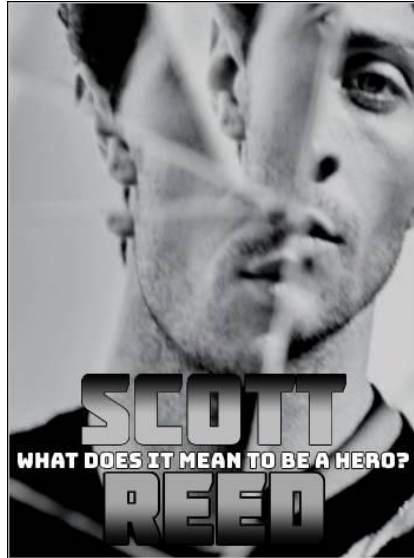




002

“He get you again, kid?” Mr. Bobby walks over to me while I’m looking in the bathroom mirror. My lip is busted to bits to say the least.

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head. My head throbs as I move it. I’d gotten into another fight with Chris. But then again, I shouldn’t even call it a fight honestly. Chris handed me my ass on a broken platter. Broken, just like how my face looks.

“Did you manage to get any shots in?” My house parent asks. I shake my head again, wincing in the process. “Dang, Scott.” He scoffs. “Have you ever learned how to fight?”

Have you seen me lately?

“I’ll take your silence as a no,” Mr. Bobby adds.

“Can you teach me how to fight? Chris is going to get in trouble but he won’t stop until he’s completely gone from here!” I exclaim.

“That’s something I can’t do, buddy. But,” he shrugs. “There is something I can do. I know we’ve had you in the gym and you’re looking like you’ve developed some guns on you,” he flicked my right bicep, though I wouldn’t call it a bicep. More like an ant hill. “Muscle can add power but it can slow you down. So, you need to learn how to fight but not only that.”

Is he going to teach me how to make a shiv?

I can’t go to prison for murder.

Do kids go to prison? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, if not.

"What else is there?" I ask, intrigued as fuck if I'm being honest.

Mr. Bobby grins, "You'll have to learn speed."

"I don't wanna do drugs, Mr. Bobby."

He shakes his head, "Wait? What? No. I'm talking about 'quickness' son. That kind of speed."

"Oh," I nod. "That kind of speed."

"Yeah," he replies. "Now, tell me how you know about the other..."

"What happened to you?"

I'm in the backstage area of the Saitama Super Arena, all the way in Japan. It's been a few days since I woke up in a parking lot covered in glitter, dirt, and blood. Yeah, that Joe fucker made me bleed my own blood. Like the day Mr. Bobby found me, I have a split lip. I can't leave out the black eye.

Maybe taking off the mask wasn't the best idea.

"I fell down some stairs," I reply while being checked out by a member of the SCW medical team.

"This black eye tells me you're full of shit, Beard...errr...Scott," this team member, Ray Mace, says. He's been around the block, and I'm talking about his age, not his sexual escapades, though there is always a chance he's a player. "Sorry, old habits die hard."

"Okay," I shrug. "I fell down some stairs then bounced up and hit a doorknob."

"That's all you're going to give me?"

Listen, old man. I'm not one to openly brag about getting my ass kicked.

"You should see the door, Ray. Trust me. It didn't end well..."

For me...

“Okay, keep your secrets.” Ray states as he leans back. “You’re not dying or anything. Well, since you’re booked, I can still clear you but that black eye is nasty. Must’ve been some ass kicking by that door. I can’t say I’ve heard of such a thing.”

“Trust me,” I nod before sliding off the table. “I should’ve known better,” and this is true. Joe was/is like a Mack truck. Probably hits as hard as one, too. “But with me being me, I went for it anyway.”

“I see,” Ray sighs. “Well next time, use your brain. Not your skull. And learn how to walk and maintain your balance, I guess.”

I need to join a fight club. I won't be able to talk about it, still. Sorry, Ray.

“I’ll do my best.”

“And don’t get into any trouble, tonight. Looks like you’ve been involved enough as it is.”

“This is my good friend, Sam Beckett.” Mr. Bobby introduces me to some middle aged gentleman who leans against the ropes of a boxing ring. “He taught me how to box a few years ago.”

“And trust me kid,” Sam crackles. “He still sucks.”

They share a laugh. I join in, only to ruin their moment by laughing louder than they are.

“Anyway,” Mr. Bobby breaks the awkward silence that followed my obnoxious laugh. “This is Scott Reed. He’s a good kid. He just needs a little guidance if you know what I mean.”

“I can’t fight,” the words bolt from my mouth and I’m consumed by embarrassment almost instantly.

Why would you just openly admit that, dude?

“You can’t show this kid a few pointers, Bobby?”

“Well, not him. If you catch my drift.”

Thanks. I’m an orphan. Shout it from the rooftops why don’t you?

“Oh, I see.” Sam then looks at me. “Well, Scott...you came to the right place.”

“Sam was a champion boxer,” Mr. Bobby smirks. “When he was younger.”

“I can still take you, you son of a...” Sam looks at me again, and exhales sharply. “I can still take you. Now,” he shakes his head, “are you able to drop him off or are you gonna stick around? I can put you to work, Bobby. This place needs to be cleaned up.”

“If you can teach the kid, then I’ll tidy up for you. You’ve always been a slob, Sam.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Sam returns his attention to me. “Alright, Scott. Let’s see what you can do.”

“I can’t do anything,” I say, cursing myself for admitting my faults so quickly. You’d think I’d have learned from that mistake, which was only made five minutes ago.

Shut up, Scott.

“Don’t you worry, son. We’ll get you taken care of. I’m a professional.”

What the hell was that?

I’m sitting in my locker room. My match with SMP was grade A BS. Like the dude was getting beyond desperate. I’m pretty sure he started crying, too.

And then, there was Kiersten Scott. Watching the playback, I can’t help but feel bad for those watching at home. The commentators kept saying ‘Scott’ referring to her and I. Lots of Scotts going around.

As it happened periodically during my time in a group home, I hold an ice pack against my head. Ray gave it to me, telling me I got into trouble when he told me not to.

“At least it wasn’t a door,” I remember him saying.

“It wasn’t the door, Ray. I took a knob to the face,” I replied, before silence fell between us. Looking back on it, I can’t help but think I need to learn how to talk to other people. I don’t do very well with it.

I let out a sigh, wondering which was worse. Chris kicking my ass, or would that honor go to Joe? What about ‘The One?’

She wants to get rid of me. But this ain't over until the fat lady sings, or so they say. Well, not until I rectify what went down a few years ago.

Whether she admits it or not, I handed her a win. When we do face each other, I'm taking it back.

Yeah, with interest. Yeah. Yeah...

My cell rings. It's Juice. "Hello?"

"Yo, what is crackin', crackah?"

I thought I was five while at the strip club. Me and my Pepsi. My boy takes the cake.

"Not much, man. I'm getting ready to leave the arena. I'm thinking about hitting up Club Sega. Play some video games."

"You need to do something. I watched your match. That shit was ass."

"Um, thanks I guess."

"That dude was practically crying. He should've gotten a tampon from The One. And speaking of that trick, you either need to hit that, or drop her where she stands."

"I'll take that under consideration. Thanks, again."

"I'm just saying, dude. She wiped the mat with you. It's like watching Chris beat you up all over again. You'd think that boxer dude training you, would help. You feel me?"

"Sure."

"All I'm saying is this. That shit should be like muscle memory. Just knock her out. Unless she wants to knock boots."

"I don't think I'm going to sleep with her, dude."

"She's probably too much man for you, anyway..."

“Alright, kid. We’ve been at this for months. I need you to show me what you’re made of. You got me?” Sam circles me while I stand in my fighting stance. He’s called it something like ‘Southpaw’. He says I’ve got a ‘mean’ left hand.

I nod as I begin to circle, too. I blink and he nailed me with three shots. Two to the side of the head. One to the face. I fall into the ropes.

Holy balls.

“Come on, Scott. You’ve gotta move. You’ve gotta move. Keep your guard up. Do you hear me? Huh...” Two more punches connect and I fall into the ropes again. Sam repeats himself. Telling me to keep my guard up. Telling me to move. That I’ve gotta make something happen. Then, he punches me again.

“Come on! Hit me! Do something! Hit me! Scott! You! Have! Got! To! Hit...” I come off the ropes while swinging my left hand. I connect. I feel a crunch before Sam begins cursing me. He curses my parents, though I know not to hold it against him. He doesn’t know they’re dead, after all.

I feel pretty proud of myself. Though I didn’t want to, I know I hurt him pretty good. That feeling disappears as I see blood pouring down Sam’s face. He’s covered up his nose, while a few of the other trainers slide into the ring to check on him.

Blood.

Oh, God.

Tell me that’s not...

Tell me I’m not...about to...

I see blood. Then, my stomach turns. Then, I see vomit. Then, I blink and that’s all she wrote, other than hearing Sam cry out, “Did he just fucking puke in my ring?!?!”

The taxi comes to a stop, just outside Club Sega. I notice a guy, younger than me, step outside and turn down the street to the right. This doesn’t keep my interest for long as I find myself blown away by the sheer size of the building before me. I’ve been an avid gamer almost my entire life. Like comics, video games have been an escape from reality. And let’s face it, nobody wants to deal with reality more than they have to.

That could also stem from being friends with Gio at one point.

I pay my fare and begin to make my way inside, when something stops me. I hear yelling. The Spidey-Sense that I don't really have tingles. It's coming from the right side of Club Sega.

Peeking around the corner, I see the same guy being shoved against the wall by one other guy, while a third guy punches the first guy in the stomach.

Don't do it. Just go inside. Play some games.

There's nothing to see.

"Where's my money, bitch?!?"

"I don't..."

"That doesn't work for me!"

Another punch.

"Someone...help..."

And another. And another.

Go inside. Go inside, Scott. Go inside/

But I don't go inside. I run down the left side of the building, turning right at the corner. Before I know it, I pull the hood of my coat over my face, zipping my coat up, and tying the strings, so my hood doesn't fall.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but whatever it is...I hope they don't see my face.

Minato wanted to play some video games. Nothing else. His life was shit, and he just wanted a break from it. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Club Sega was always his go-to. He could get lost in there. The twenty-four year old college student felt safe there, more importantly.

To make ends meet, he'd gotten in with the wrong crowd. It was a story as old as time. It was a crowd Minato, for some reason, thought he could avoid or out-run.

But after escaping for a few hours within the many worlds provided by Club Sega, he learned he couldn't escape the reality of his own. That crowd found him, and they wanted their pound of flesh.

And they were going to get it, too.

That was until some idiot in a hood ran up on them. Whoever it was, fought with all their might. Whoever it was, didn't do all that great, but didn't do all that bad, either, as Minato's attackers ended up on the ground, groaning and clutching at their heads.

The same could be said for the guy in the hood, but whoever it was, managed to get away.

Just like Minato, who felt he had another reason to be grateful for yet another day.

It hurts to move.

I'm in the airport. We, as in the SCW roster, are waiting to board our plane, that'll take us to our next destination.

Australia of all places. It's obvious the bookers have never heard of, or seen, the spiders that populate that country.

Are you really going to think about spiders, right now?

My ribs ache. My head and face aren't any better. I have two black eyes now. My split lip doesn't seem like it's going to heal any time soon.

You should've just gone inside.

Yeah, yeah. I know. I know.

My phone goes off. It's a text from Juice.

“How was Club Sega?”

“Great...” I reply, trying to move as little as possible. I’ve got sunglasses on, too. I don’t want someone like ‘The One’ thinking she did more damage than she actually did.

Another message.

“I read two dudes were found beat to shit outside that place, last night.”

Juice is, and always has been, a lover of all things Japan. If he wasn’t confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, I’ve no doubt he’d be here with me right now. He pays more attention to Japanese news than he does American news, obviously.

“What? That’s cray-cray...” I text back.

“Hells yeah it is. I wish I’d been there. I would’ve filmed it. Did you see anything?”

I hesitate for a moment. Do I tell him what happened?

No, no. Keep that shit to yourself.

“Not a thing,” I write.

I know it’s not Vegas, but what happens in Japan, stays in Japan. What happened last night, can’t happen again. Stay in your lane.

I put my phone away as my flight was called. I meet all airport requirements before boarding. I take my seat, and I pray for not only a safe trip, but for some rest. My body needs it, just like I need to push whatever happened last night...out of my mind.

Time. Seconds become minutes. Minutes become hours.

They say we gotta make the most of our time on this planet. The same could be said of our time on SCW programming.

I know I’m not James Evans. I’m not Deanna, nor am I Owen Cruze. These are names Kimberly Williams mentioned in the lead up to her ‘Long Road to Hell’ match against David Striker.

I’m not any of those names, nor will I ever pretend that I am. All I can be is Scott Reed, All I can do is make my time count.

The last time I competed, I faced Sean Prime. I'm not sure what you'd call that match if I'm being honest. It wasn't something I'm proud of.

I got the one breathing down my neck, but I can't say I didn't bring it upon myself. She started a fight years ago, and I've not forgotten. She can talk all the nonsense she wants, but she needs to understand one thing.

I'm going to be the one closing the book on our little story. I know we're on a collision course, and I'm not swerving. I'm going right for her.

When the time comes, I'll make those minutes count, all the way down to the last three seconds where I pin her shoulders to the mat.

And we're edging closer to the Taking Hold of the Flame battle royal. Forty superstars. One person left standing to become the Number One Contender to the SCW World Championship.

Time isn't always on your side in that match. Trust me, I'm speaking from experience, as I've never had the best luck in that particular event. Do I like my chances for June 2nd? That's up in the air.

But I do like my chances for my next match. At Breakdown, in the City of Angels, I'm going toe to toe with the reigning, five-time SCW Underground Champion, Kimberly Williams.

Now, as I said. I'm not James. Deanna. I'm not Owen. She mentioned those names, stating they had all beaten her, but left enough of her to rebound and regain the title they'd taken from her. Kim has overcome many challenges. She's established herself as a top name in this industry, as she is Queen of the Death match. She's the Woman Scorned. She has a litany of nicknames and championships to her resume.

And let's be real here. That's like...intimidating.

But then I think about Kim's tone when she addressed Striker. She talked about how she elevated the Underground division. She does deserve her praise, but her tone said differently. It told me something else.

Kim has it all, but underneath those nicknames and accolades, she's bored. She wants something else. She wants to have fun, but she's like me. She's looking for meaning in this business. True meaning. True purpose.

Kim can talk about being one of the best wrestlers in the world, be it on the technical side of things, or the extreme, but she's content to stay in Hell, as she called it. It is where she's

comfortable. I've been through my own Hell. Growing up in foster care after losing my parents. Shipped from group home to group home.

When you're in that kinda situation, you're left with a lot of time in your head, ya know?

All I ever wanted was to make something of myself.

And after years of selling myself short, after years of having no one to really believe in me, and that's myself included, it's time for a change.

I'm not going to worry about CHBK and Selena. I know their day will come and their number will be called. I'm going to worry about earning some nicknames of my own. I'm going to focus on winning championships and building up my resume.

The flame may not end up being mine to take, but this match against you Kim...it's mine. I'm not coming before you as someone bored. I'm not coming before you as someone who is content. I'm here as a man, no mask, ready to confront my own Hell, and burn it down, so I can rebuild myself.

I don't have to be seen as a wrestling superstar. You can all see me for what I really am. A professional wrestler who will get down and dirty.

I didn't grow up in a pro wrestling family. I didn't come from an established name. I will be, and you can mark my words, I will become my own establishment. Winning at Taking The Leap, that shipwreck of a match against Prime...those were a precursor for what's to come, and what's to come is this match, Kim.

I need this match. I need to be against the top names of this company. You've been in the main event spotlight, maximizing every single minute you have. I've never found success outside the TV title. I want more.

I will have more.

And that won't come from acts of desperation. That will come fighting my way to where I want to be.

Kim, you may want to move onto bigger and better things. You may have a chance at Taking Hold of the Flame. This Wednesday night, you need to forget what you think you know about me, because when it comes to me, nobody knows what's about to hit them. So, you can want bigger and better things. But that's all it's going to be this week.

You want the win.

You want to look strong going into Taking Hold of the Flame.

I need this win.

I need to look strong.

I'm going to show you that you may not want to hold that championship any longer. You may not want to carry that burden any longer. I, on the other hand, am ready to show I can hang with the best. That I'm ready to take the ball. I'm not going to have it handed to me out of nowhere.

So, Kim...let's make the most of it at Breakdown. Get as crazy as you want. Throw all you can at me. I'm doing the same.

Only one of us will walk away, and you're looking at him.

This time?

It's mine.