



Failure isn't new to me. The bruises. The blood. The quiet ride home.

I've worn all of it before.

But failure is so much heavier when someone bleeds in your place. It wasn't the loss that stuck with me, if we're being honest.

Sometimes you don't conquer a mountain on the first attempt.

I was an errant fool, but I pushed boundaries. I held my ground. Every attempt at clipping her wings, she still found a way to fly. She got the win clean, but I didn't get steamrolled. I didn't crumble. I stood toe-to-toe, and even though the cheers at the end of that match weren't for me, it still felt like we tore off the damn roof. But even sound doesn't stay with me.

The sound of that chair cracking against her skull instead of mine will live in my brain for a long while.

I was humbled.

So I signed. I don't give a fuck about your crowns. About your politics. I signed for the climb. For the ones willing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder even when the steel comes down.

If Dolly Waters is willing to take the bullet that was meant for me, then I'm damn well gonna carry my part of her fight.

I'm not gonna state some grandiose thing about bein' a part of something that isn't mine to contend with. But I'm not gonna sit in the back and just let shit happen with the mantra of "It's *not mine to deal with*". It's her revolution. Her battle cry.

I'm just here to help ensure its *longevity*.

And maybe ensure that it's somethin' that you can't **kill**.

The ramen shop on the corner was a popular abode for many a man the same as the three who were hunched in the back booth. It stank of old grease, *tonkatsu* and the rancid smell of tofu that seemed to have gone bad over the week. The stench was the kind that clung to skin, no matter how long you ended up staying. Three of them hunched in the back booth, bowls of noodles cooling between them, heads low, voices quieter still.

“Watson builds his circle,” one said, stirring a bowl he never touched. His accent was Kansai-thick, the English clipped, rough like gravel dragged across glass. “Predictable.”

Across from him, the older man — hair slicked back, white streaking at the temples — didn’t stir his broth. Didn’t move. He just let the steam curl upward, fogging his glasses, watching it rise as though it held the shape of something no one else could see. Kanzaki blood. He didn’t need to speak to own the room. His presence alone kept the other two rigid, spines locked, as though the shop’s air had thinned.

“Hamada moves the pieces,” the second murmured. Younger, nervous. His fingers drummed against the wood until he caught himself, pressing his palm flat. “Whelan has been seen with him again. The circle tightens.”

The elder leaned forward then, folding his hands neatly over the sticky table. His voice, when it came, was ice cold silk poured over fountains of glass. “Good. Let him build. Let him believe the walls around him hold.”

The youngest frowned. “And when they **do**?”

The elder’s smile was small, careful. It didn’t touch his eyes. “We do not strike the walls. We strike the heart. Not him.” The silence that followed was a knife pressed against skin. He let it hang, let it bleed into the corners of the booth. “Her.”

Neither man spoke. They didn’t have to. The weight of it sank into their skin, into the broth, into the sour air that had nowhere to go. Outside, Tokyo moved on — neon signs flickering, cars dragging through the heat, laughter spilling from bars. Inside, it felt colder, as though the broth itself had soured.

The elder reached for his chopsticks. They were his own, not the cheap wooden shit that snapped open. The clink of the lacquered wood sounded like an echo against the fabrications of time.

His eyes never left the steam. “Let Watson climb his mountain. Let him sweat and bleed for every rung. The higher he goes, the harder the fall will break him.”

The younger men bowed their heads. The elder only exhaled slowly, satisfied, as if the city itself had just answered him.

They say numbers don’t lie. Maybe not. But numbers don’t always tell the whole story either. You want to talk about XWF? Fine.

I haven’t walked in here and steamrolled the roster. Didn’t expect that I would either.

I haven’t stacked win after win like a highlight reel on loop. I said I wouldn’t either.

You know what I've done? I've fought. Every time. Every damn match. Sometimes I've lost. Sometimes I've been dragged into the mud, sometimes I've been caught flat. But here I am, still standing, breathin'. Fightin'. Livin' through whatever's thrown at me and showing even some of your best that I'm not gonna just lay down and let sleepin' dogs lie.

That's what makes a legend. Isn't it?

Not padding a record. Not catching lightning once and pretending it'll last forever. It's about taking every shot, every failure, every bruise, and turning it into fuel. My career is littered with people who thought one bad month, one off year, one cold streak would bury me.

They're gone.

I'm still here.

I left the game, I came back. I still fight. I still think I can get to the top. I **know** I can get to the top. If there's anything that the match I just had did was cement that I *can* stand next to the mountain and know that I'm nearly there. Props, I'll always give my dues to those who've earned it.

But here's the part everyone forgets: I didn't come into XWF looking for a parade. I came in swinging because that's the only way I've ever known.

I don't cherry-pick my fights. I don't hide behind graphics, gimmicks, or excuses.

I don't care if I've been knocked on my ass three weeks straight — the second the bell rings, I'm already coming for your throat. That's survival. That's why I'm still here twenty years later when most of my so-called peers are sitting on couches telling stories about the good old days.

Yeah, I lost against Dolly. But I made a statement, didn't I?

You can't kill me.

I just keep comin' back for more.

The hallway was too bright. Too loud. The fluorescent hummed like a dentist who kept his drill too tightly wound on the enamel of a tooth. Every echo of everyone's boots stretched too long and too loud. Dickie leaned against the wall in an offshoot hallway, his legs stretched out in front of him, away from the backstage rivalries and acoustic-driven busyness. His eyes were closed in an effort to turn off the brightness, but he knew eventually that it wouldn't matter.

He had his head tipped back as though there was nothing more relaxing than a brick wall instead of a pillow. His ribs screamed, just like they always did. His jaw throbbed, just like it always did. His knuckles were split wide and stung like open wounds in the air, just like they always did. The thrill of the fight, after all.

Bruises stacked, bones screaming, the quiet press of exhaustion heavier than the match itself. That was the price he knew how to pay. What sat wrong in his chest was the sound still echoing in memory — steel biting flesh, not his. Dolly. A chair meant for him, burying itself into her skull instead. That noise didn't fade, no matter how many times he blinked.

Family. A chain. A cost.

Yoshiro's words wouldn't leave him. Neither would the silence in Amelia's eyes when she caught him lying about where he'd been, or how often he kept everything from her, including when a stupid piece of lace dropped into her lap without a note from sender. Everything pressed down until it was a collar he couldn't pull off.

He slid away from the rest of the cacophony, ended up in the locker room where no one else was. He'd take an ibuprofen. He'd breathe. He'd exit stage right, lick his wounds, head home, try to figure out the rest of the mess. He wrapped his hand in gauze and tape, sniffing in as he reached for his phone with multiple messages unseen. A broken heart from Amelia, but a hug emoji in the second one.

Translation: She'd forgive him a loss, as long as he came home safe.

He reached into his bag, fumbling around for more tape. With a curse in Russian, he didn't find it, and looked closer. The strap of his duffel looked...*different*. A brightness that was in stark contrast to the black fabric. Something he hadn't put there, and something Amelia wouldn't have done either.

### **Red thread.**

It wrapped around the zipper like it had grown there, so deliberate his stomach dropped. He paused. He stared at it, letting the tip of his index finger cross it for a moment. His brain shuttered through pages and pages of data that he had lying around because he stared at Wikipedia and read too many books in his (lack of) free time.

It was deliberate.

He knew that.

Someone had come in here and tied it on *his* bag.

He racked his memory for the last time he'd seen red thread like this that seemed like a threat, because that's what was running through his system. *Threat*. Not paranoia, *known*. He knew it didn't belong. Not in his bag, not in the locker room. Not in the locker room. Not in Denver. He didn't know what it meant, didn't know what hand had slipped it there — but he knew enough. It was deliberate. Too clean to be accident.

There was no answer, and that was worse.

He didn't know the legacy behind it. Didn't know if it came from bloodlines, curses, or some ancient superstition whispered in alleyways across oceans. All he knew was that it was personal. It wasn't Dolly's fight. It wasn't the Revolution's banner. It wasn't even about the match he'd just survived. This was something else, something older, threaded straight for him. Just like the lace.

He yanked it free, let it sit in his hand, barely noticing the tremble that sat within his fingers. Thin. Weightless, but still heavier than anything he'd ever carried. He closed it within his fingers, clenching his fist. Again, he shoved his fingers into the bag. A piece of paper sat on top, as if it was meant to be there. Someone set it.

Dickie pulled it out, his eyes floating across the top of the kanji like he *knew* what it said. Or could presume. Or couldn't. It was written in a red brush line, perfect, right to left.

破壊のために生まれた血、救済のためではない

Dickie stared at it. He took a picture with his phone, but already knew what it was, the fear from months ago settling in his sternum like a poorly written ballad that somehow tore at the hearts of the multitudes.

*Kanzaki.*

The world blurred. The medics' voices, the crowd outside, the hum of the building — gone. All he could hear was the whisper already etched in his memory:

*Not him. Her.*

He closed his fist until it hurt, until pain gave him something real to hold on to. Kanzaki was here. Maybe not in flesh, maybe not in the room, but here all the same.

Amelia. Always Amelia. One by choice, one by mistake. Every time he climbed, someone else paid. Every time he reached for the summit, blood marked the path.

He hated that. He didn't believe in banners. He didn't believe in politics. Didn't believe in sanctums and people who fought for nothing. Didn't believe in the Dolly's cause either, wanted to just say he was here to fight, to climb, to be one of the best when everyone else around him said he couldn't. But the second she took steel to the skull for him, it stopped being just her fight.

Not his cause. But his blood was in it now, whether he liked it or not.

His eyes burned, unfocused, as he shoved the thread into his pocket. His body wanted to fold, to drop, to quit — but quitting wasn't in him. The climb pulled him forward, jagged and cruel.

Let Kanzaki circle. Let tyrants swing chairs because they don't like the sounds of the people. Let the whole world point at his name and whisper curses.

If they wanted to strike the heart, they'd have to carve through him first.

They say the first time you walk into somebody's house, you don't really walk out with a win. That's how it went with you, Corey. I stepped into your four walls, and the house cashed out like it always does. I knew it then. The house always wins.

But what happens when the house rots and burns in piss? You create a ledger of names around you in the hopes that you can save yourself. You came into XWF with Pantheon fireworks, and now? All I see is smoke. No wins in months. No fire. No proof that the "King of Wrestling" still sits on his throne.

And worse — you got gutted. You didn't just lose, Corey. You got exposed. Syn didn't beat you, he branded you. Made you look obsolete. He took your crown and melted it into scrap, and instead of setting the world on fire to get it back, you went quiet. That's not the King. That's a ghost.

See, I don't need to tear down your career to build mine. Twenty years, you've done it all. That's fact. But me? I'm not standing still. I've been climbing. Every rung, every name, every wall they throw in

front of me, I've dug my nails in and bled my way up. You? You've been sliding. And shadows don't fight back, Corey.

This isn't legend vs underdog. This isn't "respect the King" night. This is me, toe-to-toe with the man they say can outlast anyone. And right now, you're not a mountain. You're a test. And tests get passed.

You've got nothing left to prove. And that's the problem. Because men with nothing left to prove don't fight like legends. They fight like men desperate to be remembered one last time.

And that's when I bury them.

You've been the King, Corey. No one's taking that from you. You carved out a kingdom in blood and ash that half the people in this business are still trying to crawl through.

But kings fall. Thrones rust. And if you're not ready to swing back at the world that chewed you up, then you're just another monument for me to break on my climb.

You're still Corey Black, sure. Still the guy they call "legend." Still the house that cashed out my first night against you. But houses can fall. Legends can fade. And me? I don't fade. I don't stop. I keep climbing.

So when that bell rings, it's not about nostalgia. It's not about what you did in WCF or AW or wherever else they used to sing your name. It's about right now. You and me.

And if Corey Black's got anything left, I'll drag it out of you. But if all that's left is echoes? Then I'll be the one who silences them.

Because I don't care about kings. I don't care about crowns. I don't care about Pantheon, or thrones, or fairy tales.

I care about the climb. And if you're standing in front of me, Corey — then you're just another mountain that's about to crumble under my boots.

Concrete and steel, humming with servers and exhaust fans, buried so deep under Denver that the city above might as well have been a dream. Dickie moved through its corridors like a ghost, boots striking the hardwood overlay with no rhythm, just weight.

The thread was still in his pocket. He hadn't let go of it since the arena. Even showered, bruised, blood scrubbed raw from his skin, the damn thing still clung to him like it had been stitched under.

Yoshiro was waiting in the war room. He didn't sit — he never did — but stood like a sentinel behind the table, a screen's glow cutting across the scar down his cheek. His eyes tracked Dickie the moment he stepped in.

"You wrestled," Yoshiro said flatly, no judgment in the tone. Just fact. "And lost."

Dickie dropped into the chair opposite him, shoulders sagging, eyes sunken. “Fought Dolly. Fought like hell. Signed her union sheet. Shook her hand.” His laugh came sharp and bitter. “Didn’t matter. She bled anyway.”

Yoshiro’s jaw tightened. He didn’t ask. He didn’t need to. Dickie reached into his pocket and pulled the thread out, setting it on the steel table between them. Thin. Red. Coiled.

“Found this in my bag after the match,” he said, voice low. “Not a coincidence.”

For the first time, Yoshiro’s eyes flickered. A crack in the calm. “Kanzaki.”

Dickie leaned forward, palms flat on the table, blood still crusted around his knuckles. “Yeah. Kanzaki. They’re not just circling me anymore. They’re in the buildings. They’re in the locker rooms. And I don’t even know how long they’ve been watching Amelia.”

The weight of it pressed through the room, heavy as the concrete above.

Yoshiro spoke finally, slow and deliberate. “This is the cost of family. They will not stop with you. They will never stop with her. You build your circle faster, Dimitri. Or Kanzaki will cut it before it holds.”

Dickie’s head bowed, the thread between them catching the light like a vein. His voice came hoarse. “Every time I climb, someone else bleeds. Doesn’t matter the name. Always the leash. Always the cost.”

Yoshiro didn’t flinch. “Then bleed with people who choose to climb beside you.”

The words sat between them, cold and sharp. Dickie stared at the thread, then at Yoshiro, and for the first time since the night that started all of this, when blood ran cold and mantles were passed, he didn’t look away.