

We are deep in the guts of the building now. Far away from the pyro and the polished stage upstairs. It's cold down here. The air is heavy and smells like rust and stagnant water. The concrete walls are sweating.

There is only one light source. A single industrial work light hangs from a frayed cord, swinging just a little bit. It cuts a sickly yellow cone through the dust, leaving the rest of the hallway in total darkness.

In the center of that light stands JAMIE JOHNSON. He is clear as day. He's wearing that matte black track jacket, zip pulled up to his chin, looking at the floor with that cold, detached expression. He looks calm. Almost bored.

But he isn't alone.

Behind him, where the light dies out, the shadows are full.

Three figures are back there. You can't make out faces or gear, just outlines against the tangle of pipes and conduit.

One of them is massive, a towering shape that blocks out the end of the hall. Another is crouched low on a stack of pallets, still as a statue. A third leans back against a pillar, arms crossed over their chest. The fourth stands slightly apart from the rest, just a silhouette of shoulders and intent.

They don't move. They don't speak. They just wait in the dark while Jamie stands in the light.

My hope was that I'd walk out of Zenith as the World Champion. When I got the news that I'd be the very first entrant, I was both irritated and amused.

I figured, the odds are against me, so despite previous words the likelihood of walking out as the champ was a pretty big longshot. I knew that, everyone knows that when they draw that number. I shifted my goal then, deciding that at least I wanted to be around long enough to do some damage.

Really get my point across.

Then came Trey Willett. The Willennium. Uncle Trey.

And, you know, it's my own fault. There was some part of me that still naively wanted to hold on to something I felt from long ago. From my history. Some very small piece of me that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all the things I've seen with my own eyes, some piece of me that still believed in someone who was supposed to be a hero.

What a joke.

Jamie doesn't smile. He doesn't laugh. The word hangs in the damp air like a verdict.

Behind him, the massive silhouette in the back shifts its weight, a heavy boot scraping against the concrete floor—a subtle, grinding sound that echoes down the corridor. It's a reminder of the violence waiting in the wings.

Jamie's eyes harden. He brushes an invisible speck of dust off his sleeve, dismissing the memory of Trey Willett as easily as he would a rounding error in an equation. He takes a half-step closer to the camera, the harsh overhead light casting the hollows of his eyes in deep shadow. When he speaks again, the bitterness is gone, replaced by something colder. Something more clinical.

That's on me, though. I expected one thing, got another, that's my fault. Just a guy clinging to an idea that doesn't exist anymore.

Trey Willett ran into that battle royal, attacked my knee, and threw me out of the ring like I was trash. Cast aside.

Just a quick reminder that it's a brutal world out there and people you thought you could count on, you really can't. Again, on me.

It's not really surprising, though. The Willennium always has his own best interests as a priority.

Always.

The word hangs there. Always.

Jamie lets it sit. He doesn't look angry anymore. He looks validated. Like a scientist whose hypothesis just got proven right, even if the result was catastrophic.

In the background, the silhouette leaning against the pillar pushes off the concrete. They take a step forward, boots crunching on the grit. It's a subtle shift, but the space suddenly feels smaller. More crowded.

Jamie doesn't flinch. He doesn't even check his six. He just stares down the lens, his expression hardening into something resembling a promise.

Soooo... I asked to fight him.

Well, didn't ask. Demanded it, really. Walked into the office, almost didn't even have to anything. They knew. They knew what I wanted and they knew that I was either going to get it the logical way or I was going to get it the more violent way.

Because that's what this is all about, right? Using violence to organize chaos, and there's nobody who's as emblematic of chaos... as Trey Willett.

Trey is so chaotic that he lost his family.

His failures are so epic that, when his son was a child, Brandon, also known to the world as Malice... ended up under the care of Adrian Corazon for an incredibly long amount of time. I didn't learn about that until I was an adult, but when I did get that info?

I wasn't surprised.

The Willennium is a guy that can't get out of his own way. Really, in his own special way, he's why I came back. He's the exact type of cancer that doesn't belong here in the SHOOT Project anymore.

Jamie stares into the camera, letting the accusation settle. He doesn't look like he's trying to hurt Trey's feelings. He looks like a surgeon identifying a tumor.

Behind him, the stillness breaks.

The silhouettes step forward at once. They don't rush. It's a slow, synchronized encroach. The light catches the edge of a shoulder, the toe of a boot, the leather of a glove, but their faces remain swallowed by the gloom. They flank Jamie, creating a wall of silent, violent potential.

Jamie doesn't acknowledge them. He doesn't need to check if they're there. He knows.

He reaches up and grabs the wire cage of the hanging work light. He holds it steady for a heartbeat, his face illuminated in harsh, unforgiving detail.

Then, he shoves it hard.

The light swings wildly. The shadows in the corridor violently elongate and spin, creating a dizzying, strobe-like effect. Faces appear and disappear in the strobe. Order descending into engineered chaos.

I'm going to make an example out of a hall of famer, and the world is going to consider this a warning shot. I'm putting together a movement in the SHOOT Project. A... heh... Revolution if you will.

These guys behind me? They're going to help. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that we're going to destroy the SHOOT Project or try to ruin everything or whatever, but I'm absolutely going to say that we're going to excise some of the demons that exist in this place.

People like Trey Willett.

So I'll see you at Zenith, Trey. I hope you've got your nicotine patch on and you've done your cardio, or you're done.

A foregone conclusion.

And once that's done? We'll be looking at some other issues that need to be addressed.

Black.

JAMIE
THE BENCHMARK
JOHNSON