Wednesday. December 10, 2025.

It took my breath away for a moment, that sharp sting of the Midwestern cold as I stepped through the doorway of the Boeing 757 and into the umbilical. Whatever thoughts were going through my head as I marched along with the other passengers, herded toward the exit by a woman old enough to be my grandmother and a man who had clearly dabbled into some type of stimulant mid-flight wearing matching uniforms, were blown away by the cryonic gust that emanated from the narrow cracks between the plane and the extended corridor's mouth.

I was used to New York City winters and their dull cold, exacerbated by the seabreeze that came off the bay. I'd grown used to the deep freeze of Rochester in February and the winds that skated over Lake Ontario.

The kind of cold that comes from being landlocked, though? From the nearest bodies of water so narrow that you could see the other side? That was a new experience in feeling frostbitten, and I hadn't even stepped outside yet.

After making my way to baggage claim, two thoughts crossed my mind.

First, I wondered if there would be anybody that I'd recognized, whose own brief experiences in the sport had caught my eye. Maybe they'd worked a Zenith, or one of Cliff's cards, or maybe even NEO or the Resistance.

Then, however, came an idea so egocentric that I shuddered - like, *visibly* shuddered - and had to play off like I'd caught a chill from the exits behind me.

What if anyone would recognize *me*?

It wouldn't be too much of a shock, of course. The SHOOT Project had been such a major name in the sport that anyone who'd been featured on its programming drew *some* attention. Not even in the locker rooms, or the convention halls, or whatever. On the street. Buying coffee. Going to the gym.

At an airport.

Luckily, I'd brought a baseball hat and a brown pea coat and a scarf that Karen got me for Christmas two years ago. I dragged the brim down over my eyes and popped the collar of the coat, keeping my head forward, my face buried in the tan and black scarf. It may have made me look suspicious, sure, but it didn't let anyone see my face.

If they'd even cared to notice, of course.

As I collected my suitcase, I took out my phone to look for an Uber. I walked briskly into the glacial air, the wind ripped from my lungs, and looked up. A young Asian woman lugged a duffel bag over her shoulder, its bright colors and black stitching matching the raven black and neon green of her hair. We paused and exchanged glances and, at that moment, it was clear.

We were both here for the same reason. We shared that *look* in our eyes.

She nodded at me and turned, her arm outstretched to flag down a taxi.

My driver, an unassuming middle aged man that looked like he'd be better suited at an accountant's office, pulled up and helped me load my suitcase into the hatchback of his Honda Civic.

"I'm Scott," he said, "Scott Harlowe."

"Nice to meet you, Scott. I'm Ri–," I paused, forcing a cough to cover the moment where I decided which name to give. "Sorry about that, this cold always catches me off guard."

"Oh, I'll bet," he laughed, "I've been out here my whole life and I'm still not used to it!"

"It's funny, right? Like, how you should be used to something," I snickered to myself as I shook my head, "but never really are? I'm Richard, by the way. Richard O'Reilly."

"I know," he replied.

I raised an eyebrow as he turned down the block, headed for the highway. He caught my confused look in the rearview mirror and nodded.

"I told you, I'm from around here," he said with a smirk, "and your dad? I was there in the front row when he made his PWA Dome debut."

March. 2001. Genesis III. The first event held in the home venue of the Pioneer Wrestling Association that my father had competed in, narrowly losing to Metalhead in a vicious and blood-drenched deathmatch.

The specter of Corey Lazarus struck again.

“Don't worry, Mr. Tenet,” Scott said with an abundance of assured discretion in his voice, “I'm not telling anyone where you're staying.”

“Oh, uh, thank you,” I answered.

“Is it cool if we grab a selfie before I drop you off?”

“Oh, uh…yeah, sure thing.”

Thankfully, the chatter for the remaining twenty minutes of the drive offered no references to my father's legacy, or even that of Dustin's, and no questions about the Belmont Classic or any other aspect of my career.

Scott would list off details and stories of certain landmarks as we drove by them, often tied to personal tales.

“Over there is where my cousin Tabbie got engaged three years ago,” he shared as we drove past the St. Louis Zoo, “damn shame that her bride-to-be turned out to also be another cousin, right? That was a rough one to come back from.”

He pulled up outside of the Element Hotel and handed my suitcase over to me. We shook hands and he took a quick selfie with me, one where the notable bags under my eyes were thankfully hidden by the shadow of the hat's brim, and he drove off. I gave him five stars and a tip before checking in, passing that same young Asian woman with the wild colored hair that I'd seen at the airport.

I showered and sat on the edge of my bed and stared at myself in the mirror. Naked. Alone. In a city that I'd never been to. Hours away from sharing a locker room with dozens of others that planned on using the Belmont Classic to get their names out there.

My phone chimed and I looked at it, a smile so wide across my sleep deprived face as I read the alert.

FIONA WANTS TO VIDEO CHAT

I answered and sat on the side of the bed as the call connected.

“Hey cowboy,” her voice rang out, “how was the flight…and where the hell are your clothes?”



Thursday. December 11, 2025.

I arrived at the Chaifetz Arena hours before the contract told us to, spending most of the time pacing back and forth by the loading dock. I kept my scarf tight around my face, only removing it when I needed a sip of the hot coffee stored in the thermos that Fiona had given me days before the trip.

"What the hell are you doing here this early?" I asked myself.

By the time the staff had arrived I could hardly feel my legs. Whether that was due to the cold or nerves was up for debate, but my steps to the locker room, weighted with hesitation, exuded purpose.

I got changed as others poured in. Some were names that I'd only read about, others were people I'd seen clips of on YouTube. Jimmy Larson, Corbin Rush, and a whole slew of others.

The card for the first leg of the tournament was posted an hour before bell time. The crowd surrounding it pulsed with anticipation and passion, hints of regret coming from a few of them.

I waited for the crowd to disperse, for most of the others to accept the possibility that the first round would be their only appearance this year before they shuffled back to their home territories, and waited, and waited. There were jokes shared, raised voices, and fists ready to fly, sometimes all from the same parties.

"Look at that runt over there," one said, a larger man that seemed in desperate need of both a hug and a shower. The type to receive neither for free.

"That's Laz's kid, ain't it?" another added.

"He looks bigger on TV," came from elsewhere.

There was only one other person standing at the posted card when I finally looked for my name. That same Asian woman with the wild hair whose path I crossed at the airport. I watched her trace her finger down a little over halfway before she nodded and marched away.

KATSUMI turned, once again, to exchange glances. I nodded to her and started to wave, but her back faced me as my hand rose. Calmly, I let my fingers glide down the page as it searched frantically for my name.

It stopped on the fifteenth match of the evening. Golf Wolf vs. Ricky Tenet. A few matches away from what would, ostensibly, be the main event.

A smirk crept across my face as I backed away.

"You've earned this," I whispered to myself.

As the evening wore on, the reason for so many matches planned on the first night became all too apparent. More often than not, in one corner would stand a true professional athlete, a being that had trained and broken themselves down into a legitimate combatant, a world class fighter ready to take on the world; in the other, though, would be a middle school custodian, a pot-bellied bar fly that had never left their hometown besides a random vacation, desperately in search of some notoriety beyond the local watering hole and its denizens.

I shuddered at the idea of looking down on them, on *any* of them. That wasn't the view of the man who my mother tried to raise me to be, or who Grandpa Rick was hoping I'd become. Or who Karen wanted me to be, who Abby looked up to. Who Cliff Young and François Pelletier had trained.

That was the kind of thing that my father would think, or outright say to everyone's face, and it hit me with a nagging jab to my ego.

Maybe he was right to do so?

Though my admittance to the SHOOT Project roster came from pure nepotism, there was still a begrudged sense of *respect* that I'd earned in the past four months. It came from my passion to improve, to justify the contract that Dan Stein had offered me, and the part-timers? The ones that would sooner chat about their high school career as a second-stringer on the soccer team than put in the kind of work required of someone in my position?

Fuck them, I thought.

And so, it went. Golf Wolf caught me by surprise a handful of times, but I remembered the way he looked down at me when we met before the bell.

"No hard feelings," I said.

Silence, from him.

I took over with a flash of kicks and elbows that even I didn't think I had in me and, soon enough, my hand was raised. They told me after that we'd been in the ring for eight minutes, but it felt like thirty seconds.

As the final bell rang, with Danny Random pinning Blake Colton to the mat, I grabbed my gear and beelined for the Uber that was waiting. Again, it was Scott, and again, he requested a selfie.

C'est la vie, I thought.



Friday. December 12, 2025.

He woke me up again.

My shadow.

He sat at the end of the bed, his back to me, and his weight ripped me from that same dream and brought me back to reality at 3:19 AM.

"You're still here," I called, "but why?"

He offered no reply, no explanation.

Just solemn silence and intentional ignorance to my presence.

I shifted in the bed, desperate to see his reflection in the mirror that hung from the wall across from me, but his face was obscured. Hidden.

"Are you," I whispered as I sat up, my hand reaching for him.

As my fingers grazed his back, he dissipated into mist, and my eyes opened once more.

Another dream. Another night terror.

9:43 AM. My phone rang.

FIONA WANTS TO VIDEO CHAT

"Good morning," I answered, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Oh thank fuck," she exclaimed, "I was so nervous!"

"Yeah, I, uhhh, forgot," I replied. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's okay," she let out with a smile, "I was just nervous that my husband-to-be was hurt!"

"Nope," I let out as I rotated my shoulder, biting my tongue to hide the dull burn as my arm lifted over my head, "just had so many nerves that I stayed up too late and passed out."

"Is that why you're still in your gear?"

I looked down and shook my head, my eyes focused on the knee pad twisted down my shin and the old tape around my wrist, tattered and hanging.

"That's a good guess," I chuckled.

We ended our call shortly after and I peeled my gear off, inch by inch. It was logged with sweat, dried and stiff at the joints, and I remembered a trick that Cliff taught me.

I took a few pairs of socks and stuffed them together, running them quickly under a cold tap. Not enough to soak them, but just enough to dampen. After getting dressed into some warmer clothes, I took my tights and pads with the damp bundle of socks to the laundry room and threw them in the dryer for thirty minutes on medium heat.

As I sat by the dryers and awaited the buzzer, I remembered the night before. The nerves that trembled my guts to and fro while I paced around the locker room, the odd calm as I marched to the ring, and the undeniably smug satisfaction when my hand was raised.

The buzzer rang and I gathered my ring gear, my faith in Cliff's advice proven worthwhile. I rushed back to my room and packed my bag for the night before I booked another Uber back to the Chaifetz Arena. Again, Scott picked me up, and again, another request for a selfie.

We pulled up the same as the night prior and I marched into the building. Luckily, the night's second round matches had been posted, and the mass of competitors that remained, halved by the first round eliminations of the weekend warriors, solemnly parted after each found their name on the sheet.

I was second billed, booked against a feral looking creature known only as Lawnmower Man III.

My father's voice echoed in my head at the sight of his name, its volume peaked as I laid eyes on the man himself.

Worst sequel ever, he said in my mind, *and this joker smells like a Bill Zebub reject.*

Once in the locker room, I hastily threw my gear on and taped my hands and wrists before I knelt on the floor and stared ahead, stretching. Thinking.

Feeling.

It wasn't long before an agent rushed in to let me know that our match was next.

"No hard feelings," I said to his blank expression, forced through the raucous composure he blatantly practiced each night. His was a look of feigned intimidation, an attempt to belittle whatever threat I could pose, but what truly did shine was how little I cared.

He wasn't Darkspade. He wasn't Arthur Pleasant or even Sammy Rochester. LM3, as I heard others refer to him, was a man that would puff out his chest and think that was enough to score a psychological victory.

It was of no use.

Five minutes after the bell rang, I was in complete control. I bobbed away from his wild strikes and weaved against whatever grapples he attempted, striking with a precision that I didn't know existed within me.

Five minutes later? I had flown off the top, flipped backwards, and driven both of my soles into his chest. His wind, his *soul*, was taken away upon impact, and my hand was raised, and we both made it back to the locker room.

"No hard feelings," I said again, now with my hand extended. A bedgrudged grimace replaced the once wild look in his eyes as he took it and nodded, the words whispered back to me under his breath. Slurred.

Another ride from Scott, another selfie, and a tremble in my hand struck as I made it back into my room. The world spun and the walls melted and my heart skipped a few beats and I collapsed against the bed, my hair once matted from the perspiration now dripping wet again.

The shadow sat beside me and grinned wickedly.

"These are mere games, boy," it rasped, "the true fight is yet to come."

I swatted at it, lunged forward, and fell to the floor. The room had returned to normal in a blink and I checked my phone.

Three missed calls. All from Fiona.

I stood and shivered and dialed her back.

“Hey cowboy,” she sang, instantly grounding me.

“Hey,” I replied, “what's going on?”

“Oh, nothing much,” she turned the camera to show the video of a crackling fire on the TV, “just wishing you were here. How'd you do?”

“Oh, you know,” a smirk forced its way out as I remembered LM3's face as he shook my hand, “pretty good, I guess.”



Saturday. December 13, 2025.

My alarm sounded at noon and I booked the Uber for four o'clock. Scott, again, was my driver. Scott, again, asked for a selfie. I, again, obliged such a simple request.

“Hey, check this out,” Scott said as he pulled up to the Chaifetz Arena. He opened his phone and pulled up an album on his Insta titled *NOW AND THEN*.

The first picture was the first selfie he asked for on Thursday night, my arm around him just outside the hotel. His goofy smile juxtaposed to my attempt at a serious glare, his thumbs up pitted against my clenched fist.

The next? A similar photo of Scott from March 2001. His same cartoonish smile and uncouth thumbs up, now in direct opposition to another man's stern expression and white knuckles. A college-aged Scott Harlowe and the unmistakable visage of Corey Lazarus, hours before his deathmatch at Genesis III.

The other pictures were in the same vein, first one of the selfies he'd taken with me followed by a similar one that featured my father.

The ride back to the hotel from the first night of the Belmont Classic followed by the bloodied aftermath of my father from Good Vs. Evil 2001, his tee and slacks torn to shreds from barbed wire after a violent war with Jimmy Ultros. Dropping me off for Night Two followed by my father holding the HiC Tempest title before a match in January 2004.

“I told you I was a fan,” Scott said.

Scott struck the same pose in every picture shown, but what stood out the most was how my father and I managed to do the same, as well. Our hands held in tightened fists, our faces contorted into intimidating stares, and that same fire in our eyes.

For the first time? I felt *honored* to be compared to him. Here was a man old enough to be my father, who was a long-time fan of his, and he beamed with pride that he was able to take part in my career just as he did my father.

“This is pretty cool,” I told him, my smile hidden by how I held his phone, “thanks for showing me.”

“That's awesome, man!” Scott exclaimed, “I'll be in the front row tonight, cheering you on!”

"That's," my thoughts drifted back to the shadow last night, to the battle with Darkspade in just a few short days, and I trailed off.

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh, yeah...no, man, that's, like, really cool," I forced out, "I'll be looking for you!"

He looked at me and could tell that I downplayed my feelings about it. He laughed and took his phone back before asking the all-important question.

"Selfie?"

We struck the same poses, he with his goofy smile and thumbs up and I with my stern expression and raised fist, and he grabbed my bag out for me.

"I'll see you out there," he said.

"Same," I replied.

I found the quarterfinals sheet and scanned for my name. Third match. Percival Avalon, a brute striker that had already beaten Oscar Alameda (yes, *that* Oscar Alameda) and the walking tank called CJ Markham. He was vicious. He was violent.

He was *next*.

For twenty minutes, Percival pummeled me with everything he had, and I found a way around him to strike fast and hard as often as possible.

Something in me *snapped* late in the match, to a point where I dissociated so rapidly that I had taken a seat at ringside as the shadow took hold.

It ducked a wide lariat and unloaded with a barrage of kicks and knee strikes to Avalon's head, moving with a ferocity that shook me to my core.

Is that me? I thought.

I leapt from my seat and charged forward, wresting my body back from the darkness that overtook it. Back in my own shoes, I grabbed Percival by the head and climbed to the second rope, diving over him with his neck gripped between my thighs as I sent him flipping over himself to crash land on his head…

…but he rolled through.

In a few moments, it was over. He took the air out of me with shots to my ribs and then dropped me down with a piledriver and the shadow stood over us as the referee's hands slapped the mat. It shook its head after the third count, dissolving into the strain of the overhead lights.

Two wins. One loss.

"No hard feelings," I said to Percival after we stepped back through the curtain, "now go win this thing."

I showered in the locker room and watched the rest of the night from beside the entrance stage, dismayed as Avalon pinned Luc Labelle to make it to the finals only to fall to Jon Malakai. It wasn't that he'd lost, of course, because Malakai was nothing to look down on, but it was because it should have been *me* out there.

Another ride back to the hotel ended with another selfie with Scott. I marched back into my room, disdain filling each step, and dropped to my knees after the door closed behind me.

I was tired. I was sore. I was battered.

I was *beaten*.

A quick call to Fiona ended with me reminding her of my itinerary, a flight back to LaGuardia landing at noon, and then home.

I laid out my travel clothes for the next day and crawled onto the bed, barely remembering to take my shoes off, and closed my eyes.



Sunday. December 14, 2025.

10:43 AM. My flight landed at LaGuardia.

11:21 AM. Malcolm picked me up and told me that my dad was running late.

11:55 AM. I walked into my apartment to find everyone cheering me on. My dad had arranged a celebration for my first professional tournament. Fiona baked a sheet of vegan s'more cookie bars that chased every ounce of disappointment which lingered in my heart away.

2:30 PM. Dustin and Misty toasted our engagement, with Dustin admitting that he was hesitant when I'd asked for his blessing. Fiona shot him a stern look, but he laughed it off as he acknowledged that he was wrong to doubt my intentions.

4:58 PM. My dad, Karen, and Abby left. With our little love den finally to ourselves, Fiona dragged me to the couch and demanded that I lie down so she could rest her head on my chest.

8:03 PM. Fiona had been asleep for over an hour and I finally manage to sneak away to the bathroom for a shower. I stared at my reflection as the shadow looms over my shoulder. There's work to be done tomorrow night. The kind that could leave scars.

8:12 PM. I dried off from the shower and slid into a pair of flannel red and white checkered pajama bottoms and a SHOOT tee. I opened the door and walked back to the living room where I found Fiona, still half-asleep, staring at me.

"You look different," she said.

"Nope," I answered, "still the same Ricky."

"Not you," she added, "your friend right there."

I turned to my side and found the shadow leaned against the wall. It was more of a vapor now, its shape only humanoid in a vague sense.

"You can see it?!"

Fiona slumped back down on the couch, fast asleep, as if she were never awake at all.



Tuesday. December 16, 2025.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The bedside monitor kept track of my love's steady, medically sedated heartbeat. 65 beats per minute. Each *beep* was a reminder of the night prior.

Of the honor that came from the cheers that erupted throughout the Pinnacle as I made my way to the ring. Of the pride that washed over me as I nearly eliminated my to-be father-in-law from the Redemption Rumble. Of the shock when he hoisted me over his head and sent me to the floor.

Of the brutal dose of reality that came when Chance attacked his would-be partners after the maelstrom reached a fever pitch. Of the churning helplessness that overtook me as the same attacks that fell two men who dwarfed me in size just a few nights prior barely registered against Sammy or Arthur. Of the pure sorrow when my father and Dustin and one of the only friends I'd had, Holden Nobody, were mercilessly broken before my eyes.

Of the unbridled *rage* that coursed through my veins and seeped through every pore when Chance and Hannah took my beloved and broke her arms.

I was cuckolded on live television, violently and with intention, as the disgusting void of righteousness that took the form of the DeMONSTRance laughed at our misery.

My father nearly lost his eye, narrowly escaping with a detached retina. He would need a patch for months while it healed, little chance that his full range of vision would ever return.

My future bride would have both arms cast in plaster for six weeks, with months of physical therapy to fully recover, the full extent of potential nerve damage unknown. There was a chance she would never be able to draw or paint the same way again, leaving her scholarship to FIT hanging by a thread.

Darkspade was an afterthought. The dispensing of justice, the bitter vindication that he had so rightly earned, may never come his way.

I sat by her side, the engagement ring I'd put on her finger weeks before gripped tightly in my palm.

C'est la vie, I thought…and then paused.

My eyes drifted away from the ring clenched within my white knuckle grip as I felt *it* behind me. I turned, slowly, to face the doorway where the shadow stood. Even without a face, its remorse was easily felt, understood.

It drifted through the air and to my side, its gaze focused on Fiona as she slumbered following the emergency surgery, still filled with anesthesia and pumped full of pain medication. It laid its cold, dry hand upon my shoulder and that's when I finally realized what this all meant.

Maybe this is what Cliff meant that I needed to do it all the *right* way. It wasn't about shaking hands and playing by the rules. It wasn't about upholding the values that the sport he had dedicated his life to stood for.

It was about *setting* it right.

The unspoken code had been broken. They had attacked someone intentionally separated from what happened between the ropes. A bystander. A non-combatant. They had tried to rip out my heart. And for that?

Those motherfuckers were going to *pay*.

