



Like most megaliths: the SHOOT Project's new digs have a loading area.

In the past, this was a spot claimed by Mike de los Huesos—him and Dave's graffiti tag in neon, cartoon puke green, '*BONES BRIGADE*' surrounding a childish rendition of a

skull—remained until the fed moved. Who knows how many blunt ashes got ground into the pavement there.

Now, it's cleaner. Gleaming, or gleaming as a loading dock and series of dumpster corrals can be. These are the guts and beating heart of the operation, the place where the hard work happens to make the glitz real on your television screens.

It's also not a bad place to chill. Most of the backstage workers put up a few picnic tables to one side under an overhang. There's a basketball hoop that's not a bad place to catch a few hoops in a pickup game. And leaning against a wall, idly tapping on her phone, is the *Kamatayn* herself, Izzy Sia. Her gear hasn't changed much since the move and the merger, except now she favors a more expensive customized Nike Tech sweatsuit, with her Grim Reaper stitched on the chest in black against a grey field. It's simple, but *expensive* simple, capped off with dead stock galaxy Foamposites on feet that likely set her back a car payment.

Now the guy who strides out the back door to the pavement...expensive simple don't suit him. Nah, but it's not about the look as it is the aura. The entire atmosphere changes when Black Sheep Baez enters the scene. The attitude is different. The fibers of reality mutate. Everything seems centered and yet so right. Because, ultimately, he wants to look spectacular but his real vision is investing in his people.

Ok, so maybe we should focus on the look. He's not dressed to impress, necessarily, but the threads are tailored in some fashion and there's a purpose behind the style. He's reppin' a throwback Loco Martinez tee (find it on the SHOOTShop) with a pair of gray sweat pants (generous in regions), and a random pair of Nikes schemed to match the fit. It doesn't matter the occasion: BSB is a scholar of Dripology.

Baez stops, turns, pulls his polarized sunglasses to the tip of his nose, and grins. Cha-ching! *There she is*. He sees Izzy, but don't worry - she sees him too. Even if her back was to him - she felt his presence. He's that electric. He walks toward her, but she's not afraid to step first.

Izzy: Cute play you pulled on the first Zenith, by the way.

BSB: Ya'll know how it is, homie. Ya boi knows what the people want. Ya boi also know what they don't want: Vito Valentino as a champ.

Izzy: We agree on that much at least. But while you've been off doing whatever the fuck it is you do, some of us have been in the trenches here. Putting in work. Winning tournaments for our chance at something. For you to just step in and act like that shit is owed to you?

She spits to the side.

Izzy: Let's just say it paints a target.

BSB: Aye, *ha*, ya boi ain't finna explain himself to *you*, but I get it. I can respect the fact you been puttin' in work. I can respect the fact you been beefin' with the right folks n'buildin' that reputation. *But*, you *the Kamatayan* no matter who you twistin' the wrong way cuh. *Trust*. So, you can *spit* your progress all ya want for whatever validation you wanna receive. At the end of the day? You finna still have to get through Black Sheep Baez.

He looks down at her spit puddle.

BSB: That's *on God*.

Izzy: Y'know, you're not wrong. I mean that sincerely. You've got legitimate skills in there, type of shit I'll never have. Size, speed. Blessings. Facts are, you're here, I'm here, that's not changing any time soon. So naturally, we're gonna bump heads, and thats all fine for us because we both have a real hunger in us. So you're not wrong. My path to success means I'm standing across from you one way or the other. So seeing as everything is equal...I'd much rather it be across from me with you trying for my championship. Y'know, rather than cutting in line like some snake in the grass, chopped ass, delulu ass *bitch*.

Baez places his hand on his chest and looks flabbergasted. He turns away for a moment to process what he just heard. Then he looks back at Izzy with a look of concern that's followed with an arrogant smirk.

BSB: I'ma act like you ain't just said that silly stuff at the end n'we finna address something right'quick so that the elephant in this room can hit the fuckin' bricks. *This ain't no line. This the fuckin pathway ya boi built.*

He takes a step forward, and studies Izzy up and down. He flicks his tongue against his teeth.

BSB: What you need to do right now is reevaluate the gap between ya ass, n'ya mouf. You got about that much time before I make my decision. Either you eliminated from the picture *right now*? Or, we can see if your "*delulu*" of it bein "*your championship*" comes true so I can snatch that beeb back where it truly belong. *No line* cuh. Never *ever* has there been one. That's just life. So, *you steppin'*?

She closes the distance, sneering.

Izzy: If you think puffing your chest out and talking big is gonna make me disappear, then you aren't engaging with the reality in front of you, tiger. You name it here or name it in the ring. Honestly maybe it's better without a ref, yeah?

Mockingly, she brushes both of his shoulders off.

Izzy: That way no one can try and stop me while I'm *educating* you.

Baez closes his eyes and weezes in laughter. He spends about five seconds embracing a solid belly laugh, and then wipes a tear from his eye. He can see an image of a dead ass serious Izzy Sia gain focus as his laugh tears fade.

BSB: *Oh?* You serious?

He questions while gaining composure.

BSB: Yo, like, *I mean* - this a whole new ballgame for Black Sheep Baez. I'm tryna prove that to *everyone*. Y'all don't even know what your dealin' with cuh. I'm like a Kendrick Lamar release fam, anytime I drop I'm just *platinum bangers*. So, lemme just decipher that by sayin': if you wanna *buck* then...

He takes a step back while removing his gold chain, and then removes a few rings on his fingers. He decides to leave two of the bigger rings.

BSB: ...we finna *buck*. I'll grind your cute ass face into the street so that these blocks ain't ever finna forget the day ya boi laid you out to dry. Education *my ass*. Ya boi self taught. Always n'forever. *On God*.

He puts his fists up, ready to tussle.

BSB: Fuck a referee.

Izzy peels off her track jacket, leaving her in a sports bra—but unlike Baez, she doesn't square up and talk shit. Before her coat *even hits the floor*, she shoots for a single leg with *scary* quickness, all lightning and catlike springiness.

But Baez doesn't just slip it—he twists and gives her a tap with his knee on the way out of his dodge. Izzy rolls forward and kips to her feet, smirking.

Izzy: Fast.

That's the only acknowledgement she gives before she dives back, pressing the attack. Left body blow—Baez blocks it. Follow up with a right cross, he slips it. Fake low go high? Nah, he's seen that movie before. Every question her fists, knees, and feet pose, BSB has an answer for. She backs off half a step, giving him room to do something, shifting her stance subtly to be more receptive, more like water, *Game of Death*, 1972. Baez presses forward, fists up.

If he was a defensive nightmare, she's like a damn thorn bush: every strike has the potential for her to get an attachment. Right hook, she doesn't duck, she blocks with the elbow

and tries to take hold of his wrist. He's too fast for that. Knee to the midsection, she sidesteps and tries to cradle his leg, get him down to the ground. He yanks his leg away. More panic in his face than he'd like. Give her the two piece? She dodges the rib shot and tries to capture his whole arm when he goes for the overhead right. He spins out of that one, which gives them some breathing room. They're both sucking more wind than they'd like.

But now they understand one another.

BSB: Aight, so like maybe we try a different approach?

Baez digs the tip of his right shoe into the dirt and he grinds into the ground. He stares at an emotionless Izzy Sia with a smirk on his face. He shuffles his right foot back and forth like a bull about to gore, and then he takes off! Sia is ready for impact, or is she? Baez charges, gradually going lower so that when he reaches her he can lift her like a five pound sack of potatoes and then launch her somewhere into Sector 56 of Galactic Hemisphere Y. Every muscle in Sia is tight, her eyes move all over, and her brain pieces together a strategy. Lean, shuffle to the right, and just as she's about to dodge the roughshod spear of Black Sheep Baez - he stops?

On a dime, actually. He pauses, and looks down at a shook Sia. They're mere inches from each other. Their eyes meet. There's a brief moment where the perfect love song would do this scene justice, but if an animated heart were to have appeared on screen it would have shattered like glass as Baez reaches forward and pokes Izzy in the eyes with two very stiff fingers!

Izzy takes a few steps back, holding her hands over her eyes, and seeming very irritated. Baez chuckles to himself and watches as his competitor stumbles.

BSB: I can do this shit all damn day fam.

He lunges forward with a lighting right hook. Izzy Sia don't need eyes. Their knuckles meet mid-way, creating a bone-slapping soundwave that ripples even through the best of Sennheiser boom mics, and a near blind Izzy Sia blocks the punch. She goes low and sends a left jab into Al's mid-section. The impact sends him two steps back, but Izzy is two steps forward. She can see just fine as she leaps and drives the tip of her bony elbow into the scalene muscle where his neck meat intersects with the shoulder. It's amazing how much impact such a small person can deliver and she's like a 140 pound jackhammer on adderall driving Baez back down into the Puerto Rican core of planet Earth.

Sheep crumbles to the ground like a vintage collapsable toy. Izzy dives on top of him and swings her forearms into Baez's face one after the other. Baez doesn't block the first shot because it was immediate as he hit the floor. He can't block the second shot, and her accuracy is on display. Her speed is as well because he can't time the third shot and this one adds a blemish to Al's beautiful face.

That's putting it lightly. Blood explodes all over Izzy's forearm, and spatters across her youthful visage. She hit Baez underneath the right eye, in the same spot, and the third time was the charm. The laceration leaves a small meaty chunk dangling under his eye.

The blow sends enough endorphins through his system to knock a little sense into him. She isn't finished, but he blocks the fourth shot. He throws her off, rolls over onto a knee, and looks down at his bloodied shirt with a crimson smile. His eyes lock on Izzy, and she's not in the same spot. She's slithering toward him, low to the ground, and when she's in the right spot: Yoko-geri kekomi!

Her side thrust kick to Baez's temple is blocked! A spark bursts at the collision of her shin and the palm of his right hand. He swings his left arm, wraps her leg, sweeps her around with ease and swings her across the ground. She slides on her back across the pavement and then stops. Baez is up, and he charges. He stomps! She rolls! His Nike sole slams against the Earth to create a plume of debris, but Sia is safe from her face being rooted deep into the New York soil.

She can be seen in his periphery and he's got the pivot point locked down. He twists for a spinning hook kick and meets her upside the head as she's standing. Her head cocks to the side and blood spits from her mouth. She instantly spins in the air several times and then lands in a heap into the ground. She spits more blood at the floor and then looks over her shoulder. She knows he's creeping up on her. She's ready.

Baez has his prey in the crosshairs. Izzy shakes her head a few times, spitting, seemingly not paying attention—possum games are a lot easier to sell when your bell went rung rung rung and you're drooling crimson all over the concrete. So when he steps up just past her feet, he's not ready for the moves that come.

He's not dealing with some meathead who took a couple of BJJ classes from an Armenian dude at a strip mall in Gardenia. He's dealing with a seasoned combat fighter, Judo, Jiu Jitsu, Greco, the type of stuff that makes you *extremely comfortable* fighting on the ground. Toes behind the knee, the heel of the other foot at his ankle, BSB drops to the ground surprised, catches himself on his hands to prevent the faceplant.

Something she was counting on.

All of the sudden his arm is hooked. All of the sudden, he's on his face. All of the sudden, she's not on the ground, she's astride his back, legs wrapped, heels digging into his quads and keeping him stiff. He reaches back with the free arm but the angles are all fucked, he's been Diaz'd by maybe the finest pure grappler in the business. Smartly, Baez pushes his chin into his chest, anticipating that this grapevined chicken wing shit might transition into something far nastier.

What'll it be, what's on the menu?

Rear naked choke?

Katahajime?

Sugar hold?

But nah, nah, Izzy isn't in this to hear a few weak taps as she chokes the air out of him. She's bleeding. She's red from her nose to her neck at this point. Somewhere in the distance we hear someone say "*oh shit, someone get security!*" As if either of these two could care.

No holds, no fancy omoplatas.

But with a heave, she rolls to her back, leaving Baez exposed out turtle style. And with her right arm, she starts *burying* her elbow into his skull! *Thud*, temple, *thud*, neck, *thud*, jaw, those newly swole limbs of hers flexing and popping with the speed and the impact. *Thud*, ear. *Thud*, temple again. Transition out now, wrapping shots around that million dollar face, bashing him in his nose and eyes with her forearm—*whap, whap, whap*, Iz fuck 'em up.

Hearts racing. Energy up. It doesn't matter how many more shots she digs in he's still utilizing the pain and centering it where necessary. She's light, even soaking wet, even bloodied, and she's not strong enough to pull him into the Earth with her. Baez rolls, grunting, using her body as a shell, as a pivot point. He rolls again. Izzy grinds her teeth and she pounds him with another forearm into the cheek, pounding the dangling flesh. He rolls again, disregarding the carnage he's consuming, and this time he's able to dislodge her from beneath him and they both roll to a side.

But she's latched. Strapped on tight like a face hugger alien trying to snatch up a good man's soul. Another hoof and roll leads Al onto all fours with Sia like a sadistic backpack for the ride. Izzy isn't paying any attention to what BSB is doing and her right arm continues to do whatever it takes to end this man.

Wham! Another forearm like a donkey punch to the back of Sheep's dome.

Wham! The smack of her forearm as the bone meets the back of Al's skull for a second time but he stands to his feet.

Wham! And the impact sends him forward and nearly falling back down.

His feet slide underneath but he's still standing and before she can hit him for the nth time he takes a deep breath and runs backward! Sia was about to connect with another stiff shot but she holds onto Baez instead! He's reaching top velocity for back peddling and they close their eyes as he leaves the ground! He leaps back with hopes that they either land on the ground, defenestrate themselves, or bowl throw a collection of rubbish receptacles that were down the way.

They float through the air in slow motion. Trails of blood streaming from both of their various wounds. Their careers perhaps flashing before their young eyes. Sia clenches her peepers, clenches her teethers, and perhaps clenches other areas. Baez, on the other hand, has his eyes wide open and is grinning from ear to ear.

He knew exactly where they'd land. It was none of those things listed, but close. The launch sandwiches Sia between Sheep and a thick blue steel dumpster. Sia lets out a loud roar

as segments of her vertebrae crackle like slapping open a bag of Frito Lays. As soon as Izzy lets go then it's time for Sheep to go all out. He turns around and drives a knee into Izzy's face, which in turn sandwiches her head into the dumpster.

Ding! And then another!

Ding! Blood spatters across the blue outer paint.

Ding! A third for good measure and Izzy falls forward, flat on her face.

And rolls to her feet.

She's on skates though, her knees are betraying her.

Baez lines up for the kill, approaching the wobble, guarded up, not taking his chances. But the Kamatayan digs deep, vaults her body forward—and catches him by surprise with a headbutt, going full Zinedine Zidane to his Materazzi, but BSB is made of stronger stuff than the center back, you'd never catch him going down off some bullshit. Izzy's trying to buy herself time for the ringing in her ears to die down, but he's disinclined, snaps forward with his nose pouring red, comes at her and brings a *vicious* overhead right that drops her to a knee with her body all twisted up! The door to the parking area slams open, and the number of personnel pouring out is enough to rob Baez of his concentration—and that right there is the split second window, as Izzy Sia launches off the kneel and absolutely *slumps* BSB with a slashing back elbow!! The impact spins him ballerina style, jaw first, and Izzy has an exhausted moment to smile at the strike she landed before she is absolutely swarmed by security!

Izzy: *Let me fuckin' go!!*

She'd like that, and she does her best to make it happen, by once a third guard dog hits the hold, she can't fight against them.

Al shakes his head, getting to his feet, all sneers and anger in his face as he puts up his dukes and *spits out a molar*—the crazy bastard is actually gonna try it, and he's not in a place to listen to the staff. So he gets three. Another two in between to keep these atoms from smashing.

There's a crowd now.

No one knows who won.

Ask the fighters and they'll give you a different story apiece.

And we will find that out, soon.

