Why Now?
3.27.2026

The little red light on the camera that had been filming him, the one broadcasting his pain and humiliation to the world, suddenly went black.

He remained seated on the mat, as stunned with incomprehension as the audience seemingly was.

X-Calibur, methodically licked the metaphorical wounds inflicted by Laura Seton's completely unexpected attack. Never in a million and a half fucking years did X ever believe that Laura would turn her back on her fans–her INDUSTRY–in such a quick, anticlimactic way. But alas, there he was. His head throbbed, his ribs ached with a dull, persistent pain, and a mixture of blood and sweat stung his eye. He didn't dare move, lest he find new points of agony he had been blissfully ignorant of.

The entire Pinnacle audience sat in a silence so profound it felt like physical pressure. It was a silence entirely alien to a venue usually vibrating with cheers, jeers, and the deafening soundtrack of professional wrestling. No one moved. No one spoke. Their collective gaze remained fixed on the prone, defeated figure, their minds struggling to process the chaotic, unprecedented situation that had just unfolded before their

eyes. The air was thick with confusion, disbelief, and the slow, creeping realization that they had just witnessed something truly shocking—yet *another* fucking betrayal and a beatdown that transcended the usual boundaries of the squared circle.

“Jesus Christ,” he thought to himself. What was the meaning of this? What had they just seen? The questions hung heavy in the stunned, cavernous arena.

The sound of the crowd's roar, usually a comforting blanket of adoration or a sharp sting of hatred, now felt distant and muffled, like a noise underwater. He was breathing heavily, not from exertion, but from a shock that felt physical, a violent internal blow that left him winded.

Laura.

He saw her face one last time in his mind's eye: the determined set of her jaw, the way her eyes, once filled with a fiery passion directed at *him*, now met Breedlove’s gaze with a terrifying, cold certainty. She had held the torch, the very instrument of the Empyreon Forge, and accepted the mantle. She had become one of them.

One of them. The irony was a bitter, metallic taste on his tongue. He had cast her aside, used her as collateral damage in his selfish, desperate climb for the gold, for the power promised by the enigma of Joshua Breedlove’s growing empire. He had traded her loyalty, her trust, and her burgeoning career for the chance to stand—briefly—at the top of the mountain.

And now, she had made the exact same choice, only she hadn’t traded *him* for it. She had traded her *vengeance*.

Once all the hubbub was over and Zenith had wrapped, Eryk found himself back in the locker room. He slammed a fist against the cinder block wall, the dull impact barely audible over the ringing in his ears. He hadn't expected this. Not from her. He had expected her anger, her righteous fury, the inevitable match where she would try to tear him limb from limb. He had prepared for the guilt, the public shaming, the long, painful climb back to respectability.

What he had *not* prepared for was her indifference.

Her alignment with Breedlove wasn't a tactical move to get close to him; it was a move to surpass him entirely. It was a clear, undeniable statement: *You were a mistake. Your betrayal was insignificant. I'm playing a bigger game now.*
Her alliance with Breedlove wasn't a desperate or fleeting tactical maneuver; it was the deliberate construction of a pedestal from which she intended to launch herself higher. To his face, she offered the illusion of shared purpose, a momentary alignment of interests. But in her mind, the calculation was cold and precise. Every concession, every shared confidence, was merely a tool to gain proximity to his power and then, with surgical precision, to dismantle it.

This wasn't about revenge, which she considered a petty, finite act. It was about an ultimate, crushing declaration of superiority. The statement she was making was far more devastating than any physical wound:

You were a mistake.

Your entire scheme.

The grand betrayal you thought so fucking significant, was nothing more than an inconvenient speed bump on my path.

I haven't just defeated you; I've rendered you and your motives utterly irrelevant.

I'm playing a bigger game now—one where you don't even qualify as a fucking pawn.

As he thought these words, he could hear them being spoken by Laura herself.

Her mission was clear: erase the memory of his influence by dwarfing his accomplishments so completely that he would be forgotten in the shadow of her own ascendance.

X-Calibur: Yeah..

X-Calibur slumped onto the cold, unforgiving metal of the bench, the sound a dull, mournful clang in the empty warehouse. He ran his calloused hands over his face, pressing hard against his temples, a desperate, futile attempt to scrub away the searing image that had been burned into his memory.

It wasn't just *her* face—the face he knew better than his own, the one that used to light up his world—it was the proximity. The way she had stood, not just near, but *beside* him. *The Director*. The fucking whispers from the Architect himself. The man whose cold ambition had been fueled by calculated malice to construct their downfall, The man who had meticulously orchestrated the very events that had torn their lives apart, separating them with a chasm of blood and betrayal.

Hands in his palms, he sighed.

X-Calibur: You got yourself into this. You get yourself out of it. You're fucking X-Calibur, goddammit.

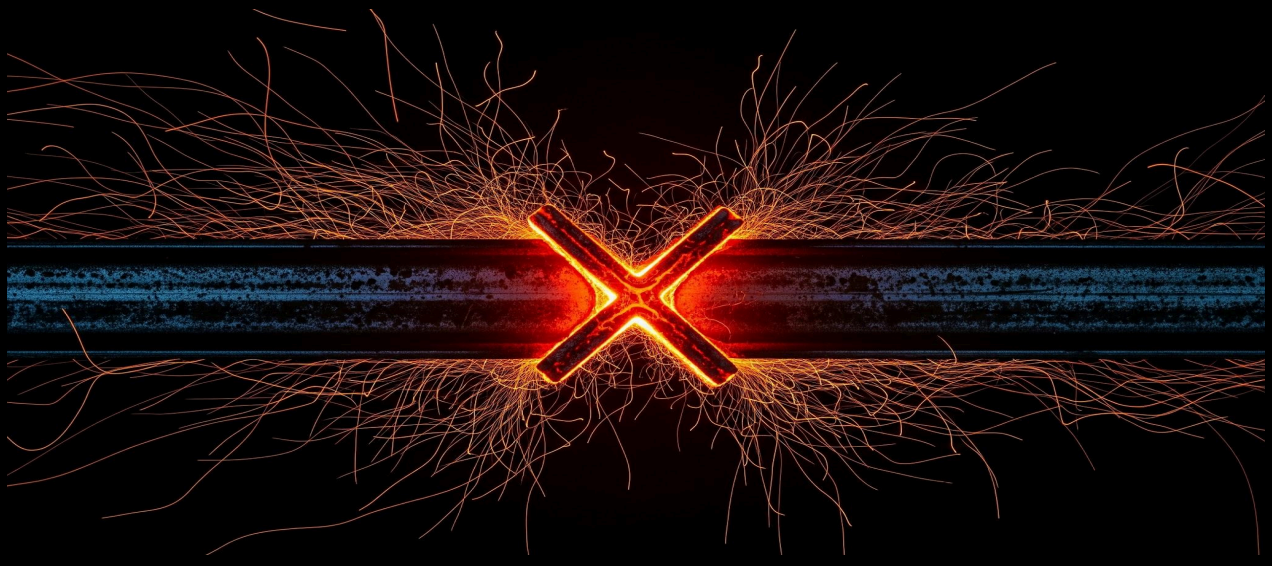
Despite his spoken self-affirmations, the betrayal was a fresh, agonizing wound. He had spent months—no, *years*—fighting to get her back from the shadows of his own cowardice. Believing she was a captive, a victim, another one of the Architect's casualties. The image in his mind, however, suggested something far worse: she hadn't looked forced.

Laura Seton, for the first time in her life and career, hadn't looked threatened. She had looked... complicit. Her posture was relaxed, her expression a mask of cool, unsettling neutrality as she stood in the glow of the man who had ruined them. The mere sight was a spike of ice in his chest, freezing the hope he had carried like a foolish, precious relic.

"She was helping this malignant cancer destroy them both!"

The thought was a raw, rasping whisper in the desolate silence of his heart.

X-Calibur: There's.... there's gotta be a way.



ZENITH: Episode VII
The Ghost in the Forge
11.16.25

Breedlove. Oh that smug, self-satisfied bastard. He didn't just beat people; he dissected their motivations, cataloged their weaknesses, and then rebuilt them in his own image, only stronger, more focused, and utterly devoid of the messy, unpredictable elements of human emotion.

“Fucking prick,” he thought to himself as he once again found himself in the locker room, one show later. It was a familiar sight as he had been in this exact position two weeks earlier.

X-Calibur remembered the conversation vividly, the one that had convinced him to sever ties with Laura, to leave her vulnerable for a cheap shot and join Breedlove’s endless mote filled with nasty crocodiles protecting that crossing to his Kingdom.

"She’s a distraction, X. A bright, beautiful, blazing distraction," Breedlove had said, leaning back in his leather chair, a faint, condescending smile playing on his lips. *"She*

represents everything you're trying to run from: commitment, expectation, mediocrity. You want the gold? You want to be the best? You want your daughter to want for nothing for the rest of her life? You have to burn the past. You have to burn your forge clean."

And X-Calibur had done it. He had convinced himself that the pain he inflicted was a necessary sacrifice, a stepping stone to his destiny. He had swallowed the lie that it was *his* ambition, *his* idea, and that Breedlove was merely the facilitator.

But now, looking at Laura, seeing her embrace the same darkness he had succumbed to, he realized the terrifying truth: Breedlove was not a facilitator. He was a collector. He didn't just recruit; he harvested. He had used X-Calibur's betrayal as the crucible to forge a new, more lethal weapon out of Laura Seton, knowing that the ultimate, purest metal is born not from heat alone, but from being shattered and reforged in the fires of personal agony.

X-Calibur had been the hammer. And now, Laura was the sharpened blade, aimed squarely at the entire industry—and perhaps, one day, at the man who thought he controlled her.

"Fucking prick," he once again thought to himself, thinking back to that oh-so smug look on his face while he sat at the table during the controlled meet.

The locker room felt colder now. His past alliances felt meaningless. When he joined Breedlove, the Empyreon Forge was a mere concept, a promise of power. Now, with Laura joining, it was a tangible, terrifying force. His initial betrayal had isolated him from the fans, from the rest of the roster, and from the one person who truly believed in him. Now, Laura's move had isolated him from his *purpose*.

His purpose, he had told himself, was to beat Breedlove at his own game, to earn the gold and then prove he didn't need the shadow of the Empyreon Forge looming over him. But Laura's move changed the narrative. It wasn't about *him* proving *his* independence anymore. It was about Laura Seton proving *her* goddamn evolution.

X pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the dial icon. Who could he call?

There was *no one*. Not a fucking soul.

The path of the selfish mercenary was a solitary one, and X-Calibur was reaping the consequences.

He stood up, walking over to the cracked, full-length mirror. He stared at his reflection, searching for the championship caliber athlete he thought he was, but only finding the haunted eyes of a man who realized he'd been outmaneuvered by his own victim.

Laura was not just a threat; she was a ghost of his own making. He had thought that by discarding her, he was doing the right thing for Esper's future. Instead, he had inadvertently given her the strength of pure, focused malice, unburdened by any loyalty to him or anyone else.

The goal had shifted. It was no longer *just* about erasing that cheesy, supervillain arrogance that people like Breedlove—or even Jake Paul—love to irritate the masses with. Nor was it *just* about winning the SHOOT Project World Heavyweight Championship for the third time in his long and storied Hall of Fame career. It was about confronting Laura Seton, the version of her he had created, and facing the truth of what he had destroyed

He had to know: *Did you do it for the gold, or did you do it to hurt me?*

The truth, he feared, was far simpler and far more devastating: She did it for herself, and he was no longer a consideration.

If only he didn't still love her.

He looked at his hands and imagined the championship belt being held in them. It'd be the vindication he needed for all the low-hanging fruit-filled insults the uninspired youth movement regurgitated over and over. Dan Stein and Joshua Breedlove were absolutely right about one thing, though.

He *hadn't* earned a shot at the championship.

He was a well-paid part-timer. At best.

But, even still?

He was motherfucking X-Calibur. Still fucking dangerous. More so than *ever*, perhaps. His match of the year with Azraith DeMitri last year was proof of that.

And now it was time to shake loose the stigma of an old part-timer. Because the heat of the forge was upon him. And if he couldn't take the heat? He'd best stay out of the kitchen.

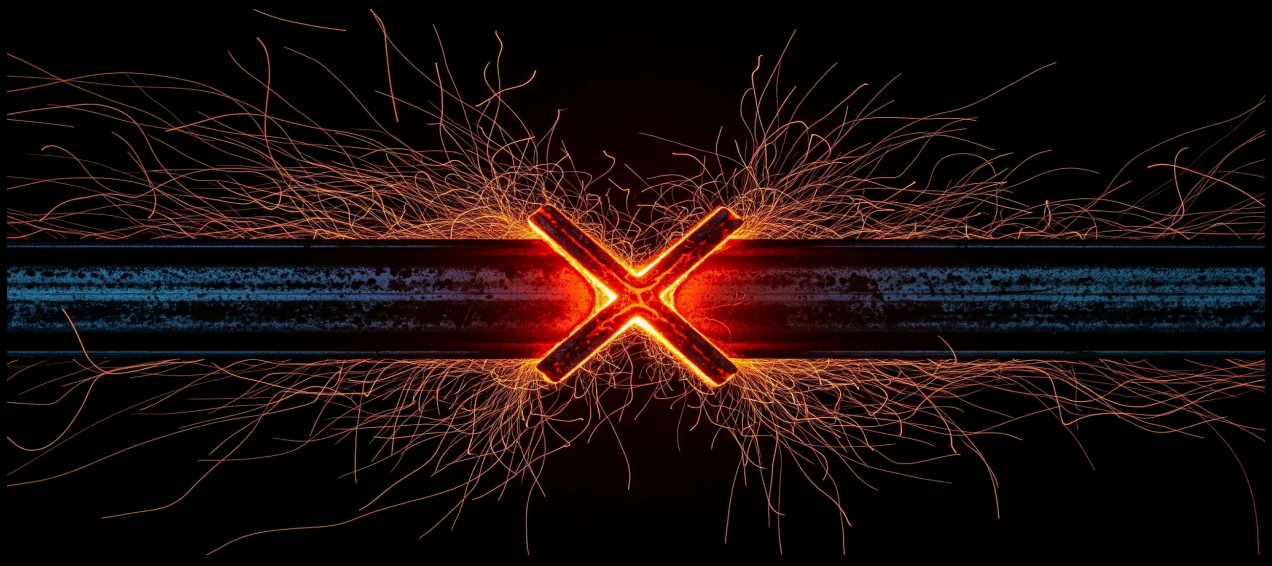
X-Calibur: Yeah..

He said this out loud, trailing off, much like he did while ruminating in the same locker room a month or so ago after the Daybreak PPV.

X picked up a discarded water bottle and squeezed it until the plastic creaked, the sound a sharp, desperate counterpoint to the silence of the locker room. The only way to survive the fire was to become stronger than the metal that fueled it. He had to face his mistake. He had to burn his way out of the pit he'd dug.

He was ready for the fight, but not for the fighter. The enemy standing across the ring from him was wearing, wielding his old ambition, and doing it all with a ruthless efficiency that could only be taught by the master manipulator himself.

He was no longer just fighting Breedlove. He was fighting his past, weaponized and lethal. He was fighting the ghost in the forge.



The harsh afternoon cold of Philadelphia burned his skin, even in the comfort of his black SUV. It was the type of cold that made one grateful for heated seats–and, without hesitation, he cranked them on high.

Eryk gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white against the worn leather, the heat inside the cab a welcome distraction from the cold dread pooling in his gut. Next to him, his daughter, Esper, swung her legs, the worn Chucks criss-crossed on the dashboard of the passenger's side area. She was humming a song Eryk couldn't quite place, her focus entirely on some kaleidoscopic app on her phone.

Eryk Van Warren: Almost there, Es.

His voice was thick with a gravelly exhaustion that had become his constant companion since the *Daybreak* disaster.

Esper: Cool.

She refused to look up while she said this.

Twelve going on twenty. How… terrifying.

She was at the age where her world was a carefully constructed bubble of TikTok dances, graphic novels, and the fierce, absolute belief that her father—Eryk Van Warren, not X-Calibur, the SHOOT Project Hall of Famer—could fix anything. This belief was the heaviest weight he carried, especially now, knowing the depths of the pit he'd dug for himself, and now, for her.

He was driving toward the only sanctuary he could imagine: the sprawling, slightly unkempt ranch-style house belonging to Jay Martinez.

Jay. Loco Martinez. His best friend, his former mentor, his *brother* in the wrestling business. If anyone understood the kind of war he was stepping into—a war not just for a championship, but for his very soul, now weaponized by Laura Seton's betrayal—it was Jay.

Loco Martinez had seen the worst of the business, lived through his own career-ending heartbreak, and, most importantly, had always been the single, unmovable bedrock of honesty in Eryk's chaotic life.

He pulled up the long, dusty driveway, the crunch of gravel under the tires announcing their arrival. Jay's place was a comfortable kind of mess, surrounded by overgrown bougainvillea and a classic, faded blue Ford F-100 parked haphazardly near a garage that probably hadn't housed a car in a decade.

Eryk Van Warren: Okay, kiddo. Phone down. Let's go.

He cut the engine. Esper tucked her phone into her jeans pocket with a practiced sigh.

Esper: Cool. Are you going to be long, Dad?

He hesitated, turning to face her. Her eyes, the exact shade of emerald he'd fallen in love with, were wide and worried beneath a fringe of dark hair.

Eryk Van Warren: I don't know, honey. But I need you to stay with Uncle Jay for a little while. This thing with that man I told you about... it's getting messy. Really messy and super complicated.

Esper: Because of Aunt Laura?

The name came out with a painful mix of accusation and concern. Eryk winced. He had tried to shield her, but kids were too smart, too plugged in. She had seen the broadcasts. She knew Aunt Laura had attacked him.

Eryk Van Warren: I'm not gonna lie to you, honey. Yes. Because of Aunt Laura, and because of the man she's, uh, become friends with.. They're playing a dangerous game, Es. And I need to be able to focus on finishing it. I can't do that if I'm worried about you. Do you what I mean, honey?

He reached out and took her hand, his calloused thumb rubbing the back of her small wrist.

Eryk Van Warren: Uncle Jay's the only man in the world I trust with you right now. He'll keep you safe, and he'll make sure you do your homework. Promise?

Esper nodded, her expression grimly serious.

Esper: Yeah, I guess. I promise. But you better *promise* to call me every single day. Even if it's just for a minute. I want to know you and Aunt Laura are okay.

Eryk put his hand up to God.

Eryk Van Warren: Every single day.

He swore this, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

As they climbed down from the steep edges of the SUV, Eryk grabbed Esper's small duffel bag from the back seat, the weight of it feeling impossibly light compared to the weight on his chest.

They walked toward the front door, the screen door swung open before they could knock, revealing Jay Martinez.

Jay Martinez: Jay hadn't wrestled in five years, not since a botched high spot had shattered his knee and ended the career of the high-flying Loco. The physical scars

were visible in the slight hitch of his gait, but the emotional ones—the ones Eryk had watched him battle with alcohol and resentment—had finally begun to fade.

Jay was a massive man, even out of the ring, his shoulders still impossibly broad, a thick, silver-streaked beard framing a face creased with laugh lines and a lifetime of hard landings. His eyes, however, were what drew you in—deep brown, full of an easy, ancient warmth.

Jay Martinez: There he is. The up and coming completely young golden boy!

Jay jested, his voice satirical to keep some levity open for the nerve-wracking situation. He stepped out and enveloped Esper in a deep, loving hug that lifted her off her feet.

Jay Martinez: There she is! *(hugging continues)* Look at you, Es! You're getting so big! How old are you again? 21?

Eryk envisioned dropping Jay with an X-Terminator on a bed of knives for saying that. Jay winked, making sure Esper knew he was only kidding.

Esper: *(giggling)* I wish! Then I could do whatever I want!

Jay set her down and turned to Eryk, his smile dissolving instantly. The warmth in his eyes was replaced by a deep, serious understanding. The two men didn't need words. They had been through too much together. As a successful tag team in LEGACY gaining tag team championships, to enemies putting out some mat classics not only in LEGACY, but SHOOT Project. Jay saw the fear, the guilt, and the hardened resolve in Eryk's eyes.

Jay Martinez: Come on in, guys. It's cold enough out here to freeze a forge.

Eryk wondered if he purposefully made a play on the word "forge". However, it was only a fleeting thought as he knew Jay hadn't kept up on anything SHOOT related in quite some time.

As Esper walked in, Jay placed a hand on Eryk's right shoulder—a simple gesture that felt like the transfer of a massive burden.

Inside, the house smelled of woodsmoke, old leather, and something savory cooking—Jay was a surprisingly excellent cook. The living room was cozy: bookshelves overflowing with dog-eared classics and wrestling biographies. There was a plush, ridiculously oversized couch, and a vintage acoustic guitar resting against the wall. It was the antithesis of the sterile, luxury-apartment life Breedlove ever offered Eryk–not that he would have ever accepted such a hollow offer. But, at least what he saw in front of him in Casa di Martinez was *real*.

Esper immediately made a beeline for the kitchen counter, where Jay always kept a jar of candy. Jay winked at Eryk before turning to his goddaughter.

Jay Martinez: The guest room is all set up, Es. There's a TV, and I got that new *Legend of Zelda* game you were talking about. We can build a fort later.

Esper: *(astonished) Zelda?!* A fort?! AWESOME!!

Eryk Van Warren: Jay loves building forts. Even when there's no adults around. And for the LOVE of GOD; no hungry, hungry hippos! I know how fucking competitive you get with that damn game.

Esper gasped at his Daddy's bad language.

Esper: *(scowling)* That's ten-dollars, Dad.

Jay mouthed the word, "Yeeeesh.", knowing ten-dollars for the four-letter no-no was a big steep.

Eryk Van Warren: Inflation.

Jay Martinez: Thank Jeebus she wasn't around during our Profanity & inSANIty days.

Eryk watched them interact for the next fifteen minutes. The tension easing in his shoulders. Esper was safe here. Safer than with him, safer than anywhere else in the orbit of the SHOOT Project.

Once Esper was distracted by a candy jar Jay produced seemingly out of thin-air like a modern day Willy Wonka, and a sudden interest in Jay's vinyl collection, Eryk followed Jay to the back patio. They walked towards a shaded area overlooking a dusty, undeveloped part of his property. Jay offered him a cold bottle of Poland Springs water, and Eryk took it. Once he twisted the cap, he had it downed in seconds.

Jay Martinez: You look like hell.

Jay stated this as he leaned against the wooden railing. He didn't ask *what* happened, because he knew it couldn't have been good.

Eryk Van Warren: Haven't slept in days, to be honest. But despite that, I'm okay. I've kind of come to a realization today, and bringing Esper here did a great job in silencing my worries.

He didn't want to recount the beatdown, or the sudden, cold appearance of Laura Seton standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Joshua Breedlove, the very architect of their combined ruin. He certainly didn't want to talk about the look in her eyes—the look of utter, calculated indifference.

Eryk Van Warren: She joined the enemy, Jay. She's gone… dark on us.

The words were nearly a raw whisper. Jay's eyes were filled with surprise, but above all else, disappointment. The silence between them was heavy. Jay knew who 'She' was. He'd known Laura just as long as Eryk had, and in that infinite amount of time, there was never a moment where he thought she would turn to the dark side.

Eryk Van Warren: She took the torch. The Empyrean Forge. She stood next to Breedlove, after *he* put her through hell. After *I* put her through hell. She helped *him* put *me* down.

Jay Martinez: Oh, the betrayal. Well, that's a new one, for sure.

Jay mused this, not as a question, but as a summary of the obvious.

Jay Martinez: Gotta say, man. Never imagined Laura would b–

Eryk Van Warren: No. The betrayal was *me* joining *him* first. It was a selfish move. Another bad decision in the life and career of X-Calibur. That was *wrestling*. This... this is different. Jay. Laura looked at me like I was a piece of trash she scraped off her fucking shoe. She wasn't seeking revenge; she was declaring me irrelevant. She used the betrayal, the memory of it, as the foundation for her own ascension. She's not trying to get back at X-Calibur. She's trying to *erase* him.

He paused, running a hand over his tired face.

Eryk Van Warren: Breedlove didn't recruit her. He *forged* her. He used my mistakes as the fucking hammer.

Jay finally spoke, his voice low and serious.

Jay Martinez: Well, I mean, and no offense, but you were ahhh.. Should I say, always too ambitious?

Eryk laughed. He could always count on the Jay, or even the Loco in him, to give it to him straight.

Jay Martinez: You needed the power, you needed the gold, and you needed to be *right*. That's always been your problem, man, and I say this with the utmost respect and love. This Breedlove gave you an excuse to shed your obligations, and you took it. He told you to burn the forge clean. But you didn't burn it, did you? You just moved the fire pit. And now, the flames you started are surrounding you. Closing in.

Eryk leaned his head back against the wall, eyes closed.

Eryk Van Warren:I know. I know. I destroyed the one good, goddamned pure fucking thing I had in this business. I broke her heart to put myself in with a group that had a lot of momentum behind them. I mean, I can say I did it for Esper all I want, but I knew, on the surface, Breedlove would never make good on a promise like that. He's not in a position of power outside of his own narcissistic mind. And now, because of my selfish decision, she's going to break the entire industry just to prove I was disposable.

Jay Martinez: Okay. So, what's the plan?

Eryk opened his eyes, the weariness replaced by a sharp, cutting focus.

Eryk Van Warren: The plan is to stop her. To stop *them*. But mostly, to get my hands on Breedlove and make him pay for twisting and trivializing everything I care about. He took my friendship, he took my trust, he tried to undermine the significance of my career, and he weaponized the woman I love against me. I need to take him out. Completely. Fucking violently.

Jay Martinez: And you need Esper out of the blast radius. Got it.

Jay finished, his eyes drifted toward the window where Esper's faint laughter could be heard.

Eryk Van Warren: She's my biggest weakness, Jay. He knows it. And now that Laura is with him... I can't risk it. I can't risk him using her, or even threatening to use her, to get to me. I need to be free of that fear. I need to be pure, unadulterated rage for the first time in years. I need to be the dangerous, selfish son of a bitch I told myself I was when I joined him.

He paused.

Eryk Van Warren: I need to be **X-Calibur** again.

Jay pushed off the railing and stood tall, his gaze fixed on Eryk, a familiar fire lighting up the deep brown of his eyes.

Jay Martinez: You think you're a selfish son of a bitch? You're the dumbest, most sentimental bastard I know. Haha. If you were *truly* selfish, you wouldn't be here. You'd hire a bodyguard like Yuri Reznikov again and tell yourself you're invincible. Naaah. You're here because you love that little girl more than the SHOOT Project World Heavyweight Championship, more than the fans, and even more astoundingly, more than your own ego!

Jay reached out, not to comfort, but to steel him. His hand clasped Eryk's shoulder with slapping force.

Jay Martinez: She stays here. She's my goddaughter. She is safe. She is *my* responsibility now, Eryk. You don't have to worry about her homework, her safety, or her nightmares. You only have one job: you go back to that circus, you find the man who hurt you and Laura, and you make him pay. And I mean *pay*. Only like you fucking can.

Eryk felt a sudden, unexpected sting behind his eyes. Jay's affirmation was more powerful than any promo, any chest-beating boast he could muster.

Eryk Van Warren: Thank you, 'Loc. I owe you everything.

Jay Martinez: You don't owe me a thing. You're my brother, man. Despite everything that's ever happened between us. Now, you go tell your little girl goodbye, and you get the hell out of here before I start asking you why you didn't call me *before* you joined the bad guys.

Eryk nodded, a small, grim smile touching his lips.

Eryk Van Warren: Fair enough.

He walked back inside. Esper was seated on the carpet, showing Jay a TikTok dance, both of them laughing. It was a perfect, normal moment, one he could put in his pocket and carry with him through the coming darkness.

He knelt beside her.

Eryk Van Warren: Okay, Es. I gotta go.

Esper's smile faded immediately. She threw her arms around her Daddy's neck, holding him tight.

Esper: Be careful, Dad. Don't let that stupid idiot hurt you anymore!

Eryk Van Warren: Never again, kiddo. I promise. Uncle Jay's got the fort materials, so you two go build a bunker fit for a world champion. I'll call you tonight.

He kissed her forehead, inhaling the scent of her hair—shampoo and bubblegum. It was the scent of everything he was fighting for.

Eryk pulled back, catching Jay's eye over Esper's head.

The message was clear: *I am entrusting my life to you.*

Jay nodded, his expression a promise more ironclad than any contract.

Eryk stood up, forcing himself to walk toward the door without looking back. He knew if he did, he wouldn't leave. He needed this separation. He needed the emotional detachment to unleash the monster he needed to become to survive Breedlove's game. The selfish mercenary. The man who had convinced himself he was capable of burning his own forge clean.

The sound of the screen door closing behind him was a final, definitive *clank*.

As he drove away, the rear-view mirror framed Jay standing on the porch, his form a silent sentinel, with Esper already climbing onto his back, riding him like a pony toward the safety of the house. He was glad he still had a friend in this world. Because that friend, 'Uncle Jay', would do anything for him. Especially when it came to family.

Now, Eryk could finally become X-Calibur again, unburdened by fear, ready to face the ghost he had created. Ready to burn down the entire Empyrean Forge, even if it meant being consumed by the flames himself.

The war had truly begun. And the first, necessary sacrifice had been made. His heart was now a weapon.

And he was pointing it squarely at his enemies.

X-CALIBUR