





SCOTT ADKINS IS...

THE GUY FROM

THAT MOVIE!

All he ever wanted to be was an **action star**.

You've seen him in **action**, getting **slaughtered** by the likes of Keanu Reeves and Matt Damon. But he's not a **star**. What does it feel like when **half your dream** comes true?

By **Joshua St. Clair**

Photographs by **Dylan Coulter**

FADE IN: BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND — 1989

We open on a boy. He is 13. Dark, wiry hair. His body lean. His smile a mischievous grin. We see him boarding a bus with his mates. We see him standing in the back with his mates when some men get on. Robbers. They make for the boys. They turn them around, frisk them, take out their wallets. The men don't have weapons. They are just older, bigger. One robber, taking out the boy's wallet, catches him grinning.

ROBBER #1

Why are you smiling?

BOY

I've never been robbed before.

[A pause]

It's kind of cool.

The man just looks at the boy and then—*WHACK!*—punches him in the face. In the ensuing mayhem, the boy escapes. But the coppers come, drive the boy home, and escort him up to the front door, where his father is waiting, looking as if he's about to throw a punch himself.

The boy's father is a butcher, and his father's father is a butcher, and his father's father's father was a butcher—just butchers all the way down. But the boy doesn't want to be a butcher. He goes down to the shop on Saturdays and makes less than a pound an hour hacking away at fat and bone, and he just thinks to himself: *No*. He thinks the same thing at school, doesn't pay attention. Why should he? The shop, school, they're backup plans, and a backup plan is just an excuse, innit? An excuse not to make it. After he's mugged, the boy has a plan: He's going to make it.

The boy turns his father's garage into a dojo. Motorbikes are pushed aside and replaced by punching bags and a makiwara and a poster of Bruce Lee—part of a shrine, really. The effigy watches the boy train. It watches the boy devour *Black Belt* magazine and *Muscle & Fitness* and every martial-arts VHS tape he brings home. Once the boy can drive, he goes from one video store to the next, scavenging. *Who's got the latest Van Damme, the latest Chuck Norris, the latest Jackie Chan?* A dream forms in the boy's mind: to be the next Van

Damme, the next Chuck Norris, the next Jackie Chan. And then the dream becomes more than a dream. It becomes a plan.

Soon he's doing kickboxing bouts in random gyms and squash courts. He's around 20. He gets his head punched against the wall during one bout—*WHACK!*—and he blacks out.

BOY'S FATHER (VOICE-OVER)

... Son, you gotta get your head screwed on.

... You gotta get a trade.

... This is not gonna work out for you.

The boy wakes. The boy leaves home.

CUT TO: BIRMINGHAM — MARCH 2022, 25 YEARS LATER INT. THE ADKINS HOME, IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

A man sits in his study: **SCOTT ADKINS**—cropped black hair, wiry over the forehead, a mischievous grin, a granite jaw, wrestling shoulders.

This is the boy.

IT IS EARLY afternoon. The house is quiet. Scott opens his laptop.

His forearms are bruised from a reshoot last weekend; he was blocking kicks. His knee has been acting up again. He can feel something *catching*. He probably needs surgery, he thinks. He doesn't want surgery. Surgery means they might cut off a piece of his meniscus. He needs all his meniscus. He'll be 46 soon.

In an hour, Scott will drive to the pre-school/primary school to pick up his son

and daughter. He lives just ten miles from where he grew up, in the kind of house he would drive by with his mom and his mom would go, "Ooh, *love* to have a house there one day." Well, now he can say it: "I made it, Mum." Mum still lives nearby.

Scott checks his emails.

He's waiting to hear back about an audition, a ridiculous bad-guy part in a streaming movie. His agent said he should send in an audition tape. It was his daughter's birthday that weekend, so he said no. They asked him again the next weekend. Adkins said okay, sent in a tape. He doesn't have high hopes. It's the fifth, sixth, seventh, maybe eighth role behind the lead. He should have heard by now.

"They've probably been to Frank Grillo, and Frank Grillo turned it down," Scott says unprompted. "And then it's like, *Let's see if we can get Scott Adkins!*" He laughs.

He flashes a Cheshire grin in moments of sincerity and also in moments of wryness, such that one cannot always tell which mood he intends—whether the grin punctuates or masks what Scott really feels.

"There's a pecking order, isn't there?" he says. "I'm guessing I'm behind Frank."

The grin.

Anyway, no email.

He is used to empty mailboxes. The roles he did not get. The chances that were never offered. He has appeared in around 60 movies, and yet...

Some hurt worse than others. He auditioned for Batman in 2013, the role Ben Affleck won. He never expected an offer. He auditions with this understanding: He expects to be disappointed. But it is the role he most wants. When he read, he read from the script for *The Dark Knight Rises*, the words Christian Bale says onscreen. Scott was hired as a stuntman for that movie. He was to double Bale in the Bat-suit. That also didn't work out. Then there was *The Witcher*, another possible break. He sent in his tape and then woke the next morning to the news that Henry Cavill had been cast. *We love you*, they always say. *But we're going in a different direction.* "It's bullshit," Scott says with a tired smile.

A lot never happened. But a lot did. Some dreams need to contract to come true. And some version of Scott Adkins's dream has come true. Just not the full version, not the one you think about when you think about dreams.

He leans back in his chair.

His study is small. (Likely a lot smaller

than Ben Affleck's study.) A desk. Bookshelves with martial-arts DVDs. A guitar in the corner. The room is adorned with framed movie posters: *Avengement*, *Accident Man*, *Ninja II*. Scott's face looks down from each. Movies not many people in the U. S. have seen, but those who have seem to love them. Scott jokes that if someone asks him what movie he's doing next, he can usually respond: Probably something with "3" or "4" in the title.

When the king of the low-budget sequel comes to Hollywood, he loses. They hire him to lose. He has lost many times.

SMASH CUT TO: TIMES SCOTT ADKINS HAS BEEN KILLED OR BEATEN TO A PULP

Front-kicked by **JACKIE CHAN** [*The Medallion*]. Throat-jabbed by **DONNIE YEN** [*Ip Man 4*]. Groin-kicked by **MATT DAMON** [*The Bourne Ultimatum*]. Blown up by **BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH** [*Doctor Strange*]. Ground and pounded to a pulp by **JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME** [*The Shepherd*]. Decapitated by **HUGH JACKMAN** [*X-Men Origins: Wolverine*]. Front-kicked in the face by **JET LI** [*Unleashed*]. Brass-knuckle-punched into a helicopter blade and, again, decapitated by **JASON STATHAM** [*The Expendables 2*].

Still no email.

He looks back to the wall.

Above him, there is another poster. *Boyka: Undisputed*. Scott stands shirtless as the hulking Yuri Boyka, a fictional Ukrainian MMA fighter. The character seems to be his most beloved; if Scott is stopped on the street, it is because of Boyka. He played Boyka three times, each movie seeing wide theatrical release only in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Most English and American viewers only ever saw Boyka on DVD. But Boyka seems to resonate. If Scott is remembered for one role, that role, he knows, will be Boyka. It is as close as he comes to a John Wick. To a Rocky Balboa. But not many recognize him as Boyka. Not many recognize him at all.

Scott took his daughter to see *The Batman* recently. His daughter was too young, the movie clerk said. (She's 11.) Scott protested: "Are you kidding me?"

The clerk didn't recognize him, but this wasn't a surprise. Even those who know Scott as Boyka don't recognize him—he bulked for the role—and so when people come up to him, some might be disap-



The hero in many martial-arts movies, Adkins often finds himself cast as the punchable villain in Hollywood.

pointed: *You're not Boyka.*

Anyway, they didn't get in.

So few make it. Even this far.

Scott still wants more. "I've done straight-to-DVD action movies, and I am seen as that guy—and I'm aware of that," Scott says. The grin. "And look, it's not the end of the world. I'm still making a good living doing what I love." He knows his privilege. Nice house in the country. Making money for movies. But when pressed, he voices again those childhood dreams. Because saying "I made it, Mum" isn't really true.

"I'd like to have a bigger career," he says, "and be somewhere more toward where Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham are."

FADE IN: EGYPT — JUNE 2022 EXT. AN OPPRESSIVE DESERT LANDSCAPE

THE MOVIES! It looks like the desert, and it tastes like shit-circling flies buzzing into his mouth. Every day for a week, the crew picks Scott up in a van and drives him over this shitty, bumpy road to the desert's edge. There's sand and a beating sun and a reservoir, standing water, which explains

the flies; they are everywhere. He stops fighting them. Just lets them stick and jump and poke his face. It's miserable.

The film: outlandish action. Scott gets to ride away from an explosion on a motorbike, fly through the air, jump away from a fireball—stuff he always dreamed about doing. But he feels ridiculous. It's a World War II movie. Everyone else is shooting guns. And here's Scott running through the gunfire and karate-kicking people. But hey, that's what the director wants, and they gave him more money than last time.

That previous movie: *Karmouz War* (released in the U. S. as *No Surrender*), one of the highest-grossing films ever in Egypt. (It made more than the final *Avengers* movie here.) Scott played the antagonist, a stand-in for British colonial oppression. In the final battle, the hero bludgeons Scott with a fire extinguisher, straps a bag to his chest, pulls a grenade pin, and then front-kicks him into oblivion. *BOOM!*

Here Scott feels like a superstar. The reason is Boyka. When Scott walks the street here, people shout, chant.

"BOYKA! BOYKA!"

One of the Egyptian posters for *Karmouz*

War—which is not a Boyka movie—didn't even say, "Scott Adkins." It said, "Boyka."

The shouting and chanting make Scott nervous. Alone, no security, in a foreign country. It happened once in Serbia a few years ago. He went to a movie. In line for popcorn, a guy started shouting:

"BOYKA! BOYKA! BOYKA!"

There are moments he wants to be Dwayne Johnson, and then there are moments he is thankful he is only Scott Adkins. He imagines the paparazzi, cameras outside his Birmingham door, the inability to move about his life, his family routines changing. "There would be a trade-off," he says.

But now he is thinking of the other side. Being Batman. Being Bond.

"I would choose to be more famous, I suppose," he says, after a pause. "Because you're reaching for it, aren't you? You want better opportunities, better movies to be in. But maybe I'd regret it. Who knows? Probably."

FADE IN: A VILLAGE, SOUTHERN CHINA — OCTOBER 1999

SCOTT'S FIRST movie. He had left England. Couldn't afford London. Didn't fit in with the acting kids. Singing and dancing. He wanted to punch and kick people in movies. So he sent his reel to a director in Hong Kong and soon found himself here.

Some shit hotel room.

Cockroaches scuttle across the floor, and the food—what the Hong Kong crew feeds him for lunch with rice—makes him sick. He eats McDonald's instead. (Is it making him fat? He can't afford to get fat.) He sits and sits and waits, tries to stay loose for 14 hours of filming. Sitting and sitting and waiting and then... ACTION!

FADE TO: LONDON — 2014

Restaurant. Lunch. **CHAD STAHELSKI**—the former *Matrix* stunt double for Keanu Reeves. He co-owns a stunt company. He asks Scott if he wants to join. Steady work. Steady paycheck.

SCOTT

No, Chad. I can't be a stuntman. I want to be a leading man. I want to be starring in films.

CHAD

[Half kidding] Scott, do you

SCOTT ADKINS VS. EVERYONE

From left: Adkins vs. Keanu Reeves in *John Wick: Chapter 4*, Adkins vs. Donnie Yen in *Ip Man 4: The Finale*, and Adkins vs. Martyn Ford in *Boyka: Undisputed*.



honestly believe that anyone in Hollywood sees you as anything other than a stuntman? The guy in *Ninja* and *Ninja II*?

Scott remembers filming *The Bourne Ultimatum* with Matt Damon. They spent all day on a small fight scene. There were several cameras rolling, all angles. It was madness. You can't sell a punch if you're filming from several angles at once—you'll literally see the punch miss. But production didn't care; they were just gonna chop it all up in editing and call it a fight. Dancing around the cameras, pretending to hit Matt, Scott thought to himself, *Fucking hell, these guys don't know what they're doing*. He was gonna have to punch Matt for real in order to sell it. In the end, it was Matt who hit Scott for real. Kicked him in the balls, actually, caught him with a toe to the testicles. Scott appears in the film for less than 30 seconds. An entire day of filming for 30 seconds—and a kick to the balls.

FADE IN: BIRMINGHAM — NOVEMBER 2022

Everything has been falling through—left, right, and center.

After Egypt, Scott had planned on filming two other movies over the summer. Both fell through.

Now he was scheduled to fly to New Orleans for another film. He spent time working with a dialect coach, trying to get his New Orleans accent down. The shoot date is getting moved, they tell him, but who knows. It might just be dead. More time wasted, more money, more hope. He had turned down other projects, thinking he'd be filming in America. Now he has nothing. Just one movie for the rest of the year. Maybe that falls through, too.

It's been only a few years since Scott took a movie to pay bills. He had just bought his house, in Birmingham. Really stretched himself. Spent money he was supposed to be paying back. He took the first movie

job available. It wasn't good. Before the house, there was another time when he took the first job available. That was 2010, when his wife was pregnant with their first child and they were broke. He had just done a Boyka movie, but he didn't get paid much for it. (Boyka never paid much.) For the first time, Scott asked himself, *Can I support a family like this? Do I need to do something else?*

Things changed for Scott only about six years ago. The work has become more consistent. But sometimes it feels like it all could end. He thinks about what he might be able to do with more money. He remembers filming *John Wick: Chapter 4* with Keanu Reeves. Just two summers ago. It will be one of his biggest films. He remembers the set, a warehouse turned into a nightclub, a huge waterfall. A \$10 million set. He remembers looking up and gaping.

If Scott were to list the top five greatest action stars ever, Keanu would be there. Beside Schwarzenegger and Stallone and Jackie Chan and Tom Cruise.

What is it that makes a man a star?

Scott's skills, his years of work, they are undeniable. Tae kwon do, kickboxing, wushu, kung fu, jeet kune do, capoeira, krav maga. And his face. Is it not the face of an action star? Cropped black hair, wiry over the forehead, a dark brow, a granite jaw. He looks like Bruce Wayne.

What is it that makes a man a star?

Why Ben Affleck and not Scott Adkins? Why Keanu Reeves and not Scott Adkins?

CUT TO: BERLIN — JULY 2021 INT. A MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR MOVIE SET

A warehouse. Inside, a nightclub. Lights strobing. A large waterfall. Torrential downpour over two men fighting. Scott Adkins vs. Keanu Reeves.

Scott is on his back, lying on a soaking mat/puddle, as waterfall rain drenches him and Keanu, who is on top of him,



just beating the absolute shit out of him. A right punch two inches from his chin. Then a left, buried into his shoulder. And then a right, pounding his sternum.

What is it that makes a man a star?

There is at least one answer—as to what makes Scott the star he is. It is an eternal Hollywood truth: Stars like Keanu will always need people like Scott.

When Chad Stahelski—the director of the movie, the man who once tried to recruit Scott to be a stuntman—called Scott for *John Wick*, he needed someone to make Keanu look good. He gave Scott a break. But he also gave him a risk. When he cast Scott, he told him what he had in mind for his character: Scott was going to act in a fat suit. He would look 100 pounds heavier. He would be punching and kicking after hours in a makeup chair, adding chins to his face and girth to his waist. He would wear grills. He would look ridiculous. Scott's biggest movie, and even if you knew him, you wouldn't recognize his face.

"I always thought Scott was going to be something," Chad says. "I still believe. He's got a long way to go. And he's gonna get there. . . . We all have different paths. It's just a matter of time. It's not so much *why* hasn't Scott become big as much as it is *when* will he?"

Scott thinks about all of this, of course. His choices. Maybe he shouldn't have done so many stunt roles. Maybe he should have finished drama school and gone the traditional way, done straight acting. Not flown back and forth to China for every martial-arts film.

He remembers filming his first huge movie fight. All those years ago . . .

FADE TO: DUBLIN — 2001

He has to kick Jackie Chan in the chest. If he does it right, if he impresses Jackie, he will be given the final fight; losing to Jackie

Chan in the final fight will be an honor. But first he has to kick him—hard but not too hard. The first couple kicks: too soft!

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER

Hit him harder!

A stuntman from Jackie's team comes over, whispers something sharply to Scott.

STUNTMAN

Be very careful!

Shit, Scott thinks. But he does it. He kicks Jackie in the chest—hard but not too hard. He gets the final fight.

RETURN TO: BIRMINGHAM — 2022

"I remember after that fight scene just thinking to myself, *This is the best day of my life*," Scott says. "Having fought Jackie Chan and acquitted myself well—and everything you've dreamed of up to that point. Being tested and coming through with flying colors. I remember just feeling so happy.

"And I had that feeling again, maybe 15 years later, when I was invited to the Jackie Chan Action Movie Awards, and I was presented with the award for best action actor, and best fight sequence, for the film *Boyka: Undisputed*.

"I don't want an Oscar," Scott says with finality. "That's not what I'm in this game for. I'm in this game to get an award from Jackie Chan."

There is no grin.

We all tell ourselves stories about who we are, who we might become. Sometimes we move on. Sometimes we outgrow the stories. But sometimes the stories outgrow us. Isn't it better this way? To always be reaching. But also to lean back in our chairs and remember roles that make us proud. Scott wants bigger roles. But for now, Boyka will be his legacy. His less watched *John Wick*. His lower-budget *Rocky Balboa*. Boyka

may not be enough, but it means . . . something. Doesn't it?

Scott isn't always sure what, exactly, Boyka means. Or what, exactly, it means that he's in *John Wick: Chapter 4*, in one of the biggest action-movie franchises in the world—with one of the biggest action stars in the world. Scott knows only that he is not that star. His plan didn't quite work out, and he's already 46. But he's gotten a hell of a lot closer than most people get to their dreams. And he's only 46.

There is a sad but redemptive end to the story of Yuri Boyka. Always he wins, but always he is imprisoned. The franchise ends with Boyka returning to the prison ring, fighting for a small audience of inmates, performing for a few who appreciate his craft while the majority outside hardly know his name.

FADE IN:

INT. A PRISON HALLWAY, DIMLY LIT, BLUE GLOW

THE FINAL SHOT: Close-up on a man. He is silhouetted in black against the blue hallway. He walks toward the camera. The chants of those in a far-off room grow with intensity. The man steps into the light. **SCOTT ADKINS** as **YURI BOYKA**. He moves determinedly forward, and the camera swivels to track his destination: a roped boxing ring surrounded by cages. The man walks into the ring and turns now to the screaming crowd, the other inmates.

They rattle the bars, the ring before them. As the man raises his fists in preemptive triumph, they continue the chant, now deafening:

"BOYKA!"

"BOYKA!"

"BOYKA!" ■

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