

East Coast Invasion: Raleigh, NC

December 5, 2025 | PNC Arena - Raleigh, North Carolina

Disclaimer

This show was written in the spirit of fun. Keeping with the "Wheel of Chance" theme, both stipulations and match participants were chosen using online randomizers immediately prior to producing the matches. For the most part, AI was allowed to choose the winners as well, to allow for a completely random experience. We hope you enjoy.

WHEEL USED: <https://spinthewheel.app/nyveBh1Enj>

RANDOMIZER USED: random.org

Introduction

The screen fades in from black to a roar. The camera whips around the packed PNC Arena in Raleigh, North Carolina as thousands of fans clap, stomp, and wave handmade signs. A thunderous barrage of pyro erupts from the stage, painting the arena in golds, reds, and electric blues as the East Coast Invasion logo pulses on the giant screen.

The hard cam settles on the entrance stage, where a massive, spotlight-bathed WHEEL OF CHANCE stands beside the ramp, its multi-colored wedges gleaming under the lights. In the center of the wheel, bold letters spell out "WHEEL OF CHANCE" as the crowd lets out a fresh pop just seeing it in person.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to East Coast Invasion from the PNC Arena in Raleigh, North Carolina! It is December 5th, 2025, and you are looking live at the final stop before Black Horizon!"

Mark Bravo: "Johnny, listen to that noise! Raleigh showed up, the East Coast Invasion train is pulling into its last station, and somebody went and parked the most dangerous office supply in pro wrestling history right on our stage!"

The camera pushes in on the WHEEL OF CHANCE as it slowly spins on its axis, each colored wedge showing different match types. A roaming camera catches signs in the crowd: "SPIN THE WHEEL, FACE YOUR FATE," "RALEIGH LOVES CHAOS," and "PLEASE NO FIRST HUG MATCH."

John Phillips: "That right there is what tonight is all about. The WHEEL OF CHANCE. For the first time in years, the United Toughness Alliance is putting fate in the hands of a spin. Match types, opponents, careers, momentum heading into Black Horizon... all of it can change with a flick of the wrist."

Mark Bravo: "And what a wrist, John. The man doing the spinning tonight is a one-night-only special kind of lunatic. The Shock-N-Rolla himself. Chance. Von. Crank."

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The crowd reaction swells at the mention of his name, a mix of nostalgia, excitement, and a little bit of dread. The big screen flashes old highlights of Chance Von Crank: wild brawls, unhinged promos, reckless dives, and that manic grin under flickering arena lights.

John Phillips: "Chance Von Crank returns to the UTA for one night only to host this special WHEEL OF CHANCE edition of East Coast Invasion. One of the most unpredictable, controversial figures in UTA history is in the house, and tonight, he's in charge of the wheel."

Mark Bravo: "Let me translate that for everybody at home: nobody is safe. You can lace your boots, you can warm up in the back, you can stare at the monitor and try to game-plan, but until that maniac spins that wheel, you have no idea what kind of nightmare you're walking into."

The camera cuts to a quick shot backstage: wrestlers watching the show open on a monitor, some pacing, some shaking their heads, others arguing about potential match types. A graphic slides onto the screen reading "MATCHES AND STIPULATIONS TO BE DETERMINED LIVE BY THE WHEEL."

John Phillips: "We've got a locker room full of competitors who have spent weeks fighting their way through this East Coast Invasion. Black Horizon is right around the corner, careers will be made and broken, and tonight is the last chance to build momentum before we get there."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, except usually you know what you're preparing for! Tonight? You might be thinking about a nice, simple wrestling match, and five minutes later you're in a Lumberjack Match, or a Tables Match, or whatever insanity they've crammed onto that wheel."

John Phillips: "Hardcore rules, No Disqualification, Falls Count Anywhere, maybe something as ridiculous as a Dance Off or Rock, Paper, Scissors... the point is, it's all on there, and it's all fair game. The Shock-N-Rolla calls your name, he spins that wheel, and Raleigh finds out right along with the rest of the world what you're about to walk into."

Mark Bravo: "And you know Chance Von Crank, John. He's not just gonna spin that thing and politely announce the results. He's gonna stir the pot, poke the bear, throw gasoline on every fire he can find. If you've got enemies, tonight is a bad night. If you don't? You'll probably make some before we go off the air."

The camera returns to the announce desk, where John Phillips and Mark Bravo sit in front of the roaring crowd. Behind them, the wheel looms in the distance, lit by a halo of white and gold spotlights.

John Phillips: "The road to Black Horizon runs straight through Raleigh, and every spin of that wheel could rewrite the card, reshape the rankings, and change who walks into Philadelphia with the edge."

Mark Bravo: "Tonight is not about comfort zones. It's about chaos, opportunity, and whether you can adapt when the universe throws something insane at you. Some careers will be made tonight, some reputations might get shattered, and if you're not ready when your name gets called, you're going to find out exactly why there's nothing like the WHEEL OF CHANCE."

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The camera zooms in one more time on the WHEEL OF CHANCE as it gives a slow, ominous turn on its own. The crowd buzzes, sensing history. A lower-third graphic flashes across the screen: "TONIGHT: MATCHES AND STIPULATIONS DECIDED LIVE."

John Phillips: "Raleigh, North Carolina is on its feet, the wheel is ready, Chance Von Crank is in the building, and East Coast Invasion is officially underway!"

Mark Bravo: "Buckle up, folks. Spin the wheel... face your fate."

The shot lingers on the vibrating crowd and that gleaming, waiting wheel as the music swells and the show prepares to roll into its first segment of the night.

Spin the Wheel #1

The camera cuts from the roaring arena to the backstage area, where the massive WHEEL OF CHANCE stands even more intimidating up close. Beside it, a clear bingo-style tumbler sits on a waist-high podium, packed with white plastic balls, each one marked with a name. Production crew mill around the edges, giving the wheel a respectful distance.

A sudden pop from the live crowd bleeds into the audio as Chance Von Crank steps into the frame, swaggering in his own brand of chaos-chic: boots scuffed, grin wide, eyes wild. He pauses in front of the wheel, soaking in the distant roar, then pats the tumbler with a fond kind of menace.

Chance Von Crank: "Well I'll be... it is good to be back."

The crowd in the arena gets even louder at just the sound of his voice, the reaction echoing faintly through the concrete walls. Chance tilts his head, listening to the noise, then laughs under his breath.

Chance Von Crank: "Raleigh, North Carolina... East Coast Invasion... and the Shock-N-Rolla's been trusted with the keys to the whole damn funhouse. Tonight... is gonna be like you've never seen before."

He sweeps his arm between the wheel and the tumbling cage, presenting them like game show prizes from a particularly deranged late-night special.

Chance Von Crank: "The rules are real simple, darlin's. I spin the wheel..."

He slaps the wooden rim of the WHEEL OF CHANCE with a hollow thud.

Chance Von Crank: "That picks your match. Then I come over here..."

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Chance saunters to the bingo roller, giving it a sharp rattle that sends the name-balls clacking around inside.

Chance Von Crank: "...and I draw two lucky souls outta this beautiful little tumbler right here. Two names. One match. No warning. No mercy."

He leans in toward the camera, eyes bright, that crooked smile never leaving his face.

Chance Von Crank: "So let's stop talkin' about it... and let's get this kicked off."

He straightens up and plants both hands on the wheel, taking a breath like he's about to pull the trigger on something irreversible.

Chance Von Crank: "First spin of the night. First taste of fate. Let's see what Raleigh's gettin'!"

Chance yanks the wheel into motion. It spins fast, colored wedges blurring together under the harsh backstage lights. The soft rat-a-tat-tat of the pegs clicking past each divider fills the air as the camera tightens on the motion, then slows, and slows...

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

The wheel finally drags to a stop, the pointer landing squarely on a bold wedge: "TABLES MATCH."

Chance Von Crank: "Ohohohh... there we go. First match stipulation from the wheel..."

Chance Von Crank: "...is a *Tables Match*."

A huge reaction erupts from the arena, the pop rumbling through the walls as if the building itself approves.

Chance Von Crank: "Somebody's goin' through lumber tonight, baby. Now... let's see *who* gets to fly."

He steps to the tumbler, grabs the handle, and gives it a long, theatrical spin. The balls churn and clatter inside until he stops it with a flourish. Chance opens the latch, reaches in, and rummages around with exaggerated care.

He pulls out the first ball, holds it up to his face, and squints, then grins wickedly.

Chance Von Crank: "First competitor... the WrestleZone Champion himself..."

Chance Von Crank: "Eric Dane Jr..."

The arena's distant reaction spikes again, a blend of cheers and heated noise for the champion being tossed straight into the fire.

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Chance Von Crank: "Champ, hope you packed a spare spine. Now... who's ridin' that table trip with ya?"

He reaches back into the tumbler, stirring the remaining balls around. The camera zooms closer on his hand as he finally plucks another one out. He rolls it between his fingers, then lifts it toward his eyes.

Chance's smile falters for just a second, surprise flashing across his face. His eyebrows shoot up, and he barks out a quick, disbelieving laugh.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh... *oh*, that's good."

He turns the ball toward the camera, the name just visible.

Chance Von Crank: "The second..."

He looks back at the ball to make sure he's seeing it right, then back to the lens, grin returning twice as wide.

Chance Von Crank: "Susanita Ybanez!"

The reaction from the arena hits another level, a roar of shock and excitement. Chance laughs, delighted at the chaos he's just unleashed, and taps the ball against the side of the tumbler.

Chance Von Crank: "WrestleZone Champion Eric Dane Jr... Susanita Ybanez... *Tables Match*. First spin of the night, and we're already tryin' to break bodies in half."

He leans into the camera one more time, eyes shining with mischief.

Chance Von Crank: "Welcome back to the WHEEL OF CHANCE, sugar. And we are just gettin' started."

The camera lingers on the wheel and the rattling tumbler as the segment fades, the distant roar of the Raleigh crowd swelling under the ominous image of two names that never expected to collide like this tonight.

First Reactions

The feed cuts to the back, just steps away from where the WHEEL OF CHANCE looms. Eric Dane Jr is pacing in front of a concrete wall emblazoned with the East Coast Invasion logo, the WrestleZone Championship slung over his shoulder. Melissa Cartwright stands nearby with a microphone, trying to keep up with his restless movement.

Melissa Cartwright: "Eric, you just heard it like the rest of us. Chance Von Crank spins the wheel, and you are officially in the first WHEEL OF CHANCE match tonight. A Tables Match against Susanita Ybanez. What's your reaction?"

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Dane Jr stops, running a hand through his hair before gripping the face of the belt, his jaw tight but eyes burning with intensity.

Eric Dane Jr: "What's my reaction? You're lookin' at it, Melissa. This right here is what happens when you put my name in a roller like it's bingo night and hope luck does the booking."

He taps the main plate of the WrestleZone Championship with his knuckles, the metallic clink echoing.

Eric Dane Jr: "I didn't ask for a Tables Match. I didn't ask for Chance Von Crank to come waltzin' back in and turn my night into a carnival act. But that's the job. I'm the WrestleZone Champion. When my name comes out of that tumbler, I don't pout, I don't hide, and I damn sure don't turn it down."

He smirks, but there's an edge to it--too much on the line with Black Horizon looming.

Eric Dane Jr: "Susanita Ybanez is tough. I've seen her fight, I know what kind of heart she's got. But tonight? Tonight she got drawn against the wrong name on the wrong night in the wrong kind of match. Because a Tables Match doesn't end with a roll-up or a flash pin. It ends when somebody's spine bounces off splinters."

Dane Jr steps closer to the camera, the belt sliding down into the crook of his arm.

Eric Dane Jr: "So Susanita, if you're watchin' this, understand something: I respect that you're fearless. I respect that you'll step up. But I am not walkin' into Black Horizon with momentum snapped in half because this wheel decided it needed a viral moment. I'll put you through that table if I have to... and if that's what it takes to make sure everyone remembers why *I'm* the one holding this."

He hoists the WrestleZone Championship higher, then nods sharply toward Melissa before pushing out of frame, leaving her to stare after him.

The shot shifts down the hallway. Further backstage, Susanita Ybanez stands near a road case, already in gear, taping her wrists. A few crew members glance up at a nearby monitor replaying the announcement. Susanita's eyes are wide but focused as another interviewer approaches with a mic.

Interviewer: "Susanita, you just found out along with everyone else--you've been randomly selected by Chance Von Crank. Tonight, you face the WrestleZone Champion Eric Dane Jr in a Tables Match. What's going through your mind right now?"

Susanita exhales, a short, disbelieving laugh slipping out as she finishes tearing the tape and smoothing it around her wrist.

Susanita Ybanez: "What's goin' through my mind? First thing... that wheel is loco."

She gestures back toward the general direction of the wheel with a small shake of her head, then cracks a

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smile that doesn't quite hide the nerves.

Susanita Ybanez: "I came to Raleigh ready for a fight. I didn't know who, I didn't know how, but I knew it was the last stop before Black Horizon and I wanted to make noise. What I didn't expect... was my name coming out after his."

She nods knowingly, acknowledging the gravity of the matchup.

Susanita Ybanez: "Eric Dane Jr is the WrestleZone Champion for a reason. He's strong, he's smart, he's clutch when it counts. A normal match against him? That's already a mountain. But a Tables Match? That means if I make one mistake, if I take one bad fall in the wrong place, my night is over."

Her expression hardens, shoulders squaring as she looks directly into the camera now.

Susanita Ybanez: "But that also means if *he* makes one mistake... I can put the champion through wood and show the whole world that Susanita Ybanez isn't just happy to be here. I didn't come from Paraguay to play it safe. I didn't come to UTA to be background noise while everybody else lines up for Black Horizon."

She slaps her taped fists together once, the sharp crack echoing off the hallway walls.

Susanita Ybanez: "Tonight, the wheel picked me. It picked him. So I'm gonna take this fear..."

She taps her chest once.

Susanita Ybanez: "...turn it into fire... and if I have to go through a table to prove I belong, then I'm dragging Eric Dane Jr there with me. One way or another, Raleigh is going to remember my name."

She gives the camera one last determined look, then turns back toward the direction of the gorilla position, rolling her shoulders out as the shot fades back toward ringside.

Eric Dane Jr. vs. Susanita Ybanez

The camera returns to ringside, and the scene is chaos in motion. Crew members in black UTA polos hustle up and down the aisle, arms full of folded tables. One after another, they slide them under the bottom rope or lean them against the barricade, building a forest of potential wreckage around the ring.

Inside the ropes, two staffers snap a table open and lock the legs, testing the stability with hard palms. Another drags a second table into a neutral corner and props it upright a few feet out from the buckles. On the floor, a table goes up flush with the apron on the hard-cam side to a low murmur from the crowd.

John Phillips: "Take a good look at this, folks. These are not decorations. This is a Tables Match, and the only way it ends is when somebody goes crashing through one of those tables."

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Another runner slides a table under the ropes; it gets dragged toward the far side and left folded against the bottom strand like a landmine waiting to be armed. The referee steps carefully around the mess, counting what's in the ring, what's on the floor, mentally mapping every hazard.

Mark Bravo: "And just to be crystal clear, John, because the rules matter tonight. It does not matter how you go through. If a table breaks and your body is the one going through it, you lose. If you slip, if you trip, if you try something stupid and miss and put yourself through that table, that is still the end of your night."

John Phillips: "Exactly. No pinfalls, no submissions, no count outs. First competitor to go through a table by any means necessary is the loser. That's the gamble that comes with the WHEEL OF CHANCE."

The crew finally clear the scene, climbing down to the floor. We now see at least four tables clearly in play: one standing in a neutral corner, one leaned against the barricade, one set up on the floor at ringside, and another half-folded near the timekeeper's area, ready to be deployed.

John Phillips: "Earlier tonight, Chance Von Crank spun that wheel and landed on a Tables Match. Then he reached into that tumbler and pulled two names: the WrestleZone Champion, Eric Dane Jr... and Susanita Ybanez."

Mark Bravo: "And this is the last stop before Black Horizon. Every bad landing you take in Raleigh, you're carrying with you to Philly. There's no reset button between now and then."

"Made You Look" by Nas hits the speakers, and the PNC Arena rattles with a hot mix of boos, scattered cheers, and pure noise. Silver-and-blue lights strobe across the stage as Eric Dane Jr steps through the curtain, sequined headband sparkling, the WrestleZone Championship slung over his shoulder like it's glued there.

He stops at the top of the ramp, slowly turning in a circle, soaking in the reaction like he believes every decibel is for him. He taps the nameplate of his title, then points down at the tables lining ringside with a smirk, mouthing toward the nearest camera: "Easy work."

John Phillips: "There he is, the WrestleZone Champion, Eric Dane Jr. Second generation, riding the Dane name, and absolutely convinced that destiny is already written in his favor."

Mark Bravo: "And to be fair, the kid can move. Flippy, fearless, and not nearly as good as he thinks he is. That's a dangerous combination in a match where one wrong move will literally send you through a table and cost you the whole thing."

Eric struts down the ramp, jawing with fans at the barricade, pausing just long enough to give one of the tables on the floor a testing kick. He laughs at whatever he feels, then hops up onto the apron with a flourish, wiping his boots more for style than respect.

He ducks through the ropes, steps to the center of the ring, and unstraps the WrestleZone title. With a cocky

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tilt of his head, he lifts it high with one hand, turning so hard-cam can drink it in as the crowd volume swells again.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr has made a career so far out of demanding the spotlight. Tonight, the WHEEL OF CHANCE put him in it whether he wanted this stipulation or not."

Mark Bravo: "And don't forget the rule you laid out, John. If he gets cute and tries to shoot for a highlight reel and he's the one going through the table, that's it. He loses. You don't get credit for your own crash."

He hands the belt to the referee, jabbing a finger at the main plate and saying something we can't quite hear, then saunters over to the table standing near the neutral corner. With a smirk, he nudges it with his boot, then pulls it a little farther away from the buckles, making sure it's centered just right. Message sent: he is not afraid to play with the furniture.

The arena lights bleed into deep red as the pounding drums of "Ignite" by Dead Legacy roll through the PNC Arena. Strings and piano swell, and flame flickers along the edge of the stage, climbing higher with each cue until a loud concussion of pyro explodes upward.

Out of the smoke steps Susanita Ybanez, shoulders squared, eyes locked dead ahead on the ring. The crowd swells with a strong, building cheer at her arrival, a mix of respect for her grind and anticipation for the chaos she's about to walk into.

John Phillips: "And here comes Susanita Ybanez, from Lambaré, Paraguay. First woman from South America signed to a full-time UTA deal. She has fought and clawed for every inch of ground she has in this company."

Mark Bravo: "Look at that focus. That's somebody who remembers every alley workout, every busted mat, every bus ride across Paraguay. You do not make a road like she did just to freeze because there are tables around a ring."

She heads down the ramp at a steady, deliberate pace. A few hands reach out over the barricade and she slaps a couple on instinct, but her gaze is already cataloguing the battlefield: the table leaned on the barricade, the one set flush with the apron, the one Eric adjusted in the ring. She nods once, accepting the risk, the opportunity, and the pain waiting for her.

At ringside, Susanita climbs onto the apron. Red light washes over her as she pauses, then leans back and throws her arms up. Pyro blasts from all four corners, the crowd popping as the silhouette of "La reina silenciosa" stands tall against the fire. She steps between the ropes and immediately circles wide, keeping both Eric and that center table in view.

John Phillips: "We heard from her earlier. Susanita knows what this could mean. You put the WrestleZone Champion through a table tonight, you don't just win a match, you change the conversation going into Black Horizon."

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Mark Bravo: "And if you're Eric Dane Jr, the last thing you want is to be the guy everybody replays on loop getting splintered a week before Philly. His ego cannot afford that L."

The music dies down. The referee stands between them, holding the WrestleZone Championship aloft for a long beat. The title isn't on the line, but the implication is clear: status, momentum, perception. All of it is in play.

He hands the belt to the timekeeper, then gestures toward the tables in and around the ring, talking as he does. One table. One break. One loser. Eric nods with an impatient little shrug, as if this is all obvious. Susanita nods firmly, eyes not leaving the champion.

The referee backs away and signals.

DING DING DING

John Phillips: "Here we go. Tables Match. Eric Dane Jr versus Susanita Ybanez!"

They begin by circling slowly, eyes locked on each other but both clearly aware of the geography. Susanita's gaze flicks for half a second to the table in the neutral corner; Eric catches that and smirks, drifting just enough to keep his own back away from anything wooden.

Mark Bravo: "You can already see it in the footwork. Every step, every angle, they're thinking: if I go down here, what do I hit? The ropes don't feel safe, the corners don't feel safe. Nothing is just a rope break tonight."

They move in and lock up in a collar-and-elbow. Eric uses the weight edge and low center of gravity to bully Susanita backward toward the ropes, trying to steer her toward the side of the ring where a table lies folded on the apron. She feels the wood against the small of her back and immediately pivots, sliding out to the side and snapping a low kick into his thigh.

He grunts and resets. They tie up again, and this time he switches directions, muscling her toward the corner where the upright table waits a couple of steps out from the buckles. Susanita digs her heels in, then drops levels and spins out, reversing the pressure and shoving Eric chest-first toward the buckles and the table.

He gets his hands out and braces himself on the turnbuckle pads before his weight can tip backward into the wood. The crowd gives a tense little gasp, the first real "almost" of the match.

John Phillips: "That was inches. One bad step and we're done already."

Mark Bravo: "And that is the reality check. This isn't theoretical anymore. That was almost the WrestleZone Champion sending himself through a table thirty seconds into the match."

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Eric turns, annoyance written all over his face. He lunges sloppily, grabbing for Susanita. She ducks under the grasp and answers with another sharp low kick to the thigh, then a second, then a third. His leg buckles slightly and he reaches down, more annoyed than hurt.

She takes advantage, jumping into a front facelock. In one quick motion, she drops straight down with a Snap DDT, spiking his head into the canvas. The crowd pops as Eric rolls to his side, one hand clamped on the back of his neck.

John Phillips: "Beautiful Snap DDT from Susanita! She is not intimidated by the name or the belt."

Mark Bravo: "And look at her, John. She's not even thinking about a pin, because there is no pin. She's glancing for the tables. She knows what actually wins this thing."

Susanita rises slowly, catching her breath, eyes sweeping the landscape. The table on the hard-cam floor side catches her attention. She grabs Eric by the wrist and starts dragging him toward the ropes, each step measured. He deadweights, dropping to a knee. She hammers his upper back with forearms, but he fires back from that kneeling position with a short, thudding shot to the ribs that knocks the air from her lungs.

He pushes to his feet, shaking out the cobwebs, then yanks her forward into a sudden elbow strike that clips her on the jaw. She staggers backward into the ropes and he follows, lighting up her chest with a sharp knife-edge chop that echoes through the PNC Arena.

Mark Bravo: "That'll wake you up. He's been watching all those strong style highlight reels and he wants to live the dream."

Eric buries a shoulder into her midsection a couple of times, then whips her hard across the ring. She hits the opposite turnbuckles spine-first and staggers out, and he barrels in with a running back elbow that drops her to one knee.

He glances at the neutral corner table again, and this time the idea sticks.

Eric drags the in-ring table a little closer to the middle, adjusting the angle so it's halfway between the corner and center. He tugs at the legs to make sure it's locked, then grabs Susanita by the wrist and hair and hauls her onto the tabletop, laying her flat on her back.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr is looking to end this early. If he puts her through that table from any height, it's over."

He steps to the ropes, climbing steadily. Second buckle. Then the top. The crowd buzzes louder with each rung. Eric turns to face the ring, arms outstretched for balance, eyes flicking between Susanita and the table beneath her.

Mark Bravo: "I know that look. He's thinking about something with a rotation. But he has got to remember

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the rule. If she moves and he crashes, he loses. Not 'almost loses.' Not 'both hurt.' He loses."

The camera catches a close-up of his face. The confidence is there... but so is the math. If she's gone, and he isn't, the table still breaks, and that is his match thrown away.

He hesitates. Just for a beat.

John Phillips: "For maybe the first time in his career, Eric Dane Jr is actually thinking twice before he jumps."

Down below, that one heartbeat is all Susanita needs. She rolls off the table, dropping to the canvas and clutching her ribs as she tumbles clear. The table stays intact. The crowd lets out a breath and a cheer all at once as Eric climbs down a rung, abandoning the high-risk gamble for the moment.

He hops back to the mat, jaw tight, the crowd riding him for backing off. Embarrassment simmers under his expression. Susanita, still hurting, scrambles up using the ropes.

Eric charges in too fast, swinging a lariat. Susanita ducks under, hits the ropes, and rebounds with a running forearm that catches him flush on the side of the head. He stumbles back a step, surprised. She hits the opposite ropes again and leaps, catching him with a flying corkscrew body press that sends both of them crashing to the canvas, narrowly missing the table legs by inches.

John Phillips: "What a corkscrew from Susanita Ybanez! Every time they leave their feet, they're gambling with their careers in there."

Both competitors slowly push to their knees, the early impact already etched on their faces. Susanita is the first to rise. She darts in low and snaps a dropkick at Eric's knee. His leg buckles, dropping him on one knee again. She grabs his head in a front facelock and starts hauling him toward the ropes where that table sits waiting on the floor.

Eric fights it, planting his free leg, leaning his weight backward like an anchor. He drives short punches into her ribs, forcing her to loosen the grip. Then, in a sudden burst, he pops up and wraps his arms around her waist, snapping off a rough belly-to-belly suplex that sends her flipping and crashing to the mat not far from the apron.

Mark Bravo: "That one rattled her from the spine out. You can feel the air leaving the ring after a landing like that."

Eric stays down for a couple of seconds, hand on his chest, sucking wind. The lack of conditioning starts to show already in the heaviness of his breathing. He rolls to his stomach, plants a forearm, and pushes himself up, eyes going to the table set up flush against the apron on the floor.

An idea creeps across his face. An ugly one.

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He crawls over to Susanita, grabs a handful of boot and waistband, and drags her toward the ropes. With effort, he shoves her under the bottom rope so that her torso ends up on the apron, legs still inside the ring, face turned toward that table just beyond her fingertips.

John Phillips: "This is a dangerous position. If she gets knocked off that apron the wrong way, she could go straight through that table and that would be it."

Eric steps through the ropes onto the apron himself, gripping the top strand for balance. The crowd rises as both wrestlers now stand on a narrow ledge with a table directly beneath them on the floor.

Mark Bravo: "This is where careers get shortened, John. You've got no room to slip, and all that wood waiting to catch you if you do."

Eric hauls Susanita upright on the apron by the hair, both of them wobbling as they fight to keep their footing. He hooks an arm around her head, setting up for a suplex out toward the floor. The table below them might as well be screaming.

Susanita's eyes go wide in alarm. She immediately blocks, hooking her leg behind his, stomping down on his foot, driving her forearm into his ribs in a flurry of short, desperate shots.

The two struggle, boots scraping on the apron edge, that table looming inches below as the crowd roars in anticipation...

On the apron, Eric wrenches on the suplex attempt, trying to muscle Susanita up and over toward the table. Her boots scrape for grip, and the crowd noise swells into a desperate roar.

John Phillips: "If he gets her up from there and they go out, she is going straight through that table!"

Susanita plants her hips low, blocking the lift. She hammers Eric's ribs with three rapid-fire forearms, then stomps down hard on his foot. He yelps and loosens his grip just enough for her to slip an arm free.

She fires a short headbutt under his chin. Eric reels, his balance rocked. He windmills his arms to stay upright, heel hanging over the edge of the apron above the table.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, he's dancing on the edge now!"

Susanita drops to a knee and drives a low kick into the back of his grounded leg. Eric's base buckles, and he stumbles sideways, instinctively grabbing the top rope with both hands. Instead of tumbling backward into the table, he slumps forward, landing stomach-first on the middle rope and clutching at his knee.

John Phillips: "He just saved himself by a handful of rope! That could have been the end of the WrestleZone Champion's night!"

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Susanita, still on the apron, glances down at the table and then at Eric draped over the ropes. She steps carefully back inside between the strands, shaking out her arms. The crowd gives her an appreciative cheer just for surviving that sequence.

Inside the ring, Eric pulls himself upright using the ropes, testing his leg. Susanita stalks in, staying low. She snaps a kick into the compromised thigh again, then another. Eric grits his teeth, swiping at her with a wild forearm that she ducks.

She hits the ropes, comes back, and nails a running single-leg dropkick directly to the same knee. Eric goes down hard, clutching it, pounding the mat in frustration.

John Phillips: "Susanita going after the leg now. Every time she takes away his base, that arsenal of dives and rotations gets a little more dangerous for him than for her."

She grabs his ankle and twists, turning him over, teasing the Figure Four for a heartbeat before remembering the stipulation. She releases and instead drags him a few feet toward the center of the ring, away from the ropes and the nearest table.

Mark Bravo: "Old instincts, John. You trap that leg in a Figure Four and you might get a tap in a regular match, but tonight a submission doesn't do anything except wear him down. She's gotta think lumber."

Breathing hard, Susanita moves to the corner and starts adjusting the upright table, pulling it a bit closer to the middle and squaring it with the turnbuckles. The crowd murmurs with every scrape of wood on canvas.

Eric, still down, notices what she's doing. He rolls to his back, then to his side, dragging himself toward the opposite ropes. The referee keeps an eye on both, giving occasional warning not to use the table as a weapon yet.

Susanita finishes positioning the corner table and turns back to Eric, who's now pulling himself up by the ropes on the far side. She charges, looking to keep him off-balance. He ducks down and suddenly backdrops her up and over the top rope.

The crowd gasps as she sails out of the ring--but she manages to catch the top rope with one hand, swinging and landing awkwardly but safely on the apron instead of careening into the table below.

John Phillips: "She caught herself! That could have been disaster on the floor!"

Eric spins, throwing a desperation forearm. Susanita answers with a shoulder thrust through the ropes, burying it in his midsection. He doubles over. She slingshots in, springboarding over the top rope and catching him with a sunset flip-style roll that doesn't go for a pin, but rolls him toward mid-ring, away from immediate table danger.

They untangle, both scrambling up. Susanita rushes him again, but this time Eric meets her with a sharp

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knee to the gut and a clubbing forearm across the back that drops her to all fours.

Mark Bravo: "There's that mean streak. When the pretty stuff isn't working, he'll gladly just start clubbing you."

Eric grabs her by the hair and tights, roughly shoving her toward the corner where she had just set that table. She collides with it, the wood rattling but holding. He follows in with a running back elbow that sandwiches her between his body and the table.

She crumples to her knees in front of it, one hand clutching her back.

John Phillips: "That table's already paying dividends for him, just as a backboard."

Eric takes a moment to shake out his leg again, grimacing. Then he gets a glint in his eye as he looks from Susanita to the table and back.

He drags the table a step farther out again, then yanks Susanita up by the wrist. He hooks her head, looking out at the crowd, and raises his free hand, calling for something big.

Mark Bravo: "He's thinking brainbuster, John. You can see it in the way he's setting her up."

He tries to hoist her for something resembling the SD2 setup, but his leg gives a little under the strain and Susanita drops back down to her feet, blocking. She throws a short knee up into his ribs, then another. Eric releases the hold, the air driven from his lungs.

She bursts forward, driving him back-first into the same table. It shakes violently but does not break. Eric slumps against it, grimacing, arms out over the top like it's the only thing holding him up.

John Phillips: "That table just keeps surviving. Every time it does, the risk doubles for whoever is leaning on it next."

Susanita backs up, measuring distance. She charges and nails a rip cord knee smash, catching Eric high on the jaw and bouncing his head off the table behind him. He drops to a seated position in front of it, dazed, blinking hard.

The crowd comes alive, sensing she's building momentum.

Mark Bravo: "That knee might have just scrambled the champion's GPS! She's picking her spots and she's landing flush."

Susanita takes a breath and looks out to the floor-side table near the apron. An idea clicks. She grabs Eric by the wrist and drags him toward the ropes, rolling him under the bottom strand so his upper body hangs off the apron again, this time closer to that waiting table.

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She slips out to the apron herself, pulling him by the head until his chest is on the apron and his feet are still inside the ring. The table stands just beneath them on the floor, a few feet away.

John Phillips: "We are right back to that high-wire act. Both of them have flirted with disaster out here already."

Susanita steps back inside, leaving Eric draped halfway. She points to the opposite ropes, the crowd responding with a roar. She sprints across, rebounds, and comes back with a 619 attempt, hooking her body around the middle rope to swing her legs into his face.

At the last instant, Eric yanks himself down off the apron, dropping to the floor. Susanita's legs swing through empty space over the apron instead of his head.

Mark Bravo: "He bailed! Great awareness from Eric Dane Jr, he knew that could be the shot that sends him into the table zone again."

Susanita lands on her feet inside the ring off the swing, but the whiff throws her balance. She stumbles, grabbing the ropes. Eric, now on the outside and just out of range of the table, takes a second to shake his head clear and then rolls back into the ring, choosing to reset rather than risk another apron dance.

They meet in the center again, both clearly slower, clearly hurting. The tables now feel less like props and more like predators waiting for one decisive mistake.

They exchange strikes--chops from Eric, forearm shots from Susanita. The crowd counts along with each hit, the pace grinding down into something more grimy, more desperate.

Eric rocks her with a rolling elbow that sends her staggering into the ropes. He follows with a running cannonball into her against the strands, squashing her between his back and the cables. She slumps to one knee, sucking wind.

John Phillips: "The champion emptying the tank here, trying to keep her grounded and away from any table setups that favor her."

He grabs her wrist and whips her toward the neutral corner--toward the table that has been abused but still stands. At the last second, she dives under the diagonal and instead slides out of the ring under the bottom rope, preserving her body at the cost of giving up ground.

Mark Bravo: "Smart decision. Live to fight the next exchange rather than hope the hardware holds."

On the floor, Susanita leans against the barricade for a heartbeat, chest heaving. She looks up to see another table still leaned against that same barricade a few feet down the line. Her face tightens. Too close for comfort.

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Eric sees her on the floor and, despite the sweat and labored breathing, gets that glint again. He hits the far ropes and comes back with a tope con hilo in mind.

John Phillips: "He's thinking tope over the top!"

He charges, leaps--

--and Susanita, eyes widening at the last second, steps hard to the side.

Eric flies over the top, clearing the ropes in an impressive arc. But instead of colliding with Susanita, he grazes her shoulder and crashes chest-first into the bare floor, narrowly missing the leaned table. His body skids, air knocked out of him.

Mark Bravo: "He almost gave himself the loss right there! If that table had been two feet closer, we'd be done!"

The referee leans through the ropes to check, but the table remains untouched and unbroken. The match continues.

Susanita stares down at Eric, who is groaning, rolled onto his side, clutching his ribs. She looks from him to the tables and back, knowing she has an opening but also knowing one bad choice could flip the script instantly.

She grabs him by the head and trunks, guiding him slowly toward the table that's set up flush with the apron on the hard-cam side. She plops him onto it, working hard to keep his deadweight in the center. The table creaks under their combined shifting weight.

John Phillips: "She is trying to set the champion up for a crash landing. If she can find the right angle from the ring, this could be it."

Once he's laid out, Susanita slides into the ring and quickly climbs the nearest corner, moving slow but determined. The crowd rises with her, the buzz growing.

She reaches the top rope, looking down at Eric on the table below. Her chest heaves. This is a huge risk. She closes her eyes for a heartbeat, then opens them and adjusts her footing.

Mark Bravo: "If she hits La estrella negra from up there through that table, this place is going to come unglued."

She leaps, twisting in the air, going for a splash--but Eric, running purely on instinct, rolls off the table at the last possible moment.

Susanita manages to adjust just enough to catch the edge of the table with her hips, bouncing off and hitting

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the floor in a rough heap instead of driving through it. The table shudders, one leg lifting briefly, but it does not break.

John Phillips: "She crashes and burns but the table does not break! That might be the only thing keeping her in this match!"

The crowd groans at the impact. Susanita curls around her midsection, face twisted in pain. Eric, now on all fours, looks back at the table with wild eyes and then at her, realizing how close he came to losing and how lucky he got.

He drags himself up and, with considerable effort, hauls Susanita by the hair and arm back toward the table. This time, he rolls her onto the canvas inside the ring and follows her in, clearly deciding to move the action back to more familiar ground.

The table on the floor is left standing but precarious.

Mark Bravo: "Both of them are carrying a lot of damage now. Ribs, backs, legs. You can see it in the way they're moving."

Inside the ropes, Eric pulls another table from the corner and starts setting it up near the center of the ring. His hands shake slightly as he locks the legs, but he manages it, then gives it a hard slap to test the surface.

He looks over at Susanita, who is slowly getting to her knees, then to the ropes. He smirks, the old arrogance resurfacing over the pain.

John Phillips: "You can see the wheels turning in his head. He wants a statement. He wants a clip. And that might be exactly what costs him."

Eric drags Susanita onto the table in the center of the ring, laying her flat again. She barely resists, limbs heavy. He then trudges to the corner, planting one foot on the bottom buckle, then the second, then forcing himself up to the top.

He looks out at the crowd, then down at her, then at the table. The hesitation is still there, but this time ego shoves it aside.

Mark Bravo: "Oh no. He wants SD3. I can see it. If he goes for that Shooting Star DDT onto the table and he's wrong even by an inch..."

Eric turns, facing the ring, knees bent. He calls out something unintelligible to the rafters and launches himself, rotating into that familiar Shooting Star trajectory--arms reaching, body twisting, fully committing.

And at the last possible heartbeat, Susanita rolls off the table and drops to the canvas, collapsing in a ball beside it.

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Eric's eyes widen mid-rotation. There is nothing beneath him but empty space and wood.

He slams through the table back-first, the force of his own momentum driving his body straight through it. The table explodes into splinters, legs snapping out, debris flying.

DING DING DING

John Phillips: "He put himself through the table! Eric Dane Jr just drove his own body through that table!"

Mark Bravo: "He bet everything on the highlight reel and lost, John! She moved, he chose the dive, and he turned himself into his own worst enemy!"

The referee immediately jumps in, waving his arms and shouting toward ringside. He kneels beside Eric, who lies amidst the wreckage, barely moving, his back arched in agony.

Susanita, still on her side, clutches her ribs, eyes wide as she realizes what just happened.

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen... as a result of Eric Dane Jr putting himself through the table... the winner of this match... SUSANITA YBANEZ!"

The PNC Arena erupts. A roar surges over the broken table in the center of the ring as Susanita slowly pushes herself up to her knees, then to her feet.

John Phillips: "By the rules of a Tables Match, it does not matter who sets it up or who throws the strike. If you go through the table, you lose. The WrestleZone Champion took the risk, pulled the trigger, and paid the price."

Mark Bravo: "And Susanita Ybanez, the kid from Lambaré, just watched the champion beat himself. But make no mistake, she survived everything he threw at her and had the presence of mind to get out of the way when it mattered most."

Medics slide into the ring to check on Eric, who is groaning, one arm draped over his midsection. The referee keeps them between him and the still-standing tables in the corners, just in case.

Susanita limps to one corner, using the ropes for support. The referee takes her wrist and raises her hand, and the crowd responds with another huge cheer. She winces but lets the moment wash over her, eyes shining with the realization of what she has just pulled off.

John Phillips: "On the final stop before Black Horizon, Susanita Ybanez just scored the biggest win of her UTA career, putting the WrestleZone Champion in the rearview via the WHEEL OF CHANCE."

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Mark Bravo: "You want chaos? You want something you have never seen before? The wheel gave us exactly that. The champ, splintered. Susanita, standing. And every eye in that locker room now has to look at her a little differently heading into Philly."

The camera closes on the image of Susanita, battered but victorious, raising her arm again as broken table pieces surround Eric Dane Jr at her feet. The roar of the Raleigh crowd carries us out of the scene.

Spin the Wheel #2

The camera cuts backstage again, right back to the shrine of insanity: the towering WHEEL OF CHANCE and the bingo-style tumbler full of names. Chance Von Crank stands in front of both, still buzzing from what he just watched, a crooked grin on his face as he listens to the distant roar of the crowd after the first match.

Chance Von Crank: "Now *that* is how you start a party. One spin. One crash. One champion picking splinters out his backside. Raleigh, y'all are welcome."

He pats the side of the wheel affectionately, as if it's a living thing. Before he can say more, a low, unsettling chuckle seeps into the frame from off-screen. The camera pans just a bit as Maxx Mayhem steps into view, shoulders shaking with amusement, eyes bright with that familiar brand of barely-contained violence.

Maxx Mayhem: "Chaos, brother..."

He looks up at the wheel like it's a religious icon, tracing an invisible line over one of the wedges with his eyes.

Maxx Mayhem: "Now *that*... that first match? That was art. Pure, unfiltered, spine-snappin' artwork. This wheel..."

He taps the wooden rim with two fingers, then presses his palm flat against it.

Maxx Mayhem: "This is pure, unadulterated chaos. This is exactly what the UTA needed."

Chance nods along, delighted, eyes twinkling at a kindred spirit appreciating his favorite toy.

Chance Von Crank: "You know what, big man? I knew you had taste. If you love chaos so much..."

He gives Maxx an exaggerated once-over, then jerks a thumb at the wheel.

Chance Von Crank: "...why don't you go ahead and spin it for the next match stipulation?"

Maxx's face splits into a wide, demented grin. He lets out a low cackle that climbs in pitch as he steps closer to the wheel, flexing his fingers like he's about to put hands on something sacred.

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Maxx Mayhem: "You're gonna let *me* spin it?"

He looks straight into the camera, eyes wild.

Maxx Mayhem: "Oh, we are so *cooked* tonight."

Chance spreads his arms, inviting the chaos.

Chance Von Crank: "Have at it, darlin'. Show Raleigh what fate looks like when Mayhem puts his hands on it."

Maxx grabs the side of the wheel, takes a breath like he's savoring the moment, then yanks it into motion with a big, theatrical spin. The wedges blur together, the familiar rhythmic clicking echoing down the hallway as the pointer bounces over each divider.

Click. Click. Click. Slower. Slower. The wheel crawls to a stop on a wedge that pops clear on the camera: "TUXEDO MATCH."

Mark Bravo (voiceover from commentary): "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

John Phillips (voiceover): "We just went from tables and splinters to... this."

Back at the wheel, Maxx leans in, reading the wedge, then throws his head back and laughs. Loud. Unhinged.

Maxx Mayhem: "Tuxedo Match."

He practically spits the words out, delighted.

Maxx Mayhem: "Chaos."

He barks out another jagged laugh, eyes glittering as he imagines the possibilities.

Maxx Mayhem: "You know what you can do with a tuxedo, Chance? You can class somebody up, dress 'em like a penguin, make 'em feel real important... and then you can rip it all off piece by piece in front of the world."

He runs a hand over his beard, almost salivating at the thought.

Maxx Mayhem: "Who's gonna be in it, huh? Who we gonna humiliate tonight?"

Chance gestures grandly toward the tumbler, that ever-present grin creeping back.

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Chance Von Crank: "Good question. Let's find out."

He steps to the bingo-style roller and gives it a sharp spin. The plastic balls clatter around inside, white blurs bouncing off each other until he stops the handle and pops open the hatch.

Chance reaches in, rummages around with exaggerated care, then plucks out a ball and holds it up to his face, squinting for show.

Chance Von Crank: "First person in the Tuxedo Match is gonna be..."

He looks at the ball. His mouth curls into a slow, wicked smile. He turns his head slightly toward Maxx.

Chance Von Crank: "...why, it is *you*."

He flips the ball around to the camera.

Chance Von Crank: "Maxx Mayhem is the first person in the Tuxedo Match."

Maxx's laughter stops on a dime. His eyebrows shoot up. He looks from the ball to Chance, then down at his own gear.

Maxx Mayhem: "I do not even own a tuxedo, gov."

Chance can barely contain himself.

Chance Von Crank: "I'm sure the UTA will be more than happy to provide one. Maybe something with tails. Maybe somethin' with a little bow tie. Real classy. Real tear-away."

Maxx lets the idea settle in, then the grin returns, darker this time.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're gonna put this face in a tuxedo and then tell somebody to try and strip it off? Oh, that's *cruel*. I like it."

He leans in closer to Chance, eyes narrowed in anticipation.

Maxx Mayhem: "So who's the lucky soul that's gonna dance with me?"

Chance just laughs and reaches back into the tumbler, shaking the remaining balls around with a rattling clack. He pulls another one free, rolls it between his fingers, and then checks the name.

His eyebrows jump, impressed.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh, that is lovely."

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He looks at the camera, then at Maxx, milking the beat of suspense.

Chance Von Crank: "Your opponent..."

He lifts the ball up between them.

Chance Von Crank: "...Rosa Delgado. From The Empire."

Maxx's tongue runs over his teeth as he processes it. A slow, pleased smile spreads across his face.

Maxx Mayhem: "Rosa Delgado in a tuxedo match with me."

He chuckles, low and dangerous.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why ain't that just lovely."

He turns his head slightly toward the imaginary direction of the women's locker room, as if she can hear him through the walls.

Maxx Mayhem: "Rosa, Empire, whoever wants to hold your little jacket for you... you just got invited to the strangest dance of the night."

Maxx looks back to Chance, cackling again.

Maxx Mayhem: "Guess I need to go get me a tuxedo on."

He claps Chance on the shoulder a little too hard, then strides out of frame, still laughing to himself at the thought of the chaos to come. Chance watches him go, then turns back to the wheel with a satisfied nod as the camera slowly pulls out on the image of the WHEEL OF CHANCE and the rattling tumbler, both still hungry for more names.

Ringside

The camera fades back to ringside, the roar of the Raleigh crowd still humming after the chaos we've already seen. Broken table debris is gone, but the energy it left behind hangs like static in the air.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to East Coast Invasion here at the PNC Arena in Raleigh, North Carolina. If you're just joining us, you missed one of the wildest opening matches we've seen in a long, long time. The WHEEL OF CHANCE picked a Tables Match... and then the WrestleZone Champion, Eric Dane Jr, put *himself* through a table."

Mark Bravo: "He didn't just lose, John, he turned himself into modern art. Shooting Star, empty table,

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straight through the wood. Susanita Ybanez didn't just survive, she watched the champ blow himself up and walked out of here with the biggest win of her UTA career."

John Phillips: "That is a statement heading into Black Horizon. The WrestleZone Champion lying in splinters on the very last stop before Philadelphia, and Susanita Ybanez standing tall because she had the awareness to move when it mattered most. That's the kind of moment that changes how the entire locker room looks at you."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the point of tonight, right? You sign up for a WHEEL OF CHANCE show, you sign up for complete loss of control. Eric rolled the dice on a highlight, and the wheel made sure he paid for it."

The camera cuts briefly to a replay: Eric crashing through the table in slow motion, the crowd exploding, Susanita rolling away in shock. Back at the desk, both commentators look amped and slightly incredulous.

John Phillips: "And if you thought that was unpredictable, take a look at what's next. We head backstage, Maxx Mayhem walks up to Chance Von Crank, tells him he loves chaos, spins that wheel himself... and what does the WHEEL OF CHANCE land on?"

A graphic appears on the screen: "UP NEXT: TUXEDO MATCH - MAXX MAYHEM VS ROSA DELGADO." A little bow tie icon spins in the corner.

Mark Bravo: "A Tuxedo Match. You heard that right. In Raleigh, on the final stop before Black Horizon, Maxx Mayhem is about to be stuffed into a tux and thrown into a match where the whole idea is to strip your opponent out of theirs until they are not exactly ring-ready anymore."

John Phillips: "The WHEEL OF CHANCE picked the stipulation. Then Chance Von Crank reaches into that tumbler, pulls a name, and the first person he draws for this Tuxedo Match is... Maxx himself. And if that weren't enough, name number two is Rosa Delgado of The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "You want whiplash? We just went from splintered tables and near-broken ribs to Maxx Mayhem and Rosa Delgado trying to tear each other out of tuxedos. That is the kind of tonal swerve only this wheel can give you."

John Phillips: "And do not let the comedy of the stipulation fool you. For Maxx, this is another excuse to hurt somebody and humiliate them. For Rosa Delgado, this is a chance to represent The Empire on a night where everyone is watching, and embarrassment is just as dangerous as any pinfall."

Mark Bravo: "Plus, you dress a monster like Maxx Mayhem up in a tuxedo and tell somebody to try to peel it off? That is a horror movie waiting to happen. Rosa's gutsy, she's ruthless when she needs to be, but she is stepping into a very weird kind of storm tonight."

John Phillips: "You never know what is going to happen when the WHEEL OF CHANCE is involved, and we are proving that in real time tonight. First match, the champion sacrifices himself to the tables. Next up, a

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Tuxedo Match between Maxx Mayhem and Rosa Delgado that nobody in this building could have predicted an hour ago."

Mark Bravo: "Chaos is running the show, John. Chance Von Crank is smiling, the wheel is spinning, and Raleigh, North Carolina is about to watch Maxx Mayhem try to redefine what 'formal wear' means in the United Toughness Alliance."

The camera pulls back for a wide shot of the buzzing crowd as the graphic for the upcoming Tuxedo Match lingers on-screen, setting the stage for the next bizarre turn of the night.

No Doubt

Backstage, the UTA logo glows on a monitor behind Melissa Cartwright as she stands in a crowded hallway, microphone in hand. Medical staff wheel a crate of supplies past, and just off her shoulder, Eric Dane Jr leans against a road case, one arm wrapped around his ribs, his face still flushed and marked from his Tables Match earlier in the night.

Melissa Cartwright: "Eric, earlier tonight the WHEEL OF CHANCE put you in a Tables Match with Susanita Ybanez, and it ended with you driving yourself through a table. How does a loss like that affect you heading into Black Horizon?"

Eric stares off for a second, jaw working, clearly not thrilled to even be having this conversation on camera. He adjusts the strap of an ice pack taped around his midsection, then looks at Melissa with a tight, forced half-smile.

Eric Dane Jr: "You know, Melissa, it is really somethin' when the first question anybody has for you isn't about being the WrestleZone Champion, it's about one bad landing on a bad night."

He shakes his head, eyes flicking briefly toward the camera before he continues.

Eric Dane Jr: "I am not gonna stand here and pretend that didn't hurt. You go full rotation into a table and it feels like your lungs are trying to escape your body. My back hurts, my ribs hurt, my pride hurts. All of it."

He straightens a little, pushing off the road case, stubbornness overriding the pain for a moment.

Eric Dane Jr: "But let's get something straight. That was not Susanita Ybanez suddenly figuring me out. That was not some big moral victory where the whole world finally sees 'who I really am.' I made a call. I saw the opening, I wanted the exclamation point, and I misjudged it by about half a second. She moved. I crashed. That is the rule in a Tables Match. You go through it, you lose."

He points to his own chest with two fingers, owning it even as his tone gets sharper.

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Eric Dane Jr: "That is on me. Nobody else. Not the wheel, not the referee, not Black Horizon, not my last name. Me."

Melissa nods, clearly surprised by the small moment of accountability.

Melissa Cartwright: "So if it is on you, does that change anything about your mindset going into Black Horizon? Does this plant any doubt, physically or mentally, about what you can do on that stage?"

Eric laughs once, short and humorless, then winces as the movement jars his ribs.

Eric Dane Jr: "You really wanna ask the Dane kid about doubt on the last stop before the big show."

He paces a small circle, collecting his thoughts, then comes back into frame, eyes a little harder now.

Eric Dane Jr: "Look, Black Horizon was never gonna be easy. You do not walk into a show like that at one hundred percent, no matter what your name is. Everybody is nursing something. Everybody is taped up somewhere the camera cannot see. So, yeah, now I am going into Philly with sore ribs and a back that feels like it got hit by a bus. That is real."

He holds up a hand before she can follow up.

Eric Dane Jr: "But doubt? No. What it does is sharpen things. Tonight was a reminder that this is not a video package, it is not a highlight reel you can just rewind and fix. I tried to make a moment out of Susanita and the only moment I made was me putting myself through a table on national television."

He leans in a bit, talking more directly to the camera now.

Eric Dane Jr: "So at Black Horizon, I am not walking in there trying to impress anybody. I am not out to prove to the internet that I can spin in the air more times than the next guy. I am walking in there to win. Period. If that means leaving the pretty stuff at home for one night and grinding somebody into the mat with the basics, then that is what I will do."

Melissa studies him for a moment, then presses on.

Melissa Cartwright: "And what about Susanita? You mentioned this loss being on you, but she still walks out with the win over the WrestleZone Champion. Do you feel like she earned a little more of your respect tonight?"

Eric exhales through his nose, a reluctant smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

Eric Dane Jr: "Look... I am not blind. She is tough. She took a lot of shots tonight and kept coming. She did not get scared by the tables, she did not back down from the moment. The wheel pulled her name right next to mine, and she did not blink."

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He nods once, grudging but honest.

Eric Dane Jr: "So yeah, she earned something. She earned being on that replay loop, and she earned every conversation people are gonna have about her on the way to Philly."

The nod turns into a smirk, the edge creeping back into his voice.

Eric Dane Jr: "But do not get it twisted. One night of the WHEEL OF CHANCE does not rewrite the whole story. I am still the WrestleZone Champion. I am still walking into Black Horizon with that title. And if Susanita ever finds herself across from me again without tables involved, she is gonna find out that I do not make the same mistake twice."

Melissa turns slightly back toward the camera as Eric adjusts the ice pack and starts to step out of frame.

Melissa Cartwright: "So a painful reminder, but a focused one. Eric Dane Jr, sore, maybe bruised, but more locked in than ever heading into Black Horizon."

Eric pauses at the edge of the shot, looking back over his shoulder.

Eric Dane Jr: "Black Horizon is where I prove I am more than my last name, Melissa. Tonight hurt... but it just made sure I do not forget that."

He limps down the hallway, trainers falling in step beside him as Melissa watches him go, the WHEEL OF CHANCE logo flickering faintly on the monitor behind her as the scene fades out.

Maxx Mayhem vs. Rosa Delgado

The camera swings back to ringside as the graphic for the Tuxedo Match fades off the screen. The Raleigh crowd is buzzing, half laughing, half unsure what to expect after the chaos of the opening bout.

John Phillips: "We are back at the PNC Arena, and just when you thought the WHEEL OF CHANCE couldn't get any stranger, it drops this on us. A Tuxedo Match. Maxx Mayhem versus Rosa Delgado, representing The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "Maxx Mayhem, who in about a week is going to try to make Chris Ross say 'I Quit' at Black Horizon... tonight he's got to worry about cufflinks and cummerbunds. You could not make this up if you tried."

John Phillips: "And on the other side of the ring, you have Rosa Delgado. A blue-collar technician, arm-hunter, precise, stubborn. She's The Empire's workhorse in a lot of ways. And tonight, instead of grinding down a limb, she's been thrown into a match where the goal is to literally strip your opponent out of their tuxedo."

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Mark Bravo: "We saw her face when that announcement came up backstage. That was not 'this is funny.' That was 'all right, fine, give me the rules and I'll still figure out how to beat this psycho.'"

John Phillips: "The rules, as laid out by the referee earlier tonight: both competitors start in full tuxedo. Jacket, shirt, pants, bow tie. The first person to have their tuxedo stripped to the point they are down to their regular ring gear underneath is declared the loser."

Mark Bravo: "No pinfalls, no submissions, just wardrobe malfunctions on purpose. And with Maxx Mayhem involved, I am terrified of what 'formal wear' looks like after five minutes."

"Holiday" by Green Day blasts through the arena and the crowd reacts with a mix of boos and excited noise. The curtain gets shoved aside and Maxx Mayhem strides onto the stage... in a tuxedo that looks like it lost the fight before he even came through the curtain.

It is technically a black tux, but the jacket sleeves are ripped clean off at the shoulders, tattoos on full display. The shirt is buttoned wrong, the bow tie hanging loose and crooked, and the pants are just a bit too short, showing off his boots. There is a faint red wine stain on one lapel that absolutely was not there when UTA had it dry-cleaned.

Mark Bravo: "Oh my... that is... I don't know what that is."

John Phillips: "That is Maxx Mayhem in a company-issued tuxedo, and it already looks like it got into a bar fight in catering."

Maxx throws his arms wide, soaking in the reaction, then points down at himself, shouting at the camera.

Maxx Mayhem: "Look at this, gov! I'm classy now!"

He stalks down the ramp, half cackling, half barking at fans in the front row. At one point he stops to lean over the barricade and lick the lens of a handheld camera, leaving a smear before flipping off the operator and stomping on.

John Phillips: "Remember, this is the same man who is scheduled for an I Quit Match with Chris Ross at Black Horizon. Tonight it is tuxedo fabric. In Philly, it is going to be flesh and steel."

Mark Bravo: "If he survives the tailoring tonight."

Maxx slides under the bottom rope, pops up, and does a mocking bow in the center of the ring, one hand flourishing the ripped jacket like he is hosting a bad awards show. He yanks at his bow tie, teasing like he might take it off already, then stops and wags a finger toward the hard cam, refusing to give Rosa even that early advantage.

"Legendary" by Halestorm hits next, the first pulse of guitars sending a fresh jolt through the crowd. The

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lights shift to a cool white-and-blue scheme as Rosa Delgado steps onto the stage.

Her tuxedo is crisp and clean, tailored to fit, black with a subtle silver pinstripe. The jacket is sharp, the white shirt perfectly pressed, bow tie straight. Her dark hair is pulled back, and under all that polish, there is a look in her eyes that says she is treating this as a fight first, costume second.

John Phillips: "And there is Rosa Delgado, representing The Empire tonight. You can see the difference in attitude already. The tux is clean, it's proper, it's professional. Just like her approach to the ring."

Mark Bravo: "That is a woman who starts her shift early, grinds you down, isolates the arm, and doesn't stop until you tap or fall over. Now you're telling her the win condition is 'take this all off your opponent.' That is not her usual playbook."

Rosa makes her way down the ramp with measured steps, eyes never leaving Maxx in the ring. She doesn't play to the crowd beyond a quick nod here and there, The Empire's aura of cold control hanging around her like a second jacket.

At ringside, she pauses, looks down at her own sleeves, flexes her left hand inside the cuff as if reminding herself that beneath the fabric, the armbar is still in there somewhere. Then she climbs the steps, walks down the apron, and steps cleanly between the ropes.

Maxx immediately spreads his arms, doing a slow turn as if on a runway, grinning wide.

Maxx Mayhem: "Whaddaya think, Rosa? You gonna buy me dinner before you tear this off, or what?"

Rosa just stares at him, unfazed. She reaches up, straightens her own bow tie without breaking eye contact.

Rosa Delgado: "I am just here to work, cabrón."

The referee steps between them, holding his hands out as he recites the rules one more time, pointing at the tuxedos.

Referee: "You both start in the tux. First one stripped out of jacket and pants, down to their regular ring gear, loses the match. No pinfalls, no submissions. Keep it off the face, keep it mostly clean, and listen to my instructions. Understood?"

Rosa nods once. Maxx gives a half-hearted salute that is almost insulting, then leans against the ropes like he is lounging at a bar.

The referee backs off and signals.

DING DING DING

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John Phillips: "And the Tuxedo Match is underway."

They start by circling, the visual alone enough to get a reaction from the crowd: Maxx Mayhem in badly abused formal wear, Rosa Delgado looking like she could step into a boardroom or a main event.

Maxx lunges first, making a big exaggerated grab for her lapels. Rosa swats his hands away and snaps a quick inside leg kick to his thigh, just enough to sting. He laughs, more amused than hurt, and reaches again, trying to snag the jacket shoulders.

This time, Rosa ducks under, slides to his side, and cinches a standing hammerlock on his left arm, fabric twisting around his shoulder as she wrenches it up.

John Phillips: "There it is. Even in a match like this, Rosa goes straight for that left arm."

Mark Bravo: "You can put a bow tie on a fight, John, but you cannot take the grind out of Rosa Delgado. She finds the arm and she lives there."

Maxx winces, face contorting, then makes a great show of overcompensating, stomping around in a circle as Rosa tightens the hold. She uses his own jacket against him, gripping the fabric at the elbow to crank the hammerlock even tighter.

Rosa Delgado: "You wanted chaos. How about discomfort?"

Maxx, stuck, flails his free hand toward the ropes and misses. He tries to throw a blind elbow back and she simply ducks her head to the side, staying snug on the hold.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're gonna wrinkle it, gov!"

He finally charges backward, driving Rosa into the corner turnbuckles to force the break. The referee slides in between them, counting. Rosa releases at four and steps away clean, smoothing her jacket front with one hand as if she just clocked out of a shift instead of avoiding whiplash.

John Phillips: "And that's the clash of styles. Maxx wants chaos, wants a brawl, wants to turn this into a joke and a car crash at the same time. Rosa wants to break you down, piece by piece."

Maxx comes out of the corner rubbing his shoulder, faking a pout as he looks down at the now-wrinkled sleeve.

Maxx Mayhem: "You ruined the rental, Rosa. Now I gotta bill The Empire."

He suddenly lunges low, tackling her around the waist and driving them both down to the mat. The crowd pops at the sudden burst of aggression. On the canvas, Maxx scrambles up to a seated position and starts yanking on her jacket, trying to peel it off one arm at a time.

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Rosa plants her boots, bridges up, and twists. She traps his left wrist again, threading her legs for a short armbar tease, using his own tuxedo sleeve as leverage. Maxx yelps, torn between protecting his arm and protecting the jacket.

Mark Bravo: "This is amazing. He's trying to strip her, and she's using the fabric as a submission handle. Only in the UTA, John."

Rosa does not fully extend the armbar, mindful of the stipulation, but she uses the threat to force him to roll away from her and release the grip on her jacket. She lets go at the same time, both popping back up to a crouch.

John Phillips: "Rosa refusing to give up position just to chase a quick sleeve. She's staying true to who she is, even in this environment."

Maxx gets to his feet, shaking out his left arm again, irritation starting to creep through the showmanship.

Maxx Mayhem: "You wanna twist my arm all night, or you wanna undress me for these people?"

Rosa steps in close instead of backing off, surprising him. She grabs his bow tie with one hand and his jacket lapel with the other, yanking him down into a sharp European uppercut that snaps his head back.

Rosa Delgado: "Why not both?"

The crowd reacts loudly as Maxx staggers. Rosa doesn't waste the moment. She spins behind him, grabs the bottom of his sleeveless jacket, and in one sharp motion yanks it up over his head like a hockey fight jersey.

Maxx flails, blinded for a second as the jacket catches around his face and arms.

John Phillips: "Rosa with the first big wardrobe removal of the match! She's got that tux jacket halfway off already!"

He thrashes, trying to free himself, and Rosa uses the bundled fabric to spin him around into a rolling elbow, cracking him across the jaw through the half-peeled tux. The shot sends him sprawling to the mat, and the jacket finally comes free in her hands.

The crowd pops huge as she holds it up for a moment, then tosses it toward the timekeeper's area.

Mark Bravo: "There goes the jacket! Maxx Mayhem is down to dress shirt and pants, and he does not look amused anymore."

Rosa does not pose long. She drops down on him, going right back to the left arm, threading her legs for a grounded hammerlock while the crowd keeps buzzing.

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John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado representing The Empire with composure and control in a match that was supposed to be nothing but chaos. But Maxx Mayhem is never more dangerous than when he gets embarrassed."

On the mat, Maxx grimaces as she grinds his arm up behind his back again. The ripped tux jacket is gone, but the pain is very real. He kicks his boots against the canvas, looking for an escape, face contorted between fury and dark amusement as the Raleigh crowd chants along.

The camera closes in on their struggle, fabric stretched tight, arm torqued, tuxedo rules hanging over something that suddenly feels a lot more like a fight than a joke...

Maxx claws his way toward the ropes, face twisted as Rosa cranks the hammerlock tighter, using the fabric of his dress shirt to pull the arm higher than any tailor intended. The crowd leans in, a mix of laughter and winces.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado treating that left arm like it is any other night. Tuxedo or not, she's trying to take a limb home with her."

Mark Bravo: "He's not gonna be able to sign the tux rental paperwork after this if she keeps that up."

Maxx finally manages to hook a boot on the bottom rope. The referee steps in, calling for the break. Rosa releases clean at four, rolling backward to her feet, while Maxx slumps against the ropes, clutching his shoulder and glaring at her.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're not supposed to *hurt* me in the fancy suit, gov!"

Rosa just stares, expression flat, then gestures with a small flick of her fingers for him to get back up and try again.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado is not here for the comedy. She is here to represent The Empire and win a match, no matter how ridiculous the packaging is."

Maxx pulls himself up, shaking out the arm. The grin creeps back in, meaner now. He saunters to the center of the ring, arms spread wide as if inviting a collar-and-elbow tie-up.

Maxx Mayhem: "C'mon then. Let's dance proper."

Rosa moves in cautiously. As soon as her hands touch his shoulders, Maxx drops low and rips at the buttons of her jacket, trying to tear it open. The crowd gasps as fabric pops.

He manages to yank the jacket open down the front, tugging one sleeve halfway off her right arm before she reacts. Rosa responds with a sharp knee to the gut and a stiff forearm across the back, forcing him to let go.

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Mark Bravo: "There he is. That's the Maxx Mayhem we know. Smile on his face, hands full of somebody else's clothes."

Rosa shrugs her jacket fully off herself before he can grab it again, flinging it over the top rope and out of play, choosing mobility over modesty. Underneath, she's in her usual ring top, eyes locked back on him.

John Phillips: "Smart move by Rosa. If he's going after the jacket, make the decision yourself and get rid of it before he can get momentum off it."

Maxx claps mockingly, then charges. Rosa sidesteps and snags his left arm again, whipping him toward the ropes. On the rebound, she nails a spinning backfist right on the jaw, sending him stumbling into the corner.

She follows up with a corner shotgun dropkick, both boots slamming into his chest. Maxx crumples to a seated position in the buckles, dress shirt already coming untucked, bow tie hanging by a thread.

Mark Bravo: "She just about kicked him out of that shirt."

Rosa gets to her feet and immediately goes back to the arm, grabbing the wrist and pulling Maxx up out of the corner. She twists into a hammerlock back suplex attempt, trying to hoist him while controlling the left arm.

Maxx senses the lift coming and throws his weight backward, blocking. Instead of letting her try again, he swings an elbow back, clipping her on the temple. She stumbles away, blinking.

He seizes the opening, pouncing with a snap DDT that spikes her on the canvas. The crowd oohs as Rosa rolls onto her side, hand going to the back of her head.

John Phillips: "And there is that burst of violence. Maxx Mayhem reminding everyone that underneath the torn tux and jokes, this is the same man who is heading into an I Quit Match with Chris Ross at Black Horizon."

Maxx sits up, breathing hard, then looks down at his own shirt. He laughs, unbuttons the top couple of buttons himself, then straddles Rosa's back and starts yanking at her tux pants waistband, trying to drag them down.

Rosa plants her knees, kicks, and twists, managing to keep the pants in place. She reaches back, snags his damaged bow tie, and yanks it straight down across his throat.

Maxx coughs, gagging as the silk tightens for a moment. He releases her to rip it off his own neck, tearing the bow tie free and hurling it into the crowd.

Mark Bravo: "There goes the bow tie. You know you are in a different kind of match when strangling a guy with his tie is a defensive maneuver."

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Rosa rolls to her feet, tugging her waistband back into place, jaw set. Maxx comes at her with a wild discus elbow. She ducks under, catching his arm in mid-swing, and spins into a beautiful dragon screw that whips him down to the mat.

He clutches his knee as he lands, and Rosa is on him instantly, dropping down into a grounded position and trapping his left arm in another hammerlock while driving a knee into his back.

John Phillips: "Dragon screw into the arm again. She is dissecting him, piece by piece, even with tuxedo rules hanging over the whole thing."

Maxx grits his teeth, trying to push up, but Rosa rides the movement. She shifts her grip, using his dress shirt like a gi, and rolls them both until she ends up behind him in a seated position, her legs hooked around his waist, his left arm trapped across his own chest.

From there, she starts unbuttoning his shirt with her free hand, ripping buttons off one by one while keeping the arm pinned.

Mark Bravo: "That is just mean. She's using the hold to strip him. That is veteran-level pettiness right there."

The crowd laughs and cheers as more buttons pop. Maxx snarls, thrashing, but every time he tries to stand, she torques the arm a little higher, forcing him back down.

Finally, she yanks the shirt open completely, peels it off his shoulders and arms, and throws it aside, leaving him in his undershirt and tux pants.

John Phillips: "And there goes the shirt. Rosa Delgado has systematically taken half that tux off while still attacking the arm. Maxx Mayhem is down to pants now."

Furious, Maxx uses a burst of strength to shove Rosa backward, freeing his arm at last. He rolls out to the floor, stalking around the ringside area, slapping the apron to fire himself up while the crowd gives him a hard time.

Maxx Mayhem: "You think this is funny? You think this is all I am?"

He slides back in under the bottom rope as Rosa approaches, catching her with a low chop block to the knee. She drops hard, clutching her leg. Maxx pops up, grinning again, that mean glint back in his eye.

He drags her up by the waistband, backs her into the corner, and starts raining down short punches and shoulder thrusts. Rosa covers up as best she can. The referee warns him to stay off the face.

John Phillips: "Now the tuxedo is almost irrelevant to him. This is just Maxx Mayhem doing what he does best: turning things violent."

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He grabs a handful of her tux pants at the hip and tries to haul them down. Rosa uses the corner for leverage, driving a sharp elbow into his ear. He flinches, loosening his grip just enough for her to twist out to the side.

She snaps a rolling elbow into his jaw, sending him staggering backward toward the center of the ring, legs wobbling.

Rosa looks at the crowd, then at her own leg, testing it with a quick step. She claps her hands together, starting a rally, and the fans respond, clapping with her.

John Phillips: "There's that clap rally. She feels the finish coming."

Rosa charges and hits another rolling elbow, this time catching Maxx flush and sending him crashing down onto his back. He sprawls, dazed, arms out. She doesn't go for a cover--there is none to take. Instead, she grabs both of his pant legs at the ankles and starts dragging him toward a corner.

Maxx kicks weakly, trying to fight it, but she steps over and ties his legs briefly around the bottom rope, trapping his boots.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, this is clever. She's gonna immobilize the legs and go to work."

With his feet tangled in the bottom rope, Maxx tries to sit up. Rosa answers with a stiff kick to the chest that knocks him flat again. Then she goes to the waistband of his tux pants and starts working the button and zipper, the crowd roaring as they realize what's coming.

Maxx flails, grabbing at her wrists, but every time he reaches, she slaps his hands away and stomps his gut for good measure. The referee is right there, watching closely, but it is all legal by the bizarre rules of the match.

John Phillips: "If she gets those pants off, that's it. That's the match."

Maxx makes one last desperate move, yanking his legs free of the rope and twisting his hips. In the chaos, he accidentally helps her yank the pants down to his knees. He teeters, half-trapped in his own tuxedo.

Rosa seizes the moment, planting a boot on his thigh and yanking hard. The pants slide off in one rough pull, coming free entirely and leaving Maxx in his boots and his regular ring trunks.

DING DING DING

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen, as a result of Maxx Mayhem being stripped of his tuxedo... your winner of the Tuxedo Match... ROSA DELGADO!"

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The Raleigh crowd erupts, some cheering the victory, others laughing at the spectacle. Rosa drops the tux pants onto Maxx's chest and steps back, breathing hard but composed, adjusting her remaining gear.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado, representing The Empire, finds a way to win in a match completely outside of her usual element. She outwrestled Maxx Mayhem, outsmarted him, and used those rules against him."

Mark Bravo: "Maxx wanted chaos, he got it... and he ended up getting peeled like a cheap rental tux. But you look at the way he was throwing shots in there, the way he snapped when he felt the match slipping? Chris Ross is watching this, and he's not laughing. He's taking notes for that I Quit Match at Black Horizon."

In the ring, Maxx sits up, staring down at his discarded tux pants with a mix of humiliation and dark amusement. He smacks the mat once, then starts laughing, crazed, like he's already plotting how to turn this embarrassment into violence in Philly.

Rosa raises her hand once more, The Empire's representative standing tall as the referee holds her wrist aloft. The camera catches the image of Maxx on his knees in trunks and boots, grinning through grit while Rosa Delgado, tux jacket gone but pride intact, looks back at him without flinching.

John Phillips: "The WHEEL OF CHANCE strikes again. Eric Dane Jr drives himself through a table, Maxx Mayhem loses a Tuxedo Match, and Raleigh is finding out there is no such thing as a 'normal' night when Chance Von Crank is in the building."

The shot lingers on Maxx, still chuckling to himself as he slides out of the ring, then on Rosa, calm and resolute, before we fade away from the ring to whatever chaos the wheel has planned next.

Spin the Wheel #3

The cameras cut back backstage, and once again we find ourselves at the altar of chaos: the towering WHEEL OF CHANCE and the rattling tumbler of names. Chance Von Crank is front and center, head tilted back as he finishes chugging a bottle of PRIME, neon label catching the light.

He lowers the empty bottle, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and lets out a loud, unapologetic belch that echoes off the concrete walls.

Chance Von Crank: "'Scuse me. Had to refuel. This much entertainment don't run on air, baby."

He casually tosses the empty bottle off to the side, where it clatters across the floor out of frame. Then he turns back to the wheel, rolling his shoulders like a man warming up for one more bad idea.

Chance Von Crank: "All right, Raleigh. We've put somebody through a table, we've ruined a tux rental... let's see what kinda nonsense the universe has got for us next."

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He grabs the edge of the wheel with both hands, gives the camera a wink, and yanks it into a hard spin. The wedges blur into a kaleidoscope of colors as the familiar clicking starts up again, the pointer rattling over each divider.

Click. Click. Click. The wheel slows. The wedges begin to separate again. The pointer skips, hesitates, and then finally settles on a brightly colored slice labeled: "FIRST HUG MATCH."

Chance just stares at it for a second. Even for him, this is a lot.

Chance Von Crank: "...huh."

He leans in, squinting, then taps the wording with one finger.

Chance Von Crank: "So, it would appear, for this one... the first person to hug their opponent... wins."

He raises an eyebrow at the camera, half amused, half exhausted by his own creation.

Chance Von Crank: "Look, I told y'all at the top of the night this thing did whatever it wanted. I did not say it was always gonna be violent. Sometimes it's just weird."

He lets out a long sigh, shoulders dropping for a moment before he smirks again.

Chance Von Crank: "All right. First Hug Match it is. You two wanna win, you better get real friendly, real fast."

He steps over to the tumbler and grabs the handle, giving it a vigorous spin. The white balls clatter and bounce inside, the sound almost comically dramatic given the stipulation on the board.

When it slows, Chance stops the drum, pops open the hatch, and reaches inside with a flourish, rooting around like he's elbow-deep in destiny.

Chance Von Crank: "Let's see who's gonna get sentimental tonight."

He pulls out a ball, rolls it between his fingers, then lifts it up to read the name. A slow grin crawls across his face.

Chance Von Crank: "First competitor in the First Hug Match..."

He turns to the camera.

Chance Von Crank: "...Valentina Blaze."

The crowd reaction in the arena can almost be heard in the distance, a muffled pop as her name hits the

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screen graphic.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh, that is a good one. Valentina Blaze. Fire, attitude, not exactly Miss Cuddle."

He looks back at the tumbler and rubs his hands together, eyes glinting with mischief.

Chance Von Crank: "Now... I am gonna be honest with you. For purely professional reasons, I am kinda hopin' this next one is another lady. What's hotter than two women havin' to hug it out to win, huh?"

He winks shamelessly at the camera, then reaches back into the tumbler, digging around with exaggerated care.

He pulls out the second ball, lifts it to his face, and the grin dies on his lips, replaced by a look that is equal parts surprise and delight.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh... boy."

He bites back a laugh, then slowly turns the ball toward the camera.

Chance Von Crank: "Your second competitor in the First Hug Match..."

Chance Von Crank: "...CHRIS ROSS."

The moment hangs for a second, as if even the air is processing the combination. First Hug Match. Valentina Blaze. Chris Ross.

Chance Von Crank: "Well. That is *not* what I had on my bingo card tonight."

He chuckles, shaking his head.

Chance Von Crank: "Valentina Blaze, who would probably rather set you on fire than hug you... and Chris Ross, who might just try to suplex his way out of affection."

He slaps the side of the wheel affectionately, once more resigned to the madness.

Chance Von Crank: "First one to hug the other wins, kids. You heard the wheel. I don't make the rules..."

He pauses, then smirks.

Chance Von Crank: "All right, I *do* make the rules, but I wrote this one on a dare."

He looks dead into the camera, the grin widening.

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Chance Von Crank: "Raleigh, you wanted a weird night? You got it. First Hug Match. Valentina Blaze versus Chris Ross. Somebody's about to get real uncomfortable on national television."

The camera slowly pulls back on Chance standing between the wheel and the tumbler, still chuckling to himself, as the graphic for the upcoming First Hug Match fades in over the shot.

Let the Spotlight Rest

We open in a quiet UTA trainer's room. Not the chaotic post-show rush -- this is later in the night, when most of the bodies have cleared out and the buzz has faded to a low, distant hum.

*A TV in the corner is on mute, running a highlight package from **Survivor** and the last couple of shows. Quick cuts: big moments, big spots, big reactions...*

And then, there it is again:

- Gunnar Van Patton's fist, thrown like a missile.
- Troy Lindz taking the shot and crumpling.
- The referee's hand hitting three. The timestamp graphic in the corner reads from **weeks ago**, but the image still feels fresh.

*On the exam table sits **Troy Lindz**. No bruise now -- the jaw looks fine. The damage is older, healed on the outside. They're in partial gear: boots still on, tights, a simple black tank top instead of their usual full spectacle. Their ring jacket, all sequins and drama, hangs over the back of a nearby chair like a shed skin.*

Troy is hunched slightly forward, forearms on their thighs, fingers laced together. Their eyes keep flicking up to the TV every time that punch sneaks into the montage. It's been weeks, but production still loves that clip.

Trainer (off-camera): "You're good. Looseness in the neck's gone, reflexes are clear. Whatever you took at Survivor, you've bounced back from it physically."

Troy forces a small smile and nods.

Troy Lindz: "Physically. Yeah."

The trainer pats their shoulder and exits. The door shuts with a soft click, leaving Troy alone with the muted TV and their thoughts.

*The highlight package rolls again. There's Troy a week after Survivor -- working a match, hitting **Center Stage** a half-beat slower than usual. Another show -- a near-loss they barely pull out. Commentary captions scroll silently along the bottom: "IS TROY OFF THEIR GAME?" "SURVIVOR STILL IN THEIR HEAD?"*

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Troy exhales slowly, eyes narrowing at the words more than the punch.

Voice (soft): "You know... you can turn that off."

Troy doesn't jump. It's like they expected it. They close their eyes briefly, then look toward the doorway.

Eli Creed stands there, one hand on the frame, dressed in his usual white shirt, sleeves rolled up. Calm. Measured. The hum of the arena sits behind him like white noise.

Troy Lindz: "You ever use a door like a normal person, or do you just materialize whenever doubt shows up?"

Eli steps inside, letting the door close behind him.

Eli Creed: "If you want me gone, say the word."

Troy considers it, really considers it, then shakes their head once.

Troy Lindz: "If I wanted you gone, I wouldn't be sitting in the same room as your greatest hits reel."

They nod at the TV -- another shot of their own near-loss from last week flickers by.

Eli Creed: "How many times do you think you've watched that punch in the last three weeks?"

Troy leans back a bit, resting their hands on the table edge.

Troy Lindz: "Enough that I can feel it without seeing it."

They tap their jaw lightly.

Troy Lindz: "But the docs keep telling me I'm fine."

Eli Creed: "Physically."

He says it the same way they did a moment ago. It lands heavier.

Eli walks over to the TV, studies it for a beat, then looks back at Troy.

Eli Creed: "First week after Survivor, you were still loud. Still bright. 'It happens, baby, I'll bounce back.'"

He mimics the cadence, not mockingly, but precisely.

Eli Creed: "Second week? You hesitated. Just for a second. I saw it. They saw it."

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He gestures toward the invisible crowd.

Eli Creed: "This week? You're in here. With the jacket off. Watching it alone."

Troy's jaw tightens. They look at the jacket without meaning to.

Troy Lindz: "I can't keep pretending it didn't rattle me."

There it is: the admission. Not a big speech. Just a sentence spoken like it hurts.

Eli nods once, like he's been waiting to hear exactly that.

Eli Creed: "Good."

Troy snorts.

Troy Lindz: "You're the only one who thinks 'rattled' is good."

Eli Creed: "It means the surface cracked. And once the surface cracks, there's finally room for something real to come through."

Troy's eyes harden slightly.

Troy Lindz: "You keep saying 'real' like everything I've built is fake. My look. My entrance. The way I move. The way I live."

They gesture to themselves again -- less flamboyant, more defensive now.

Troy Lindz: "This isn't a costume I take off when I clock out. This is me."

Eli's gaze takes them in -- head to toe -- but his voice stays soft.

Eli Creed: "I never said it wasn't you. I said it isn't *all* of you."

That sits there like a loaded statement.

Troy Lindz: "And you think you're the one who's gonna dig out the rest?"

Eli Creed: "I think you're tired of carrying the show twenty-four hours a day."

He nods at the jacket again.

Eli Creed: "When's the last time you walked down a hallway and didn't feel like you had to perform just to

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prove you belong in it?"

Troy opens their mouth to fire back... and nothing comes out. A beat. Another.

Troy Lindz (quieter): "That's the deal, Eli. I stop performing, I fade into the background. I've been fighting that my whole life."

Eli doesn't smirk. He doesn't pounce. He just nods with a hint of sad understanding.

Eli Creed: "And how's that fight going... these last three weeks?"

Troy looks down at their hands. The silence answers for them.

Eli Creed: "Close your eyes."

Troy scoffs automatically.

Troy Lindz: "We did this bit already."

Eli Creed: "Last time, you did it to prove you weren't scared. This time, do it because you're tired of pretending you're not."

The line hits harder now that weeks have passed. Troy hesitates... then, slowly, closes their eyes.

The sound of the muted TV keeps flickering--bright images with no audio, just light on their eyelids.

Eli Creed (soft): "Imagine the music cuts. The pyro dies. The crowd forgets the catchphrases."

His voice is steady, guiding, almost hypnotic.

Eli Creed: "They strip your name off the poster. The hashtag stops trending. No cameras. No jacket. No spotlight."

The camera pushes in tight on Troy's face -- eyes closed, jaw clenched, breathing a little quicker.

Eli Creed: "What's left?"

A long pause. It feels like the whole arena is holding its breath, even though they're not here to see this.

Troy Lindz (barely above a whisper): "I... don't know."

The honesty hangs in the air. No bravado. No tagline. Just that.

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Eli lets it sit, then reaches over and clicks the TV off. The room falls into a deeper quiet without the flickering images.

Eli Creed: "That's what I'm offering."

Troy opens their eyes, blinking into the stillness.

Troy Lindz: "You're offering... me not knowing who I am?"

Eli's lips curl into a faint, almost kind smile.

Eli Creed: "I'm offering you the chance to find out who you are when nobody's watching. When you're not fighting to stay seen every second of every day."

He takes a step back, deliberately giving Troy space instead of closing in.

Eli Creed: "You've spent your entire career making sure the world can't look away from you. But in three seconds... Gunnar made sure *you* couldn't look away from yourself."

Troy swallows hard. The truth of that stings more than the punch ever did.

Troy Lindz: "And if I let you... 'help'..."

The word tastes strange in their mouth.

Troy Lindz: "What happens to everything I've built? Everything I am out there?"

Eli glances briefly at the jacket, then back to Troy.

Eli Creed: "Maybe it changes. Maybe it doesn't. I'm not here to erase you, Troy. I'm here to make sure the person underneath all of that"--

He nods at the gear, the persona, the invisible spotlight.

Eli Creed: "--is strong enough to survive when it flickers."

Another long beat. Troy looks at their jacket... then at the door Eli came through... then back at Eli himself.

Troy Lindz (quiet, conflicted): "I've been trying to drown this out for three weeks."

They gesture vaguely to their own head.

Troy Lindz: "The replays. The whispers. The second-guessing. And somehow, you're making it louder... and

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clearer at the same time."

Eli doesn't deny it.

Eli Creed: "That's what the bend feels like."

Troy lets that sit. Then, finally:

Troy Lindz: "If I... if I walked into one of your rooms... one of your 'sessions'..."

They can't quite look at him when they say it.

Troy Lindz: "I'd be doing it on my terms. Not because I got dropped. Not because I lost. Because I decided to."

Eli nods slowly, respectfully.

Eli Creed: "Exactly."

A beat.

Troy Lindz: "Then maybe... I'm closer to that door than I thought."

They don't smile. They don't posture. They just sit with the admission, breathing a little easier and a little heavier at the same time.

Eli steps toward the door, hand on the knob, but pauses to look back at them.

Eli Creed: "When you're ready to see who's left when the spotlight rests... you'll know where to find me."

He exits. The click of the door closing sounds louder than it should.

The camera lingers on Troy. Alone. Jacket glittering on the chair, TV dark, no noise left except their own breathing.

They glance at the door Eli left through... and for the first time, they don't look away quickly.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

"BREAK. BEND...."

Fade out before "BUILD" appears.

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Valentina Blaze vs. Chris Ross

The camera fades back to ringside, the graphic in the corner reading: "FIRST HUG MATCH - VALENTINA BLAZE vs. CHRIS ROSS." The Raleigh crowd is buzzing, half laughing, half nervous about how this is possibly going to work.

John Phillips: "We are back at East Coast Invasion: Raleigh, and I can't believe I am about to say this with a straight face, but up next... the WHEEL OF CHANCE has given us a First Hug Match. Valentina Blaze versus Chris Ross. First competitor to successfully hug the other wins the match."

Mark Bravo: "First to hug. Not pin. Not submit. Not knock the other guy out. Hug. And one of the names in this thing is Chris Ross, quite possibly the single most unhuggable human being in professional wrestling."

John Phillips: "This is a man who has built an entire legacy on street fights, curb stomps, screwdriver assaults, brutal beatings... not exactly the warm-and-fuzzy type. In just a short time, he has reminded the UTA exactly why he was blacklisted from half the wrestling world."

Mark Bravo: "And in about a week, he has to walk into Black Horizon and try to make Maxx Mayhem say 'I Quit.' That is going to be pure violence, no hugging, no comedy, just two broken monsters seeing who blinks first. But tonight, thanks to the WHEEL OF CHANCE, he has to avoid a hug from Valentina Blaze... or give one to her."

John Phillips: "And Valentina Blaze is no stranger to big fights herself. From back-alley lucha in Miami to the UTA, she's all fire and speed and fearless dives. She does not cut corners, she does not cheat, and she certainly doesn't come to the ring expecting to win with a hug. But those are the rules tonight."

The lights dim, and a burst of strobing reds and oranges flicker across the stage. "Firestarter" by The Prodigy blasts through the arena, the opening beat sending a jolt through the crowd.

Valentina Blaze explodes onto the stage, all motion and energy. She pauses at the top of the ramp, throwing up her signature gesture -- both hands raised, fingers splayed as she mouths, "Light it up!"

Pyro flares in a quick, sharp burst behind her like jets of flame, and the Raleigh crowd answers with a loud cheer.

John Phillips: "Here comes Valentina Blaze, born to Cuban immigrants, sharpened in back-alley lucha rings, and now standing under the lights of the UTA. She's used to spinning back kicks and springboard roundhouses, not... heartfelt embraces as a finish."

Mark Bravo: "If anybody can turn a hug into a weapon, though, it might be her. She's quicker than just about anyone in the division, she knows how to use angles, how to slip around people. If she treats this like a game of tag, she might be able to dart in, wrap up, and get out before Chris Ross knows what hit him."

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Valentina starts down the ramp, slapping a few outstretched hands, the "Firestarter" beat driving her steps. She moves with a combination of swagger and focus, eyes already on the ring, occasionally glancing up at the big screen where the match graphic flashes.

At ringside, she pauses, looking around at the crowd, then at the hard camera. She mouths "You wanna see this?" and gets a loud reaction in return. She hops onto the apron, grabs the top rope, and springboards gracefully over it, landing clean in the center of the ring.

She hits the ropes once, twice, letting the energy roll through her, then comes to a stop in her corner, leaning back into the pads, rolling her shoulders loose as she waits.

The lights shift abruptly to a colder tone as "Firestarter" cuts out. The arena drops into a low, ominous hum.

John Phillips: "And now the part where this stops being funny."

"Black Flame" by Bury Tomorrow hits, heavy and dark. The crowd reaction is immediate: a heavy mix of boos, some wary cheers, and a noticeable shift in atmosphere.

Chris Ross steps onto the stage, broad frame silhouetted against the screen. No extra theatrics, no pyro. Just a man in boots and gear, jaw set, eyes locked on the ring like it offended him personally.

Mark Bravo: "There he is. The Boss. The man who has never met a rule he didn't want to break and never met a body he didn't think he could hurt worse."

John Phillips: "From Harrisburg streets to Lancaster Championship Wrestling to the most violent corners of the UTA and beyond, Chris Ross has carved a path of destruction everywhere he has gone. Curb stomps, screwdriver attacks, mirror glass... this is a man who thinks a three-count doesn't mean anything if you're not leaving in an ambulance."

Mark Bravo: "And the WHEEL OF CHANCE, in all its twisted glory, has booked him in a First Hug Match. If you tried to pitch that to him on a normal night, he'd probably put you through a wall."

Ross stands at the top of the ramp for a beat, scanning the crowd with visible contempt. He glances up at the screen just in time to see the match graphic: his image opposite Valentina's, with "FIRST HUG MATCH" emblazoned over it.

His lip curls in disgust. He shakes his head slowly.

John Phillips: "You can see exactly how much respect Chris Ross has for this stipulation."

Mark Bravo: "If he had his way, this would be First Blood, Last Man Standing, Bar Fight in the Parking Lot. Instead, the rulebook says: hug or be hugged. And you know what, John? I don't think Chris Ross has hugged another human being in about ten years."

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Ross starts down the ramp, shoulders squared, walking with that heavy, deliberate stride of a man who is always half a second away from punching someone. The crowd closest to the aisle leans back a little as he passes; a couple of brave souls boo straight to his face. He doesn't even bother to acknowledge them.

At ringside, he stops, eyeing Valentina in the ring. She meets his stare, unflinching, bouncing lightly on the balls of her feet to stay loose.

Ross exhales once, then climbs the steps, each stomp echoing. He wipes his boots on the apron out of habit, then ducks between the ropes, stepping into the ring like he is crossing a line of no return.

John Phillips: "This is the man who, at Black Horizon, is going to be locked in an I Quit Match with Maxx Mayhem. No fluke finishes, no count-outs, no reprieves. One of those two has to say the words. After what we've seen from both men, that match is going to be ugly in ways we don't even want to picture."

Mark Bravo: "And imagine if you're Maxx, watching this. You're looking at Chris Ross in there, knowing what he's capable of, and you're watching him struggle with the idea of a hug. That's how far outside his comfort zone this is."

In the ring, Ross paces a slow half-circle, never taking his eyes off Valentina. She doesn't back down; she steps out of the corner, meeting him in the center distance. The size difference is obvious -- his 6'2", 255-pound frame towering over her 5'8" athletic build -- but so is the fire in her eyes.

The referee moves between them, raising a hand.

Referee: "All right, listen up. Rules are simple. First Hug Match. First competitor to secure a clear, two-arm hug around their opponent's upper body -- front or back -- wins the match. No pinfalls, no submissions, no knockouts. I want it clean, I want it obvious. When I see the hug, I call for the bell. Got it?"

Valentina nods once, lips pressed into a determined line. She glances at the crowd, who roar their encouragement, then back at Ross.

Ross stares at the referee like he just spoke a foreign language. Then he chuckles, humorless and low.

Chris Ross: "You're not serious."

The referee holds his ground.

Referee: "Those are the rules tonight."

Ross's eyes flick back to Valentina. He takes one slow step forward, muscles tense, like he's imagining about ten other ways this could go that don't involve a hug.

Valentina doesn't flinch. She raises her hands again, "Light it up!" gesture, feeding off the reaction as the

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crowd gets louder -- half chanting her name, half chanting "HUG HIM! HUG HIM!" just to see what happens.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze, passionate, fearless, not backing down for one second from a man who has turned careers into crime scenes. If she can turn her speed and creativity into openings, she might actually be able to catch him and end this with one clean embrace."

Mark Bravo: "And Chris Ross... I don't know what's more terrifying, John. The idea that he might have to hug someone to win, or the idea that he might decide he doesn't care about winning and just starts throwing suplexes and seeing how much he can get away with."

The referee checks both competitors one more time, then backs toward the timekeeper's side, hand poised to signal for the opening bell.

Valentina lowers into a ready stance, knees bent, eyes sharp. Ross rolls his shoulders back, that cold, ruthless look settling over his features as the chants swell around them.

The tension tightens like a wire -- a woman of fire and speed, a man of brutality and scars, locked in a ring where the first one to hug wins everything.

The referee raises his arm...

...and we hold on the image of Valentina Blaze staring down Chris Ross in the middle of a First Hug Match, the strangest fight of both their careers about to begin.

The referee signals for the start.

DING DING DING

Valentina immediately turns to the ropes, bouncing on her toes. She throws her arms up, "Light it up!" gesture in full, hyping the Raleigh crowd into a loud, rolling chant. She points from one side of the arena to the other, waving her arms to crank the volume even higher.

John Phillips: "And Valentina Blaze is leaning all the way into this. If the win condition is a hug, she is going to have thirty thousand people behind her when she goes for it."

Across from her, Chris Ross doesn't move. He just stands there, arms loose at his sides, watching her like he's not entirely sure if this is a joke, a trap, or both. His brow furrows, then lifts slightly in disbelief.

Mark Bravo: "Look at Ross. I have never seen that man more confused in his life. He's trying to process how you go from curb-stomping people into cars to... this."

The referee hovers nearby, eyes flicking between them, ready to pounce the second he sees a clear embrace.

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Valentina turns back to Ross, arms spread wide, palms up, almost pleading.

Valentina Blaze: "C'mon! Just let me hug you!"

The crowd roars with laughter and cheers. Ross actually cracks a tiny, incredulous smile, almost embarrassed by the entire request. He takes a half-step to the side to avoid her first playful advance, hands up like he's dodging a handshake he doesn't want.

John Phillips: "She's going right for the win condition! Two arms around the upper body, and this thing is over."

Valentina turns back to the fans, pumping her fists, clapping along, getting them even louder. A chant of "HUG! HUG! HUG!" breaks out in one section and spreads quickly.

Ross looks out at them, laughing now despite himself. He shakes his head slowly, pacing a small circle, then looks from the crowd to Valentina and back again, like he can't quite believe he's even considering this.

Mark Bravo: "You know what's killing him? It's not the hug, it's that he knows if he gets caught first, that's a loss on the record... in a hug match."

Finally, Ross exhales, throws his arms out wide, and steps forward toward the center of the ring.

Chris Ross: "All right. Fine. Let's get this over with."

The referee darts in closer, eyes glued to the space between them.

Valentina doesn't wait. The instant his arms open, she launches forward, wrapping both of hers tightly around his chest in a full, clear hug. The crowd explodes as the contact is unmistakable.

John Phillips: "She's got him! That's the hug!"

DING DING DING

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen, the winner of the First Hug Match... VALENTINA BLAZE!"

Ross's eyes go wide as the bell rings. Realization hits him all at once. She got there first. He looks down at her arms still locked around him, then up at the referee, incredulous.

Chris Ross: "You're kidding me."

Valentina quickly releases him and hops back a step, hands up, almost sheepish as she backs into the corner -- fully aware that she just out-hugged one of the most dangerous men in the business and that there might be a price for it.

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Mark Bravo: "She did it clean, John! No tricks, no traps, just an honest-to-goodness hug right in the middle of the ring. Chris Ross just lost a First Hug Match."

Ross stands there a moment, jaw working, breathing steady. The crowd buzzes, some chanting "YOU GOT HUGGED!" just to twist the knife. He points at Valentina, wagging a finger with exaggerated sternness, like he's scolding a kid who got one over on him.

John Phillips: "Uh oh. That look usually means something very bad is about to happen."

But instead of exploding, Ross steps forward slowly, nodding once. He extends his arms again, this time more deliberately.

Valentina hesitates, unsure, then moves in cautiously. Ross wraps his arms around her in a firm, surprisingly controlled hug. The crowd erupts again, louder this time, shocked at the display.

Mark Bravo: "What universe are we in? Chris Ross voluntarily hugging someone after a loss?"

They break the hug, and Ross takes Valentina's wrist, lifting her arm high in the air for everyone to see. She looks a little stunned, but a grin breaks out on her face as the fans cheer.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross, being a good sport tonight. You do not hear that every day."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, enjoy this while you can, folks. I can just about guarantee you this will *not* be the version of Chris Ross that shows up at Black Horizon when he's got Maxx Mayhem in an I Quit Match. No hugs in Philly. Just pain."

Ross releases her arm, gives her a short nod of respect, then turns and steps through the ropes, heading up the ramp with that same heavy, dangerous stride -- the brief glimpse of softness already fading from his face.

In the ring, Valentina Blaze soaks in the moment, "Light it up!" gesture one more time to a roaring Raleigh crowd, the strangest victory of her career now in the books as the WHEEL OF CHANCE continues to warp the night.

Spin the Wheel #4

We cut backstage once more to the ever-spinning heart of tonight's madness: the WHEEL OF CHANCE and the rattling tumbler of names. Chance Von Crank is back in frame, one hand resting on the wheel like it's an old friend he's already gotten into too much trouble with.

Chance Von Crank: "Raleigh, y'all holdin' up out there? We've had tables, tuxedos, hugs... I dunno about you, but I'm gettin' a little thirsty."

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He gives the camera a conspiratorial grin, then slaps the rim of the wheel.

Chance Von Crank: "Let's see what else this beautiful mistake has got in it tonight."

He hauls the wheel into another big spin. The wedges blur, pointer clacking as it races around and around. The sound echoes down the hallway -- click-click-click -- before it starts to slow. The colors separate, the pointer bounces... and finally lands on a wedge labeled in bold letters:

"ALL BEERS COUNT MATCH."

Chance leans in, then bursts into laughter.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh, now *this* is my kind of stipulation."

He turns toward the camera, eyes bright.

Chance Von Crank: "For those of y'all playin' along at home, an All Beers Count Match means the two competitors start out by downin' a nice cold one, and they gotta keep drinkin' throughout the match. Beers at ringside, beers on the apron, beers in the corners... you wanna win, you better be able to fight *and* drink without fallin' on your face."

He pats his own chest proudly.

Chance Von Crank: "So basically, it's my version of cardio."

Chance steps to the tumbler and gives it a hard spin. The plastic balls rattle around inside, white blur bouncing against the glass. He stops it with a flourish, pops open the hatch, and fishes around for the first name.

Chance Von Crank: "Let's see who's takin' this little beer run with us."

He pulls a ball out, rolls it in his palm, then looks up with a satisfied grin.

Chance Von Crank: "First competitor in the All Beers Count Match... Gunnar Van Patton."

There's a distant pop from the arena as the lower-third graphic flashes Gunnar's name on-screen.

Chance Von Crank: "Big ol' Gunnar, tough as leather, hits like a truck. I have seen that man throw hands and I have seen that man throw back a cold one. This is gonna be interestin'."

He reaches back into the tumbler without wasting time, stirring the remaining balls around.

Chance Von Crank: "And his dance partner tonight..."

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He pulls another ball, flicks a thumb over the number, and starts chuckling even before he says it.

Chance Von Crank: "B. R. Ellis."

He points dead at the camera, delighted.

Chance Von Crank: "Oh, that's perfect. Gunnar Van Patton and B. R. Ellis in an All Beers Count Match. Punches, power, and pilsners, baby."

Chance looks back at the wheel, then at the camera again. You can almost see the idea form in real time.

Chance Von Crank: "You know what..."

He taps a finger thoughtfully against his chin, then shrugs in that shameless CVC way.

Chance Von Crank: "Ol' CVC could use a drink."

He thumbs toward the arena, smirk widening.

Chance Von Crank: "Tell you what. I'm not just bookin' this thing... I'm gonna ref it. That's right. Special guest referee, Chance Von Crank, right in the middle of Gunnar Van Patton and B. R. Ellis in an All Beers Count Match."

He spreads his arms wide, like he's blessing the madness.

Chance Von Crank: "I'll make sure the beers are cold, the shots are stiff, and every last sip counts. Raleigh, get ready. We're about to find out who can hold their liquor and their balance at the same time."

The camera zooms out slowly: the WHEEL OF CHANCE behind him, the tumbler of names at his side, and Chance Von Crank already picturing himself with a referee shirt and a beer in hand as the scene fades.

Unpleasant

Backstage, the glow of a monitor flickers against cold concrete. On the screen, Chance Von Crank's voice echoes: "All Beers Count Match: Gunnar Van Patton vs. B.R. Ellis -- with CVC as special referee." The crowd's roar bleeds faintly through the corridor, a reminder of the circus outside.

Gunnar Van Patton stands rigid before the monitor, arms folded, jaw locked. His single exposed left eye doesn't waver as his name flashes in bold letters over frosty beer graphics. The black leather patch conceals the other, making his stare all the more severe.

At his side, Avril Selene Kinkade leans against a road case, posture immaculate, gaze split between Gunnar

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and the screen. Her expression is cool, aristocratic, every word sharpened to command attention.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Sergeant, I must impress upon you the gravity of this stipulation. Alcohol has never been your ally. When you drink, you do not become the disciplined soldier who earned the Medal of Honour -- you become volatile, reckless, and dangerously self-destructive. And every reckless swing, every needless injury, leaves me buried beneath mountains of paperwork, drafting appeals to keep you from suspension or worse. I am not inclined to spend my nights salvaging your reputation from the wreckage of a barroom parody."

Gunnar's jaw tightens, his left eye narrowing as the monitor shifts to clinking bottles and CVC's frozen grin.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Save it. Ah know what yer gonna say."

Avril steps forward, voice precise, elegant, cutting through the noise.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "You are not a prop in Chance Von Crank's tawdry spectacle. You are a decorated man, a soldier, a destroyer of reputations. To reduce yourself to a stumbling drunkard would be beneath you, Sergeant. Let them have their cans and their laughter. You must remind them why your name is spoken with reverence -- not pity. And if I may be perfectly candid, that is the most charitable way I can phrase it."

Gunnar exhales a humorless puff of air, turning fully to her, shoulders squared, his single eye hard and unflinching.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Stop beatin' 'round the bush. Ah'm an asshole when Ah drink. Ain't worth two cents if Ah start playin' clown for their laughs."

Avril's gaze remains steady, her tone softening only enough to sharpen the sting.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Precisely. You are the man who folded Troy Lindz in half with a single punch. You are the one they whisper about when they speak of true danger in this company. Do not let tonight be remembered as the evening you stumbled through an All Beers Count Match and became the worst version of yourself on live television. Show them the soldier, not the drunkard. Show them the man who breaks bodies, not contracts."

The arena audio swells -- Gunnar's name flashing over fists, chaos, destruction.

Gunnar Van Patton: "No. Ah've done enough of that off camera. Don't need to give 'em a highlight reel too. Good Lord willin' and the creek don't rise, Ah'll keep mah head straight."

He scrubs a hand over his face, stripping away any trace of amusement.

Gunnar Van Patton: "So Ah go out there. Ah touch the can, play along just enough to keep the office off mah back... then Ah treat Ellis like any other fight. Beer or no beer."

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Avril's lips curl into a small, satisfied smile, her voice cool and resolute.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Now you are thinking clearly, Sergeant. Let Chance have his spectacle. Let the crowd have their laughter. You? You ensure that when the bell rings, no one speaks of how much you drank. They speak only of how hard you hit."

The decision settles into Gunnar's shoulders, into his stance. His left eye glints under the corridor light, the patch making the stare sharper, heavier.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Yeah. Fun and games are over tonight. Ellis is fixin' to go 0 for 3, and when Ah'm done, he'll be hurtin' so bad they'll be wheelin' him straight to the hospital."

He turns, stride heavy, measured, storm leashed. Avril falls into step besideinto step beside him, the composed counterbalance to his menace.

The camera lingers on the empty space they leave behind -- the monitor still glowing with beer cans and bright logos, a party veneer over something darker waiting to walk through the curtain.

That's the Job

Backstage, in one of the locker rooms claimed entirely by The Empire, Rosa Delgado sits on a bench, still in her ring gear, a discarded tuxedo jacket draped over her knee. The sleeves are wrinkled, one shoulder seam nearly blown out from earlier. A duffel bag sits open at her feet. The faint sound of the crowd seeps through the walls.

Amy Harrison, UTA Women's Champion, leans against a row of lockers with the title over her shoulder, idly scrolling on her phone. Selena Vex is perched on a nearby equipment crate, legs crossed, while Dahlia Cross stretches out one shoulder, rolling her neck, eyes sharp as ever.

Selena Vex: "You know, for a tuxedo match, that looked a lot more like you trying to pull his arm out of the socket than anything else."

Rosa smirks, turning the ruined jacket in her hands.

Rosa Delgado: "They said first one to strip the tux wins. They did not say I couldn't make him regret signing the contract on the way there."

Dahlia lets out a low, amused hum.

Dahlia Cross: "You made Maxx Mayhem look... manageable. That's something. Most people just try to survive him."

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Rosa shrugs one shoulder, downplaying it.

Rosa Delgado: "He wanted chaos. He got it. He just forgot the part where I still know how to wrestle..."

Amy snorts without looking up from her phone, thumbs still tapping.

Amy Harrison: "Please. A tuxedo match."

She finally looks up, eyes rolling, belt glinting under the fluorescent lights.

Amy Harrison: "If I was drawn and had something as ridiculous as that... I have no idea how I'd take it."

She scoffs, shaking her head.

Amy Harrison: "'Congratulations, Amy, you're the champion of unbuttoning people on television.' Yeah, no thanks."

Selena chuckles, waving a hand.

Selena Vex: "You'd still win, though."

Amy Harrison: "Obviously I'd win. That's not the point."

She nods toward Rosa with her chin.

Amy Harrison: "The point is they put one of mine in a clown stip and she didn't blink. Went out there, treated it like work, took apart Maxx Mayhem in a bow tie, and walked back here with her head up. That's why you're in this room."

Rosa glances at her, the faintest hint of pride flickering under the cool exterior.

Rosa Delgado: "The crowd could laugh if they wanted. He could make jokes. At the end, it was still Maxx on his back and me taking his pants off like it was nothing."

Dahlia snickers darkly.

Dahlia Cross: "Trust me, he's going to remember that longer than anyone else. Men like that don't take humiliation well."

Amy pushes off the lockers, stepping closer, the Women's Championship hanging easily from her shoulder.

Amy Harrison: "Good. Let him stew. Let him beat somebody half to death at Black Horizon trying to get that feeling off him. While he's doing that, The Empire keeps stacking wins. Tuxedos, submissions, knockouts, I

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don't care what they call it. It all goes on the same column."

Selena tilts her head at Rosa.

Selena Vex: "So, how'd it feel? You're not exactly a... comedy match type."

Rosa thinks for a beat, then folds the tux jacket neatly, dropping it into her bag like she's closing a file.

Rosa Delgado: "Felt like any other match once the bell rang. He swung, I countered. I found the arm, I stayed on it. The only difference was when I was done... there were more clothes on the floor."

Amy cracks a genuine, quick laugh at that, then fixes Rosa with a measuring look.

Amy Harrison: "Good answer. Remember it. Because this is what they do when they don't know how to handle us. They get cute. They get 'creative.' They give us tuxedos and hugs and wheels to spin, hoping somebody in The Empire slips on the banana peel."

She taps the faceplate of her title.

Amy Harrison: "We don't slip. We adapt. You proved that tonight."

Rosa nods once, firm.

Rosa Delgado: "Next time, they want to get cute, they can put a limb on the line instead of a jacket."

Dahlia's eyes glint with approval.

Dahlia Cross: "I'd quite like that, actually."

Amy shifts the belt on her shoulder, turning toward the door.

Amy Harrison: "Enjoy the tuxedo highlight reel while it lasts. After tonight, it's back to business. Black Horizon is coming, and I'm not stepping into Philadelphia with a single Empire loss hanging over us if I can help it."

She looks back over her shoulder at Rosa.

Amy Harrison: "You did your part. Keep doing it. Let the rest of them laugh at the stipulations. We'll be the ones holding gold when the wheel stops spinning."

Rosa meets her gaze, calm and steady.

Rosa Delgado: "Sí, jefa. Tuxedo or not, they tap, they break, or they fold. That's the job."

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Amy smirks, satisfied, and pushes the door open. The rest of The Empire fall in behind her, a confident, dangerous unit moving back toward the heartbeat of the arena, leaving the crumpled tux in Rosa's bag as just another reminder that even on the strangest night, they still walked out winners.

Gunner Van Patton vs. B.R. Ellis

The buzz in the PNC Arena dips into a curious murmur as the camera swings back to the entrance stage. The ring is empty, the graphic on the lower third reading: "ALL BEERS COUNT MATCH - SPECIAL REFEREE: CHANCE VON CRANK."

Suddenly --

BOOM!

A thunderous shotgun blast rattles the sound system, jolting the crowd out of their seats. The lights strobe wildly across the entranceway as a grungy southern guitar riff tears through the arena. A distorted drawl rides over the top of it all:

Voice (over PA): "Shock N Rolla... Here 2 Show Ya... Cocked Back... And... Loaded! Chance Von Crank!"

The curtain jerks violently as Chance Von Crank steps out onto the stage, one case of beer in each hand, cardboard digging into his fingers. He's in a crookedly buttoned striped referee shirt that looks like it's seen better nights in better states, jorts, scuffed boots, and a smirk that could curdle milk.

He stops at the top of the ramp and hoists both cases up over his head, cans rattling inside. The Raleigh crowd pops big, half cheers, half whoops from people who know exactly what kind of chaos this means.

John Phillips: "There he is, the Trailer Park Prodigy himself! Chance Von Crank, not just your host for the WHEEL OF CHANCE tonight, but your special guest referee for this All Beers Count Match."

Mark Bravo: "Referee, beer mule, and probably the biggest problem for any state liquor board watching this feed right now."

CVC starts his walk down the ramp, cases swinging at his sides like they weigh nothing. He jaw-jacks with fans the whole way, leaning in to shout something off-mic at one guy in a Gunnar shirt, then barking a laugh at a group in the opposite aisle.

About halfway down, he stops, sets both cases down, and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. He points to the ring, then to himself, then makes a big exaggerated "count to three" gesture, just to remind everyone he's allegedly in charge of enforcing rules tonight.

He scoops the cases back up and heads the rest of the way, clunking them down on the apron before rolling

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in under the bottom rope with a surprisingly quick slide for a man this unbothered by cardio.

Once in the ring, he grabs one case and drags it to a neutral corner, wedging it snugly between the bottom and middle turnbuckles. Then he crosses diagonally, lugging the second case to the opposite corner and setting it there like he's placing sacred offerings.

John Phillips: "You heard the man earlier tonight: All Beers Count. These competitors aren't just allowed to drink during the match, they're expected to. And Chance Von Crank is making sure the supply lines are fully stocked."

Mark Bravo: "If this goes more than ten minutes, the ring might be 40% foam."

CVC pops the flap on the second case with his thumb, fishing out a single can. He slaps the top once, grinning, then steps onto the middle rope and climbs up to the second turnbuckle, referee shirt hanging off one shoulder, beer held aloft.

The crowd reacts with a roar, some raising imaginary cans in the stands. Chance tilts his head back, cracks the tab with a sharp hiss, and chugs, throat working as he downs a solid first pull.

He finishes with a satisfied gasp, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Foam drips down onto the canvas as he holds the empty can up like a trophy.

Mark Bravo: "Special referee's already one beer in and the match hasn't even started yet. This is gonna go great."

Chance crushes the can in his fist, tosses it out toward the timekeeper's area, and beats a fist against his chest, shouting something lost under the roar of the crowd as the guitar riff blares on. Perched on the turnbuckle, grinning like a man who just found his natural habitat, the Trailer Park Prodigy is ready.

The music fades out and the crowd settles into a low buzz as the hard-hitting intro of "Remember the Name" by Fort Minor hits the sound system. The beat rolls out steady and focused, the kind of song that sounds like preparation more than celebration.

B.R. Ellis steps through the curtain, no theatrics, no posing. Just a focused walk, jaw set, eyes locked straight ahead on the ring. He adjusts the tape on his wrists once, then starts down the ramp with the efficient, compact gait of a man who has drilled footwork more than he's practiced taunts.

John Phillips: "Here comes B.R. Ellis, a world-class athlete who has built his game on conditioning, technique, and ring IQ. This is a man who treats every match like a test -- counters, transitions, control. And tonight, he's being asked to tack 'beer tolerance' onto the grading sheet."

Mark Bravo: "Think amateur standout, Olympic-level serious, and now hand him an open bar and tell him to wrestle in it. You can see it on his face, John. He's not thrilled about the All Beers Count part of this

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equation."

Ellis ignores the jeers and the scattered "CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!" chants as he reaches ringside. He hops up onto the apron in one smooth motion, grabs the top rope, and slings himself over, landing lightly inside the ring.

He immediately walks toward Chance Von Crank, who's just hopped down from the turnbuckle, still wiping stray beer from his chin. Ellis starts talking, animated but controlled, hands moving as he clearly questions the sanity of this entire stipulation.

CVC holds his hands up at first, grinning, nodding along like he understands completely -- then claps Ellis on the shoulder, talking right back at him, gesturing broadly toward the cases of beer in the corners.

John Phillips: "B.R. Ellis clearly making his feelings known to our special guest referee. This is not the environment he trained his whole life for."

Mark Bravo: "Chance Von Crank's sales pitch right now is probably just: 'Lighten up and drink one.' That's not exactly sports science."

Chance finally throws his hands up with an exaggerated "fine, fine" gesture, then saunters over to the nearest case in the corner. He rips the top open wider and fishes out two cans, one in each hand.

He walks back to Ellis, offering one can out with a big, crooked grin.

Chance Von Crank: "House rules. All. Beers. Count."

Ellis looks at the can, then at Chance, then out at the crowd, who immediately swell into a "DO IT! DO IT!" chant. He exhales through his nose, clearly unimpressed, but finally snatches the can from CVC's hand.

John Phillips: "B.R. Ellis is a professional. He may not like it, but he knows the show rolls on whether the stipulation makes sense or not."

Mark Bravo: "And he's well aware of how he currently sits at 0 and 2 versus his opponent."

John Phillips: "If there's one person who knows what Van Patton can do in the ring, it's Ellis, and having his mind clouded by alcohol will surely not help him."

Chance holds his own can up next to Ellis', raising his eyebrows. He mouths, "On three," loud enough for the front row to see. Ellis hesitates, then gives a tiny, resigned nod.

They both hook their fingers under the tabs. The arena leans in.

Mark Bravo: "We are really about to watch a referee peer-pressure a world-class wrestler into a pre-match

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beer. Only on WHEEL OF CHANCE night."

HISS--!

Both cans crack open at the same time, foam misting the air. Chance grins wide, clinking his can lightly against Ellis' in a makeshift toast.

Chance Von Crank: "To bad decisions and good fights."

Ellis huffs out the faintest smirk despite himself, then tips his can back as CVC does the same. The crowd erupts, cheering as the two take their first pulls -- the official start of the All Beers Count madness.

Chance finishes his swig, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and lets out a satisfied holler, while Ellis lowers his can, eyes sharpening again. The party vibe is all CVC's; the business, clearly, still belongs to B.R. Ellis as we fade toward the next arrival.

The house lights dim again, that low ripple running through the crowd. For a heartbeat there's nothing...

Then "Boots and Blood" by Five Finger Death Punch detonates out of the speakers, a sharp scream and pounding drums turning the murmur into a roar.

Gunnar Van Patton steps through the curtain -- not empty-handed this time. In one fist, a full case of beer. In the other, a bottle of Jack dangling by the neck, glass catching the strobe flashes. He stalks out to the center of the stage and sets both down at his feet with a solid thud.

John Phillips: "And here comes Gunnar Van Patton... the Fallen Soldier, the man who turned Troy Lindz's world upside down at Survivor. Looks like he's taking this All Beers Count stipulation literally."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, that's a case of beer and a bottle of Jack on the stage. Two things Gunnar Van Patton likes to do: kick ass and drink. Tonight, he gets to do both."

Gunnar crouches, rips open the beer case along the top, and fishes out a can. He pops the tab with a sharp hiss and immediately tilts his head back, pouring the beer straight down his throat in one long, steady pull. Foam spills down his beard and onto his shirt as the crowd roars in approval and disbelief.

He crushes the empty can against the side of his head, tosses it aside without a look, then stands, scooping the case up in one arm and the bottle of Jack in the other. No posing, no playing to the crowd -- just that cold, forward march toward the ring.

John Phillips: "We saw him earlier backstage with Avril Kinkaide, being reminded exactly what happens when he drinks. He said it himself -- he's an asshole when he does. If this is him trying to prove a point, this could get ugly very fast."

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Mark Bravo: "B.R. Ellis is about to find out what happens when you book a man who already lives like a bar fight into a match where all beers count."

Gunnar strides down the ramp, the case tucked against his hip, the Jack bottle swinging. A few fans reach over the barricade to slap his shoulder; he doesn't break stride or glance their way. His one visible eye is locked on the ring, on Ellis, and on Chance Von Crank waiting inside.

At ringside, he sets the case and the Jack down on the apron, taking a moment to remove his hat and shirt and throw them deep into the crowd. He then slides the alcohol under the bottom rope ahead of him. He rolls in after, rising smoothly to his feet as "Boots and Blood" begins to fade.

Chance Von Crank: "Now hold up, big man, beers is one thing, but what's with the Jack--"

Gunnar cuts him off with a glare, stooping to drag the beer case upright again. He rips it open with a rough yank, fishing out another can.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Yer gonna look real funny eatin' corn on the cobb with no F***in' teeth."

He cracks the can open with a snap, never breaking eye contact with Chance, and takes another long, unapologetic drink right there in the middle of the ring. The crowd pops again, half hyped, half nervous at the tension between special ref and special kind of problem.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton is not here to play along with Chance Von Crank's rules. He is here to fight, and if that means downing beers on the way in, he's going to do it on his terms."

Mark Bravo: "Ellis is all business, Chance is all party, and Gunnar's somewhere in between with a case and a bottle. This is a powder keg, John, and the bell hasn't even rung yet."

Chance steps into the center, glancing between both men, a half-grin on his face and a little wobble in his stance from the beers he's already downed.

Chance Von Crank: "You ready, Ellis?"

B.R. Ellis nods, rolling his shoulders, bringing his hands up into a ready stance.

B.R. Ellis: "Yeah. Let's go."

Chance turns to Gunnar.

Chance Von Crank: "Gunnar, you rea--"

Gunnar cuts him off with a raised middle finger right in Chance's face, his expression flat and dangerous.

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Mark Bravo: "That's a yes in Gunnar Van Patton language."

Chance stares at the gesture for a second, then shrugs it off with a crooked smirk. He looks like he's about to signal for the bell... but instead turns on his heel and saunters past Gunnar to the nearest corner.

He pops the case again, digging around until he's got a can in each hand. With a smooth flick, he tosses one to Ellis, who barely snags it against his chest. Then, walking back past Gunnar, he presses another can against Gunnar's ribs as he goes by, already fishing out a third for himself.

John Phillips: "Chance Von Crank apparently deciding that before the All Beers Count Match officially starts... all beers have to count again."

Gunnar and Ellis both look down at the fresh cans, then at Chance, then at each other. The crowd swells into a loud "CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!" chant, sensing what's coming.

B.R. exhales, resigned. Gunnar just snorts. On some unspoken cue, they both hook their fingers under the tabs.

HISS.

Two cans crack open in unison. Chance yanks the tab on his own a beat later, raising it high.

Chance Von Crank: "To poor decisions and bad influences!"

All three of them tip their heads back and chug. The crowd roars as beer goes down in stereo -- Ellis taking controlled gulps, Gunnar pouring it like fuel, Chance already a half-step into party mode.

Ellis finishes first, lowering the can and wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist. Gunnar crumples his empty into his fist and drops it at his feet. Chance drains the last of his, foam on his lip, then staggers theatrically toward the timekeeper's side.

DING DING DING

The bell rings just as the last drops disappear. The All Beers Count Match is officially underway.

John Phillips: "And now, finally, we are... technically... in a wrestling match."

Gunnar and Ellis both stand there for a second, shoulders rising and falling, a flush already creeping into their faces. You can see the alcohol hitting different systems -- Gunnar's eye a little wider, Ellis blinking more than usual as he tries to refocus.

B.R. takes a deep breath, then stumbles a half-step forward, feet not quite under him. He raises his arms for a classic collar-and-elbow lock-up, trying to get himself back into familiar patterns.

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But almost as soon as his hands come up, he stops, closes his eyes briefly, and drops them again, planting his hands on his hips as he sucks in another breath.

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, that's the moment where the Fort Minor soundtrack in your head gets replaced with the phrase, 'I should not have chugged that third beer.'"

Chance casually crushes his empty can in his hand, tosses it over his shoulder, and lets out a thunderous belch that the front row actually pops for.

Chance Von Crank: "WOOOO, YEAH. THIS IS WRESTLING, BABY!"

Gunnar and Ellis both glance his way with matching looks of disbelief, the ring tilting just a little under the weight of beer and bad ideas as the match threatens to lurch into motion.

Ellis is still trying to steady his breathing when Gunnar suddenly lifts a hand, index finger raised.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Hold yer horses."

He turns away from Ellis, bends down near the ropes, and scoops the bottle of Jack off the canvas where he left it earlier. The crowd pops at the sight of it coming back into play.

B.R. Ellis: "No. No, that's a bad idea."

Gunnar's already twisting the cap off, the sharp crack of the seal breaking audible over the low rumble of the arena. He tips the bottle up and takes a long, unapologetic gulp, throat working as the whiskey burns its way down.

Mark Bravo: "Down goes a third of that bottle."

He lowers it with a hiss, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then extends the bottle straight out toward Ellis.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Yer turn."

Ellis holds up both hands, backing a half-step away.

B.R. Ellis: "No thanks. I'm good. Beer's enough."

Gunnar's expression hardens, that one visible eye narrowing.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Keep pace."

Ellis glances at the bottle, then at Chance, then back at Gunnar, clearly not wanting to mix beer and liquor in

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the middle of a fight.

B.R. Ellis: "Seriously, man--"

Chance Von Crank: "Hey, I'll take some!"

Chance chimes in from the side, hand halfway raised, grinning like a kid who heard the word "shots."

Gunnar doesn't even look at him. He just turns his head slightly and flips Chance off again, middle finger right in the ref's direction.

Then he steps in and shoves the bottle hard into Ellis' chest.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ah said drink, pussy."

Ellis stumbles back half a step, catching it out of reflex. The crowd buzzes louder, sensing the tension spike. After a long, reluctant beat, he exhales and brings the bottle up.

John Phillips: "Ellis does not want to do this, but Gunnar Van Patton is not giving him much of a choice here."

Ellis tips his head back, lifting the bottle to take a quick gulp--

--and Gunnar drills him with a sudden, stiff knee right into the gut.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on!"

The shot doubles Ellis over instantly, knocking the wind and the whiskey out of him. The bottle slips from his hand, crashing to the canvas and rolling away as liquid splashes across the mat.

Before Ellis can even grab his stomach, Gunnar steps in and drives the point of his elbow down on the top of his head, the impact echoing as B.R. crumples to the canvas in a heap.

Mark Bravo: "And there it is. This stopped being a cute drinking game the second Gunnar Van Patton decided to be himself."

Ellis sprawls on the mat, gasping, whiskey fumes rising from the spill, while Gunnar looms over him, that ugly, satisfied look on his face as the crowd reacts with a mix of boos and shocked noise.

Ellis tries to push himself up, one knee under him, hand clutching his ribs. He gets somewhat vertical.

Gunnar informs him that was a bad move.

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A Thunderous roundhouse causes the entire arena to cringe and Ellis collapses to the mat.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton showing zero hesitation here. Every time Ellis tries to rise, Gunnar puts a boot on him."

A knee to the ribs follows shortly after. The impact echoes, a sick thud off the boards. B.R. flattens out again, one arm instinctively reaching for the ropes.

Mark Bravo: "This is exactly what Avril Kinkaide was warning him about backstage. When Gunnar drinks, he doesn't loosen up... he just gets meaner."

Gunnar finally peels away, turning his back on Ellis like he's not even a concern. He stalks to the nearest corner, where one of the beer cases sits wedged between the turnbuckles.

He tears the cardboard back and digs in, coming up with two fresh cans. The crowd noise spikes again, some cheering, some booing, everyone on edge.

He pops one tab, then the other, both hissing in stereo. Without hesitating, he tilts his head back and lifts both cans at once, pouring the beer straight down his throat. Foam spills over his lips and down his neck, splashing onto his chest and the mat below as he chugs from both sides.

John Phillips: "Double-fisted beer from Gunnar Van Patton, and he's already got whiskey and who knows how many cans in his system. This is turning into a very dangerous mix."

Mark Bravo: "This man is turning the ring into a brewery and a crime scene at the same time."

He drains as much as he can, then flicks the empties directly at Chance, cans bouncing off his chest and across the canvas. Beer puddles around his boots, dark patches soaking into the mat.

Gunnar wipes his mouth with the back of his wrist and turns, eye laser-locked on Ellis, who's just starting to push up to hands and knees again, still coughing from the shots to the gut and back.

Gunnar stomps across the ring, each step splashing through the spilled beer. He reaches down, clamps both arms around Ellis' waist from behind, and hauls him up off the mat in one rough, practiced motion.

B.R.'s boots drag through the puddle as Gunnar cinches the grip tighter, setting for whatever cruel suplex he's already got in mind.

Gunnar tightens his grip, knuckles whitening around Ellis' midsection. The crowd's pitch rises, sensing impact coming.

With a grunt, he hauls B.R. off his feet in a deadlift, boots leaving the beer-slick canvas as Gunnar snaps his hips and sends Ellis flying backwards in a nasty German suplex. Ellis folds up on his shoulders and neck,

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then spills over onto his side, clutching at the back of his head.

John Phillips: "Huge German suplex from Gunnar Van Patton, and that's on a canvas that's already soaked in beer. There's no way to post, no way to brace yourself properly."

Gunnar doesn't let go. He keeps the waistlock cinched, rolling through, dragging Ellis with him across the puddled mat. The crowd buzzes louder as he powers them both back to a base.

B.R.'s feet scramble for traction, but his balance is shot; between the alcohol and the slick canvas, he can't get grounded before Gunnar muscles him up again.

Another violent arch--

--second German, this one landing Ellis almost on the side of his shoulder. He bounces and skids on the wet canvas, a spray of beer kicked up under him.

Mark Bravo: "Second German! And look at Ellis' face, he doesn't know if he's in Raleigh or in a college bar right now."

Still, Gunnar refuses to release. He snarls, breath heavy, and once more rolls with the hold, dragging Ellis' limp weight across the mat like a suitcase.

He plants his feet, tries to hoist Ellis a third time--

--and this time, his own boots skid in the growing puddle. He gets B.R. halfway up before his lead foot slides out from under him. Both men stagger, tangled, and crash awkwardly to the side instead of completing the suplex.

John Phillips: "Gunnar just slipped-- there is so much beer on that canvas now that even he can't keep his footing!"

They hit the mat in a messy heap, Ellis rolling away on instinct, clutching at his ribs and neck, while Gunnar ends up on one knee, hand braced against the canvas, cursing under his breath.

Chance Von Crank winces exaggeratedly nearby, one hand on the top rope to steady himself as he watches.

Mark Bravo: "This is what happens when your ring turns into a slip-and-slide sponsored by bad decisions."

Ellis uses the opening, blindly reaching for the closest rope. He hooks an arm over the bottom strand and drags himself toward the corner, trying to get vertical. His legs are rubbery, each breath a sharp drag through his lungs after the suplex barrage.

Gunnar shakes out his own leg, then slaps the mat once, furious at being embarrassed by gravity. He

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pushes up to his feet, stalking after Ellis with that stiff, predatory stride, splashing through the beer as he goes.

B.R. pulls himself up to one knee in the corner, one hand braced on the middle rope. His head hangs for a second, sweat and beer dripping from his hair.

Gunnar closes in and grabs a fistful of Ellis' hair, yanking his head up.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ya can't be three sheets to the wind, just yet. Stand up."

He punctuates it with a sharp, echoing chop across Ellis' chest. The smack rings out, leaving a red handprint blooming immediately.

John Phillips: "And now the strikes are coming in. Beer or no beer, Gunnar Van Patton's level of contact does not change."

Another chop, harder, Ellis' back thudding into the turnbuckles. He grimaces, but a spark of defiance flickers in his eyes as the sting jolts him back into awareness.

Gunnar grabs his wrist and yanks him out of the corner, setting for an Irish whip--

--but as he plants to send Ellis across, his back foot slips again. It's only a stutter-step this time, but it opens just enough of a window.

Ellis twists, planting as solidly as he can, and turns the momentum back, trying to whip Gunnar instead. Both men stagger through the exchange, the rope-run more of a lurch than a sprint as their boots splash through the mess on the canvas.

Mark Bravo: "They are both fighting their opponents and the floor right now. This is less ring awareness and more barroom survival at this point."

Gunnar rebounds off the ropes chest-first, catching himself, then spins back around toward Ellis, eyes narrowing, anger simmering hotter beneath the alcohol. The next decision he makes is clearly going to be meaner than the last.

Gunnar comes off the ropes, boots splashing through the beer, and Ellis tries to react on instinct -- dropping low, reaching for a leg, anything to slow him down. But his footing betrays him; his plant foot slides, and instead of a clean takedown, he ends up half-kneeling, exposed.

Gunnar doesn't miss.

He snaps a standing sidekick straight into Ellis' chest, heel thudding off the sternum. B.R. is blasted backward, crashing to the mat in a spray of sweat and stale beer.

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John Phillips: "Huge sidekick! That one cut right through the haze!"

Ellis tries to roll to his side, gasping, but Gunnar's already closing the distance. He snatches B.R. by the hair and hauls him to a half-crouch, then shoves him upright just enough to send him stumbling back into the ropes.

Ellis rebounds toward the middle of the ring and Gunnar charges, launching himself off his back foot.

Both knees come up, crashing into Ellis' chest in a brutal Ong Bak-style double knee. The impact sends B.R. sprawling, flipping him down onto the beer-slick mat.

Mark Bravo: "Ong Bak knees of death~!!!, and B.R. Ellis just got his ribs turned into a six-pack!"

Ellis sprawls flat, arms out, the air knocked completely out of him. The crowd's roar shifts, a mix of shock and ugly excitement. Gunnar doesn't waste time admiring the damage.

He grabs Ellis by the head and hauls him up again, this time dragging him into a fireman's carry with a rough yank. Even a little off-balance from the alcohol, the strength is undeniable -- Ellis' legs dangle, boots dripping in the beer puddles.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton, looking for more--"

Gunnar pops him up off his shoulders and blasts a knee into Ellis' face on the way down -- a vicious Go 2 Sleep that sends B.R. collapsing to his knees and then straight forward onto his face.

Gunnar keeps the half nelson grip as Ellis crumples, rolling through with him, and transitions smoothly, dragging Ellis into position.

With a grunt, he muscles B.R. up just enough and drives him down with his FUKSZ slam, planting him hard in the slick mess in the middle of the ring.

John Phillips: "FUKSZ! Right in the center! Ellis is done!"

B.R. hits and doesn't move, eyes glassy, chest heaving shallowly. Gunnar sprawls across him for the cover, forearm grinding across Ellis' face more out of spite than necessity.

Chance Von Crank drops to his knees beside them, swaying just a little as he slaps the mat.

Chance Von Crank: "ONE! TWO! THREE!"

DING DING DING

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... GUNNAR! VAN! PATTON!"

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"Boots and Blood" kicks back in as Gunnar pushes off Ellis, rolling to his knees and then to his feet. The crowd reacts in a jagged wave -- some booing the ruthlessness, others cheering the sheer violence and spectacle of it.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton survives the All Beers Count chaos and puts B.R. Ellis down in decisive fashion."

Mark Bravo: "Survives it? He weaponized it. That was alcohol, aggression, and absolutely no mercy from bell to bell."

Gunnar doesn't ask for his hand to be raised. He yanks his arm away from Chance as the Trailer Park Prodigy reaches for it, then stomps back to the nearest corner where the beer case still sits mangled.

He digs in, pulling out two more cans, one in each hand. The crowd buzzes again -- half expecting him to pass out, half expecting him to keep escalating.

He pops both tabs open with quick snaps, foam bubbling up. Then he turns and walks back toward the center, stopping just in front of Chance Von Crank.

For a second, it looks like an odd moment of camaraderie. Gunnar extends one of the cans toward Chance, eyebrow raised, almost like a peace offering.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, now he wants to share? After everything?"

Chance's eyes light up. He reaches out for the offered beer--

--and Gunnar yanks it back at the last second, flipping him off right in his face.

Without breaking eye contact, Gunnar tilts his head back and lifts both cans, pouring them into his mouth at once. Beer cascades down his cheeks, his chest, soaking his gear and splattering more onto the canvas as the crowd roars at the sheer excess of it.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton downing two more beers on top of everything else tonight. I don't know if this man is trying to win matches or pick a fight with his own liver."

He drains as much as he can, then lets the empties fall, cans bouncing and rolling across the mat. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, gives Chance one last cold, dismissive glance, and steps past him, already turning his back on the official and the wreckage he's left behind.

Ellis lies motionless near the center, the ring a soaked battlefield of foam and bad choices, as Chance slips to the outside. CVC pulls him out onto the apron and drapes Ellis's arm across his shoulders, helping spaghetti-legged B.R. start his way to the back.

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Van Patton stands triumphantly in the ring and turns to watch them make their exit.

Mark Bravo: "Hold on, Phillips! We aren't done here!"

Two monstrous figures slip into the ring behind Van Patton. In unison, they lower the hoods of their jackets to display a pair of gigantic men, each easily eclipsing the 350-pound mark.

John Phillips: "Who are they?!?!"

One of them stomps his combat boot into the mat, catching Van Patton's attention. Gunnar turns around, only to be run over by a pair of twin, stampeding, Samoan bulls. One begins pummeling Gunnar with right hand after right hand square to the mouth, as the other tears off his jacket.

John Phillips: "What is going on here?"

Mark Bravo: "Guys like Van Patton have a list of enemies a mile long. So, who knows?"

The twins trade off and Van Patton finds himself propped up in the corner with a barrage of headbutts slamming into his face. Seeing stars, Van Patton is at their mercy. He's sent out of the corner and right into a pop-up Samoan Drop.

John Phillips: "Incredible impact there!"

Far from done, one twin drags Gunnar back up and drapes him across his shoulder for what looks to be a powerslam. Instead of driving Van Patton back-first to the mat, he lifts him just enough for his brother to slip underneath, before he falls to the mat, executing a Big Ending-Flatliner combination.

John Phillips: "Van Patton has clearly angered the wrong person and now, he's paying the price.

Mark Bravo: "But who could that person be?"

As one twin continues the assault on Gunnar, the other takes off to the outside and wastes no time in pulling a table out from under the ring.

Mark Bravo: "This is about to get ugly."

Once the table is set up, Van Patton is hurled through the ropes and to the floor. One twin lays him upon the table and holds him in place, as the other ascends the corner. The crowd rises to their feet, as the Samoan stands tall upon the top rope. One final savage scream and he takes to the skies.

John Phillips: "That's got to be almost 400 pounds crashing down on Van Patton!"

A splash drives both him and his target through the table, sending pieces of the furniture in all directions.

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Van Patton clutches at his abdomen and begins coughing. Blood begins to trickle from his mouth. A hush falling over the crowd.

Mark Bravo: "Not even Van Patton can get up after something like that. That was on par with the meteor that killed the dinosaurs."

The rabid Samoans stand over their prey, basking in the chaos they just caused.

John Phillips: "With the WrestleZone Rumble just a week away, you have to wonder if Van Patton will be able to compete."

Spin the Wheel #5

Backstage, the hallway is quieter now -- just the low hum of the arena and the distant rumble of the crowd. The WHEEL OF CHANCE stands alone, still, the tumbler of names beside it. No host. No cameras pointed at it yet. Just a gaudy, glittering monument to bad ideas and stranger fortunes.

Madman Szalinski strolls into frame, whistling some tuneless little melody, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his weathered suit pants. His tie is crooked, his hair is a little wild, and he looks like he's wandering more than walking.

He ambles right past the wheel... then slows. Stops. Turns his head, eyeing it sidelong. He turns fully, looking up and down the hallway.

No one. No Chance. No crew. Just him and the temptation.

Madman Szalinski: "Well well well... seems like we don't have a spinner."

A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. He shrugs once, like the decision is already made, and steps up to the wheel. His fingers curl around the edge.

He gives it a casual, almost lazy spin. The wheel comes to life, wedges blurring, the clack-clack-clack of the pegs echoing down the corridor.

Madman leans in, head tilting with each click as it begins to slow. Every peg, his head ticks. Clack. Clack. Clack.

The pointer bounces... slows... and finally clicks into place on a wedge labeled in bold, unforgiving letters:

IRON MAN MATCH.

Madman Szalinski: "God. Damn. Son."

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He chuckles low, savoring it for a half-second--

And that's when Chance Von Crank stumbles into the scene from the far end of the hall, shirt half-untucked, referee stripes soaked in beer, hair damp and sticking up in random directions. He's breathing a little hard, eyes a little glassy.

Chance Von Crank: "Hey... hey... this ain't the Wheel of Szalinski..."

Madman just shrugs like he's been caught peeking at a test answer and doesn't particularly care.

Madman Szalinski: "You left it lyin' around, kid."

He pats the side of the wheel once, gives Chance the faintest madman grin, and then wanders off down the hallway, whistling again like nothing at all just happened.

Chance watches him go, then turns to look up at the wheel. The camera follows his gaze to the wedge where the pointer rests: IRON MAN MATCH.

Chance Von Crank: "Iron Man match, huh?"

He wipes a streak of beer from his cheek with the palm of his hand, grins wide.

Chance Von Crank: "I can dig it."

We cut back to ringside, where the commentary team has the graphic on the monitor in front of them: "IRON MAN MATCH" filling the screen.

John Phillips: "An Iron Man Match? With about thirty minutes left in our broadcast window, that can mean only one thing, folks -- we are about to find out our main event."

Mark Bravo: "You spin the wheel, you take your life in your hands. Thirty minutes of punishment coming up."

Backstage again, Chance is already in motion, standing next to the tumbler of names, the wheel locked on its new fate. He shakes out his shoulders, then grabs the handle on the tumbler and gives it a big spin. The balls inside rattle and whirl.

He waits a moment, then pops the hatch and reaches in, fingers fishing around before they close on one.

He pulls it out, squints at the number, then looks up with a grin that says he can't wait to say this out loud.

Chance Von Crank: "First man in our thirty-minute Iron Man Match... the UTA Champion himself... Jarvis Valentine."

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The crowd reaction filters faintly through the hallway -- a big pop at the champion's name.

John Phillips (voice-over): "The UTA Champion, Jarvis Valentine, drawn into an Iron Man Match on WHEEL OF CHANCE night! That is massive!"

Chance drops the first ball into a tray, then thrusts his hand back into the tumbler with relish.

He digs around, making a meal of it, then pulls out the second ball. He looks down at it, reads the name, and starts to laugh -- a low, disbelieving cackle.

Chance Von Crank: "Well... ain't it funny how life is..."

He looks straight into the camera now, eyes bright.

Chance Von Crank: "Jarvis Valentine's opponent in a thirty-minute Iron Man Match... David... Hightower."

The arena ERUPTS. The commentary audio punches in over the roar.

John Phillips: "You have got to be kidding me! Emily Hightower's father, the legend himself, a certified future Hall of Famer, David Hightower, back in action -- and it's against Jarvis Valentine in a thirty-minute Iron Man Match!"

Mark Bravo: "The WHEEL OF CHANCE just stole the show, John. Champion versus legend. Jarvis Valentine versus David Hightower. Thirty minutes. Iron Man. That's your main event, Raleigh!"

Backstage, Chance spreads his arms wide between the wheel and the tumbler, grinning like the devil who just dealt the last hand of the night, as the WHEEL OF CHANCE locks in the fate of the UTA Champion and a returning icon.

Deal

Backstage, away from the noise of the PNC Arena, Susanita Ybanez is in a small locker room, back in her street clothes -- fitted jeans, sneakers, a simple hoodie in her colors. Her hair is still slightly damp from the earlier match as she zips up her gear bag, tucking her knee pads and boots in neatly. The echo of the crowd is just a low, distant hum through the walls.

The door opens with a soft click. Susanita glances up -- and there in the doorway stands Marie Van Claudio. Casual clothes, but still carrying herself like she's on a poster: confident posture, that unmistakable air of history and expectation around her.

Marie Van Claudio: "Hey."

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Susanita straightens a bit, surprised but pleased.

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie. Hola. You okay?"

Marie steps inside, letting the door swing shut behind her. She nods once, a little smile forming.

Marie Van Claudio: "I'm good. Better after watching you put Eric Dane Jr. through a table tonight."

Susanita's eyes flicker with a mix of pride and modesty at the reminder. She shrugs a shoulder.

Marie Van Claudio: "Congratulations, Susanita. That was a big win. Tables match, the WrestleZone Champion, on a night like this? You earned every second of that crowd tonight."

Susanita dips her head, appreciative.

Susanita Ybanez: "Gracias. He thought he was too good for me. The table... it disagreed."

They share a brief, knowing smile. The moment hangs comfortably for a beat.

Marie Van Claudio: "I also... wanted to say thank you. For Survivor."

Susanita's expression softens. She shifts her bag off the bench, giving Marie her full attention.

Marie Van Claudio: "You didn't have to be there. You didn't have to stand by me, watch my back, any of it. But you did. When everything felt like it was tilting, you were right there in my corner. I don't forget that."

Susanita nods slowly, emotions flickering behind her eyes.

Susanita Ybanez: "You are Marie Van Claudio. The first lady of this place. But that night, you were also just... someone fighting alone. I know how that feels. I wasn't going to let you be alone out there."

Marie's smile widens, more genuine now, a hint of warmth cracking through the veteran steel.

Marie Van Claudio: "Ten years ago, I probably would've tried to do it all by myself. These days... I'm smart enough to know who's worth having at my side."

She gestures toward Susanita's bag with a nod.

Marie Van Claudio: "And speaking of big nights... Seasons Beatings. Ten-woman battle royal for the United States Championship."

Susanita straightens just a little more, that competitive fire glowing behind her calm exterior.

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Marie Van Claudio: "You're in that match, Susanita. And I have a feeling... you're walking out of Seasons Beatings as a champion."

Susanita lets out a small, disbelieving laugh, but there's hope in it.

Susanita Ybanez: "That is the dream. Ten women, one title. I know it will be a fight."

She glances down at her taped-up gear bag, then back at Marie, more certain now.

Susanita Ybanez: "But I didn't come here to just be 'good.' I came here to change what people think when they hear Paraguay. If I have to throw nine people out to do it... I will."

Marie nods, clearly approving of the edge underneath the humility.

Marie Van Claudio: "That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

Susanita steps a little closer, her expression turning sincere, almost protective in its own way.

Susanita Ybanez: "And... while I won't be at Black Horizon..."

She winces just a bit at that, like it stings to say she won't be there for a show that big.

Susanita Ybanez: "I want you to know I am still in your corner. Watching. Hoping. Hardcore Sandy is no joke. But neither are you. I wish you all the luck against her."

Marie's face hardens just a touch at the name "Hardcore Sandy," then eases again as she looks back at Susanita.

Marie Van Claudio: "She's going to bring every ounce of violence she has. I've been in that kind of storm before. But it helps, knowing there are people out there who want to see me come out the other side with my hand raised."

She extends a hand toward Susanita -- not just a handshake, but a small, respectful offering between peers.

Marie Van Claudio: "You handle Seasons Beatings. I'll handle Black Horizon. And when the dust settles... maybe we'll both be standing as champions in this company."

Susanita looks at the hand, then clasps it firmly, a rare, broad smile breaking through.

Susanita Ybanez: "Deal."

They hold the shake for a moment, then release. Marie gives Susanita's shoulder a gentle squeeze before turning toward the door.

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Marie Van Claudio: "Get some rest, reina silenciosa. The next time you walk through that curtain... make sure they're ready to meet their new United States Champion."

Susanita watches her go, determination settling in like armor. As the door closes behind Marie Van Claudio, she looks down at her bag, then up toward some unseen point beyond the ceiling -- Seasons Beatings, Black Horizon, and everything that waits on the other side.

The Right Tool Needed for the Job

We cut away from the noise of the arena to the cold concrete of the PNC Arena parking lot. Sodium lights buzz overhead, casting a yellow haze over rows of cars and production trucks.

Parked crooked across two faded lines is an old, beat-up Chevy dually tow truck from the late '80s or early '90s -- weathered red paint, surface rust along the doors, a cracked windshield banner with "HIGHTOWER TOWING" barely readable anymore. The hazard light on top clicks lazily, one bulb flickering.

At the open side box of the truck, David Hightower leans in, digging through a battered metal toolbox. He's in dirty jeans, work boots, and what was once a white shirt, now stained with oil, grease, and time. His hands move through wrenches, sockets, rags -- the tools of a man who fixes everything with his own two hands.

Footsteps slap against the concrete.

Emily Hightower rushes into frame, gear already on, hair pulled back, face flushed with urgency.

Emily Hightower: "Dad! You've gotta hurry, they're calling for you. Your match is next."

David doesn't look up at first. He grunts, still rummaging, eyes narrowed on the mess of steel and chain links buried in the box.

David Hightower: "One minute, Em. I'm lookin' for somethin'."

Emily hovers at his shoulder, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Emily Hightower: "You can look after the match, c'mon--"

There's a rattling clank as his hand closes around something buried deep. He pauses... then straightens up slowly, dragging it into the light.

It's a heavy tow chain, thick, scarred links coiling down from his fist, ending in a brutal-looking tow hitch, solid metal dulled and scarred from years of use.

David turns it in his hand, the weight familiar, the hitch clinking against the side of the truck.

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David Hightower: "...Found it."

Emily looks at the chain, then up at him, jaw tight. She doesn't say anything, but the history between that weapon and David Hightower doesn't need words.

He slings the chain over one shoulder like it belongs there, gives the side of the toolbox a quick slam to shut it, and finally looks his daughter in the eye.

David Hightower: "Now I'm ready."

Emily swallows, nods once, then turns to lead the way back inside. David follows, boots echoing on the concrete, the chain swaying and clinking with every step as the tow truck sits behind them like a ghost from another era.

Back at ringside, the camera finds the commentary desk as a graphic flashes: "30-MINUTE IRON MAN MATCH - JARVIS VALENTINE vs. DAVID HIGHTOWER."

John Phillips: "We just saw it, folks. David Hightower digging through that old tow truck and coming up with that chain and tow hitch. If that comes into play, Jarvis Valentine is in more danger than he's ever been as UTA Champion."

Mark Bravo: "Iron Man rules, thirty minutes on the clock, and a man who's made a career out of turning hardware into hurt just pulled out his favorite accessory. Jarvis better wrestle the match of his life tonight."

John Phillips: "Up next... champion versus legend. Jarvis Valentine. David Hightower. Thirty-minute Iron Man Match -- our main event is coming your way."

Teddy bear... With teeth

Backstage, the camera fades in on Melissa Cartwright standing between Chris Ross and Valentina Blaze. Chris has his arms folded across his chest, that ever-present scowl softened just a touch. Valentina is pressed in against his side, one arm looped around his bicep, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris, Valentina... earlier tonight you two were put in what has to be a first in the UTA... a First Hug Match. Needless to say, while you both got hugs, a win over Chris Ross is a big momentum move for Valentina."

Valentina grins and gives Chris a little side-hug squeeze, resting her head briefly against his shoulder.

Valentina Blaze: "You know, I've had a great night getting to know Chris a lot better, Melissa. For how rough and tough he comes across, he really is just a big ol' teddy bear."

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Chris snorts, smirking despite himself, eyes flicking away from the camera.

Chris Ross: "Ah, it ain't like that."

Melissa Cartwright: "So... you two have been back here getting to know each other after your match earlier?"

Chris stays tight-lipped, jaw working, but Valentina squeezes his arm again and jumps in before he can cut it off.

Valentina Blaze: "Sure have. There's way more to Chris here than meets the eyes, Melissa. I mean it, he really is a sweetheart."

Melissa's eyebrows lift, clearly surprised by the assessment.

Melissa Cartwright: "Any comment on Valentina, Chris? Could we be seeing something blooming here tonight?"

Chris looks almost embarrassed for half a second, rubbing his jaw, then waves the notion off with a small shake of his head.

Chris Ross: "Not at all. Blaze here, she's a good cookie. But I got two of the most important matches of my life coming up and I gotta be focused."

He glances down the lens, the softness gone, that dangerous edge sliding back into his expression.

Chris Ross: "First it's Maxx Mayhem in an I Quit Match at Black Horizon. Then two weeks later, UTA Championship Match. That's where my head's at."

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris, with that title match in mind, what happens if Sea Jackson beats Jarvis Valentine at Black Horizon?"

Chris pauses, considering it for only a moment before the answer comes out flat and certain.

Chris Ross: "Then I guess I'll just have to beat his ass instead, Melissa."

Valentina's eyes light up at the bluntness. She squeezes his arm again, a little harder this time, clearly stirred by the conviction in his voice.

Valentina Blaze: "See? Told you. Teddy bear... with teeth."

Melissa turns back to camera, that bright broadcast smile back in place.

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Melissa Cartwright: "There you have it, folks. Chris Ross is ready."

The camera lingers a moment longer on Chris and Valentina -- her still hanging off his arm, him staring dead ahead with that cold, focused fire -- before fading out.

David Hightower vs. Jarvis Valentine

The camera cuts back to ringside where the crowd in Raleigh is buzzing, the energy still humming from the chaos of the WHEEL OF CHANCE.

John Phillips: "We are back inside the PNC Arena, and folks, it is time for our main event of the evening: a thirty-minute Iron Man Match."

Mark Bravo: "Thirty minutes on the clock, most falls wins. Pinfalls, submissions, disqualifications, count-outs, they all count toward the total, and when that clock hits zero, somebody's hand gets raised."

John Phillips: "And let's be very clear about something: the UTA Championship is *not* on the line tonight. But the champion, Jarvis Valentine, is one week away from defending that title at Black Horizon against Hall of Famer Sean Jackson. This is *not* the match he was looking to have as a warmup."

Mark Bravo: "Nope. Instead of a tune-up, he's got thirty minutes with a bar fight in human form. David Hightower can end careers, and he doesn't need a belt on the line to do it."

The lights shift to a grim, dusty yellow as the opening riff of "A Country Boy Can Survive" by Hank Williams Jr. kicks in over the sound system. The big screen shows grainy images of junkyards, tow chains, and backroads.

Out from the curtain steps David Hightower.

He's every inch the man we saw in the parking lot: dirty jeans, worn boots, that once-white shirt now stained with grease and life. Draped over one shoulder and dragging behind him is the same heavy chain from the tow truck, tow hook clanking along the stage with each step.

Ring Announcer: "The following contest is a thirty-minute Iron Man Match! Introducing first, from West Memphis, Arkansas, weighing in at two hundred and seventy-five pounds... DAVID... HIGHTOWER!"

Hightower doesn't pose. He doesn't play to the crowd. He just walks, slow and deliberate, that chain rattling behind him like a warning. The Raleigh crowd reacts with a mix of respect and unease, a low roar following him down the ramp.

John Phillips: "David Hightower is a man with a history written in scars. Bar fights, prison time, near-death beatings, and somehow he comes out of it and finds pro wrestling as the safer outlet. And now he's marching

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into an Iron Man Match dragging a chain with a tow hook on the end."

Mark Bravo: "You heard the story earlier, that old beat-up Chevy dually in the lot, that old life chasing him into this new one. If he decides to put that chain and hitch into play, it's not just a fall Jarvis has to worry about, it's his next six months."

At ringside, Hightower pauses, glances down at the chain, and then casually hauls it up, looping it over the top rope and dragging it into the ring with him. The tow hook scrapes the apron with a metallic screech as he climbs through the ropes.

The referee immediately steps in, hands up, pointing at the chain, clearly warning him.

Referee: "You bring it in here, you don't use it. You use that thing, I'll call the fall."

David stares at him for a long second, eyes flat. Then he huffs through his nose and lets the chain spill out of his hands, the links pooling along the bottom rope before he nudges it under the apron with his boot, leaving it coiled on the floor at his corner.

John Phillips: "Standard Iron Man rules: if David uses that chain, he risks disqualification and giving Jarvis Valentine a free fall. But just having it that close... that's a threat Jarvis is going to have in the back of his mind for thirty minutes."

Hightower moves to his corner, gripping the top rope with both hands, head down as he rocks slightly on his heels, muttering to himself, waiting for the champion.

The arena lights cut out completely.

A beat of silence.

Then "American Flags" hits, the opening bars flooding the arena as red, white, and blue lights strobe across the stage. Fireworks pop along the entryway in tight, controlled bursts, like camera flashes going off in rapid succession.

Jarvis Valentine steps out onto the stage, UTA Championship strapped around his waist. The crowd response is big and immediate -- a surge of cheers for the man at the top of the mountain.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent, from Lincoln, Nebraska, weighing in at two hundred and seventy-four pounds... he is the reigning United Toughness Alliance Champion... JARVIS! VALENTINE!"

Jarvis takes a moment at the top of the ramp, looking out over the crowd, then down toward the ring where Hightower waits. There's no showboating tonight -- just a deep breath and a subtle nod as he starts the walk.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine, the UTA Champion, walking into a situation that any other champion might

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have tried to talk their way out of. Thirty minutes with David Hightower one week before Black Horizon, where he defends that title against Sean Jackson."

Mark Bravo: "This is not smart, John. Brave? Sure. Admirable? Yeah. But not smart. One bad landing against a guy like Hightower and that championship match next week starts looking a whole lot different."

As Jarvis makes his way down the ramp, he glances to the side where the chain lies coiled under the apron at Hightower's corner. His jaw tightens for a second, but he never breaks stride.

He climbs the steps, wipes his boots on the apron out of habit, then steps between the ropes. The champion walks straight to the hard-cam side, unhooks the UTA Championship from his waist, and raises it high for the fans one time -- even if it's not on the line, it's why he's here.

The camera catches his eyes flicking back to Hightower as he lowers the belt, handing it off to the timekeeper.

John Phillips: "Title not at stake, but pride and momentum absolutely are. If Jarvis can outlast a monster like David Hightower for thirty minutes, it sends a message straight to Sean Jackson before Black Horizon."

Mark Bravo: "Flip it. If David Hightower mauls the champion and stacks up falls on him tonight, you think Sean Jackson isn't licking his chops? The champ is gambling with his body and his mystique here."

Jarvis steps into his corner, bouncing lightly on his toes, rolling his shoulders. Across from him, Hightower leans back against the turnbuckles, hands on the top ropes, eyes locked dead center on the champion.

The referee moves to the middle, signaling to the timekeeper, then glances from one man to the other.

Referee: "You ready, Jarvis?"

Jarvis nods once, eyes never leaving Hightower.

Referee: "You ready, David?"

Hightower cracks his neck, pushes off the buckles, and steps forward, giving the faintest nod.

The referee raises his hand, ready to signal for the bell as the camera finds the digital clock graphic coming up on the screen: 30:00.

Champion and legend step out of their corners, the air in the PNC Arena tightening as the final match of WHEEL OF CHANCE: RALEIGH is about to begin.

The referee is just about to signal for the bell when Jarvis suddenly steps out of his corner, raising a hand.

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Jarvis Valentine: "Hold up. Wait."

The ref pauses, hand in mid-air. Hightower stops mid-step, frowning. The crowd murmurs, unsure what's happening as Jarvis calls for a microphone.

The ring announcer hands one in, and Jarvis takes it, pacing a slow half-circle between the two men, eyes flicking from Hightower to the hard-cam.

Jarvis Valentine: "David Hightower... you and everybody in Raleigh know one thing about me by now."

He glances down at the UTA Championship belt resting on the timekeeper's table, then back up.

Jarvis Valentine: "I'm a fighting champion."

The crowd pops loud, sensing where this is going.

Jarvis Valentine: "This was booked as a thirty-minute Iron Man Match. No title on the line. Warm-up, right? Keep the engine running before Sean Jackson at Black Horizon."

He shakes his head.

Jarvis Valentine: "That's not good enough for me. That's not what this company is built on. And it sure as hell isn't what that man deserves."

He points straight at Hightower.

Jarvis Valentine: "So how about this, David..."

He steps closer, eyes locked on the West Memphis brawler.

Jarvis Valentine: "UTA Championship. On. The. Line."

The fans ERUPT, the PNC Arena exploding into a "JAR-VIS! JAR-VIS!" chant that rolls around the building.

John Phillips: "Oh my-- Jarvis Valentine just offered to put the UTA Championship on the line in this Iron Man Match!"

Mark Bravo: "One week before Black Horizon! One week before Sean Jackson! Is he insane or just that confident?!"

The referee looks stunned, glancing from Jarvis to the ringside officials as Jarvis hands the mic off. David Hightower stares across the ring, chest rising and falling, chain still coiled at the floor outside his corner like a ghost of his past life.

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Jarvis steps in a little closer, no fear in his eyes.

Jarvis Valentine: "What do you say, Hightower?"

The mic is close enough to pick up David's rough chuckle. He tilts his head, looking Jarvis up and down, then slowly nods.

David Hightower: "You wanna be that stupid..."

He steps forward, right up into Jarvis' space, nose-to-nose.

David Hightower: "...I ain't sayin' no."

The crowd roars even louder, the building practically shaking now.

John Phillips: "There you have it! David Hightower has *accepted* -- he is willing to fight for the UTA Championship!"

The referee hustles to the ropes, conferring briefly with the timekeeper and ringside officials, hands waving. After a moment, the ring announcer stands, mic in hand.

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen... I have just been informed... JARVIS VALENTINE has requested, and DAVID HIGHTOWER has accepted... this thirty-minute Iron Man Match... is NOW for the UTA... CHAMPIONSHIP!"

The pop is deafening.

Mark Bravo: "Jarvis Valentine just turned a dangerous exhibition into a full-blown title defense! One week before Sean Jackson, this man is putting everything on the table in Raleigh!"

John Phillips: "If David Hightower can outscore Jarvis in thirty minutes, we walk into Black Horizon with a brand new UTA Champion and a very different world for Sean Jackson!"

The referee retrieves the UTA Championship, holds it high between the two men for the hard-cam, then hands it back out to the timekeeper. The clock graphic resets: 30:00.

Jarvis and David step back into their corners, eyes never leaving each other now that the stakes have been raised to the absolute maximum.

The referee checks with both men one last time, then signals for the bell.

The bell rings and the clock on the screen kicks to life -- 30:00 and counting.

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Jarvis steps out of his corner, hands up, circling, trying to gauge the distance. Across from him, David Hightower comes forward with none of the bounce, none of the flash. He just walks. Straight line. Shoulders squared, chin tucked, like he's headed into another bar fight.

They meet in the center and lock up. Immediately, the difference shows.

Hightower doesn't just win the collar-and-elbow -- he bullies it. He shoves Jarvis back a step, then two, then three, until the champion's shoulder blades thump the turnbuckles.

John Phillips: "Right away you can see it -- David Hightower might be older, might be more beat up, but he is bigger, rougher, and he is imposing that on the champion."

The referee steps in with a count. Hightower raises his hands halfway, like he's going to give a clean break... then buries a forearm into Jarvis' jaw at four.

Jarvis' head snaps to the side, his body sagging into the corner as the ref backs Hightower out, barking.

Referee: "Hey! Watch it! One more like that and I'll start taking falls!"

Hightower just stares through him, unbothered, then shoulders past as soon as he's allowed, marching right back into Jarvis' space.

He grabs a wrist and yanks the champion out of the corner, whipping him hard across the ring. Jarvis hits the opposite buckles chest-first with a heavy smack, staggering back a step--

--and Hightower is already on him with a corner clothesline barrage. One. Two. Three. Four. Each one a blunt instrument driving Jarvis back into the pads.

Mark Bravo: "That's that no-nonsense big-ass brawler we talked about. No flips, no finesse. Just a man who's spent his life in fights and learned what hurts most."

Jarvis slumps, arms draped over the ropes. Hightower grabs a handful of hair and drags him out again, this time shooting him into the opposite corner. The champion hits hard, stumbling out on rubber legs.

Hightower steps into him, scoops him up like dead weight, and sends him up and over with a big back body drop in the center of the ring. Jarvis hits the mat with a grunt, arching his back in pain.

John Phillips: "Back body drop from a man that size, with that kind of mileage and power behind it, and Jarvis Valentine is getting rattled early."

The clock ticks down: 27:43.

Hightower doesn't stop. He reaches down, hauls Jarvis up by the arm, and muscled him sideways into a

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sidewalk slam, dropping him hard and staying on him for the first cover of the match.

He presses an arm across Jarvis' chest.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis shoots a shoulder up at two, jaw clenched.

John Phillips: "First cover of the match goes to David Hightower, and the champion is already fighting from underneath with more than twenty-seven minutes still on the clock."

Hightower rolls off him, but not far. He plants a boot between Jarvis' shoulders and grinds down, using the ropes for balance as he leans his weight into the smaller man's spine.

Referee: "Off the ropes, David! One! Two! Three! Four!"

At four, Hightower steps off, hands raised, but as Jarvis pushes to his knees, the West Memphis brute clubs him across the back with a double sledge, the same motion that birthed his Drop The Hammer.

Jarvis sprawls forward, clutching at his upper back, face contorted.

Mark Bravo: "That right there is why people say this isn't the match Jarvis wanted a week before Sean Jackson. Every shot from Hightower looks like it's taking weeks off his career, not seconds off the clock."

Hightower drags Jarvis up again, shoves him throat-first across the middle rope, and leans on him, forearm grinding across the back of his neck as he presses him down into the cable. The ref counts again, but Hightower uses every heartbeat he can before backing off.

Jarvis gasps, hanging on the ropes, eyes watering. Hightower doesn't give him long.

He hooks the champion from behind in a waistlock, huffs once, and with surprising ease, pops his hips and sends Jarvis up and over with a nasty release German-style throw -- not pretty, not perfect, but brutally effective.

Jarvis lands awkwardly on his shoulder and side, rolling through and clutching at his neck.

John Phillips: "That might not be on his listed move set, but when you grow up in junkyards and prison yards, you learn how to throw people around. Jarvis is in a bad way early."

Hightower rolls to a knee, eyes fixed on his opponent. He pushes up slowly, methodically, then stalks over, grabbing Jarvis by the wrist and dragging him toward the corner.

He hoists the champion, sits him on the middle turnbuckle, then climbs up to the second rope himself,

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looming over him. The crowd buzzes, sensing something dangerous.

Mark Bravo: "You don't normally see David Hightower go high-risk, but this is a man who will dive a knee through your chest if he smells blood."

Hightower steadies himself with one hand on the top rope, the other palming Jarvis' face to keep him in place. For a moment, it looks like he might be lining up the West Memphis Avalanche early.

Jarvis, blinking through the haze, brings an arm up and drives a desperate right hand into Hightower's ribs. Another. Another. The big man grunts, the shots not pretty, but sharp enough to make him pause.

John Phillips: "Jarvis trying to create some separation here, just enough to get out of danger."

Hightower answers by hammering a short headbutt into Jarvis' brow, dazing him, then steps down off the ropes instead, changing plans. He yanks the champion down with him, back to the mat, and spins him into another quick sidewalk slam, this one even nastier than the last.

He hooks the leg this time, leaning all his weight across Jarvis' chest.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis kicks out again, but slower this time, shoulder rising with effort.

Mark Bravo: "David Hightower isn't just beating Jarvis Valentine, he is *wearing him down* in the first five minutes of a thirty-minute marathon. That's what experience and meanness look like."

The clock shows 25:52 as Hightower sits up, staring down at the champion. He doesn't look frustrated. He looks like a man enjoying the process.

He grabs Jarvis by the back of the head, hauls him upright again, and this time launches him shoulder-first through the ropes, sending him crashing down to the floor right near that coil of chain and tow hitch.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine just got dumped to the outside, and he is perilously close to that chain he insisted David not use. The champion is in trouble early with plenty of time left on the clock."

Inside the ring, David Hightower rests his forearms on the top rope, looming over the fallen champion, the picture of an older, rougher man who knows he's in control of the opening chapter of this Iron Man title fight.

Back on the floor, Jarvis pushes up on his hands, trying to shake the cobwebs out. Inside the ring, David Hightower isn't content to wait.

He drops down off the apron to the floor, the impact of his boots echoing as he stalks around the corner toward the champion. Jarvis gets to one knee--

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--and Hightower meets him with a heavy forearm across the back of the neck, clubbing him down to all fours.

John Phillips: "Hightower staying on the champion, not giving Jarvis a second to breathe out here on the floor."

He grabs a fistful of Jarvis' hair and trunks, hauls him up, and slams him spine-first into the ringside barrier. Jarvis arches in pain, hands clawing at the rail.

Hightower takes a half-step back and barrels in, crushing Jarvis against the barricade with a corner clothesline-style shot that rattles the metal. Fans in the front row lean back instinctively as the barrier shifts under the impact.

Mark Bravo: "That's not ring savvy, that's junkyard physics. Put a man between you and something that doesn't move and let the collision do the work."

Jarvis slumps, only the barricade keeping him upright. Hightower peels him off it with another yank, then turns and hurls him under the bottom rope, sending the champion rolling back into the ring.

But David doesn't follow right away.

He pauses. His eyes drop to the coil of chain lying near his corner -- the same heavy tow chain with the hitch on the end that he dragged out of his truck earlier in the night.

Slowly, almost methodically, he reaches down and wraps both hands around it. The crowd noise changes instantly, a low murmur of dread rising through the PNC Arena.

John Phillips: "Oh no... Hightower's looking at that chain again."

David lifts it, links sliding over his fists until the tow hook hangs heavy at the end. He raises it high over his head, metal glinting under the lights.

In the ring, the referee leans over the ropes, eyes wide.

Referee: "Don't do it, David! I swear to you, you use that and I'll call it! Don't use it!"

Hightower stares up at him, jaw working, knuckles tightening on the metal. His breathing gets heavier, that old, ugly instinct fighting with the rules in his head.

Mark Bravo: "You can see it on his face, John. This is who David Hightower used to be. This is the stuff that got him locked up, scarred up, and banned from regular life."

Jarvis, groggy, has rolled toward the apron, trying to pull himself up by the bottom rope. His head pokes through just enough to sight Hightower on the floor.

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David glances at him... then back at the chain... then at the referee.

His fingers flex.

Referee: "Don't do it! Put it down!"

Hightower's eyes harden.

David Hightower: "Too late."

He takes one step forward and SWINGS. The tow hook and chain whip up in a brutal arc, smashing straight into Jarvis' skull as the champion's head clears the ropes.

Jarvis crumples instantly, collapsing back to the arena floor in a heap.

John Phillips: "Oh my God! Hightower just blasted Jarvis Valentine with that tow hook!"

Mark Bravo: "He knew exactly what he was doing, and he did it anyway!"

The crowd explodes in a mixture of horror and furious boos. The referee doesn't hesitate -- he spins toward the timekeeper, waving his arms.

Referee: "Ring the bell! That's a fall! That's a fall!"

DING! DING!

Hightower isn't done.

As Jarvis lies on his back, eyes glassy, David loops the chain around the champion's throat, planting a boot against the floor and yanking back, choking him with the thick links.

Jarvis' hands claw at the chain, legs kicking weakly as the metal bites into his neck.

John Phillips: "Come on! Somebody stop this! Jarvis Valentine is being choked out by that chain!"

Mark Bravo: "Hightower doesn't care about the rules anymore. He's trying to win this match in blood, not numbers!"

The referee slides out of the ring, grabbing hold of the chain and trying to pry it loose.

Referee: "Enough! Let him go! Let him go, David!"

Hightower yanks back once more, a guttural roar tearing from his throat, then finally relents as the official

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physically hauls on the chain, forcing slack into it. Jarvis gasps and rolls to his side, clutching his throat, coughing hard.

The referee tears the chain away, flinging it aside in disgust, and shoves David back with both hands.

Referee: "That's a disqualification fall! You're down one! You do it again and I'll throw you out of here!"

The scoreboard graphic flashes on the screen:

JARVIS VALENTINE - 1

DAVID HIGHTOWER - 0

John Phillips: "The referee has awarded Jarvis Valentine the first fall of this Iron Man Match via disqualification! The champion leads one to nothing, but he is in a world of trouble!"

Mark Bravo: "That's the sick logic, John -- Hightower just gave Jarvis a point, but he might've taken ten minutes off the champion's ability to compete. There's still a lot of time left on that clock."

Hightower doesn't look like he cares about the scoreboard. He shoves past the referee, grabs Jarvis by the head and the waistband, and roughly hauls him to his feet.

With a grunt, he rolls the champion under the bottom rope back into the ring, then slides in right after him, eyes cold and mean. The chain lies discarded at ringside, but the damage is very much done.

As the clock continues to tick down, David Hightower looms over a battered Jarvis Valentine, down one fall on paper but firmly in control of the champion's battered body in the ring.

Hightower slides in after Jarvis, that ugly choke mark already blooming red around the champion's throat. He doesn't waste a second -- he drops to his knees and shoves Jarvis onto his back, throwing his weight across the cover.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis jerks a shoulder up at two and a half, more on instinct than awareness. Hightower glares down at him, breathing hard, then grabs a fistful of his hair and hauls him upright again.

John Phillips: "Somehow, some way, Jarvis Valentine kicks out! The champion is up one-nothing on the scoreboard, but he can barely breathe after that chain around his throat."

Mark Bravo: "That fall might be the most expensive point lead I've ever seen, John. He's up, but he's got twenty-plus minutes to survive an angry David Hightower."

Hightower doesn't argue, doesn't plead with the referee. He just drives a knee up into Jarvis' midsection,

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folding him over, then muscles him back into the corner again. Three more heavy body shots follow -- short, thudding blows sunk deep into the ribs.

Jarvis' legs wobble. Hightower grabs his wrist and launches him across the ring one more time. The champion slams into the opposite buckles and stumbles out, chest heaving, legs gone rubbery.

David steps in and scoops him up like he's lifting a sack of scrap, turning and driving him down with another sidewalk slam, this one landing dead center. The ring shakes under the impact.

Hightower hooks a leg, leaning all his weight across Jarvis' chest.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Again, Jarvis kicks out -- but it's slower, weaker, his arm barely lifting off the mat before flopping back down.

John Phillips: "Another near fall! Jarvis Valentine refusing to stay down, but how many of these can he take?"

Hightower growls, more annoyed at Jarvis' stubbornness than anything else. He gets to his feet, drags the champion up with him by the back of the head, and shoves him chest-first into the corner.

He backs up a half-step, then unloads with a barrage of clotheslines -- one, two, three, four -- each one smashing Jarvis deeper into the turnbuckles until the champion's arms slump over the top rope, barely holding him upright.

Mark Bravo: "That's not a flurry, that's a man beating dents into a car door. Jarvis is a heavy bag right now."

Hightower grabs him by the wrist, pulls him out a couple steps, then lets go and blasts him in the chest with "Drop The Hammer" -- a running double sledge that hits like a load-bearing beam.

Jarvis flips backward from the force, crashing to the mat and rolling onto his side, clutching at his ribs.

John Phillips: "Drop The Hammer! Right to the chest, and the champion is barely conscious after that!"

The clock flashes briefly on the screen: 20:37.

Hightower looks down at Jarvis, then glances up at the nearest corner. The crowd starts to buzz uneasily as he trudges over and steps out onto the apron.

Mark Bravo: "You've got to be kidding me, big man. You're not thinking what I think you're thinking..."

He climbs up onto the second rope from the outside, then up again to the top, turning carefully as his boots find their footing. The image is almost surreal -- a man built for barroom brawls perched high over the ring,

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staring down at the champion sprawled below.

John Phillips: "If he hits the West Memphis Avalanche from up there, Jarvis Valentine might not even make it to Black Horizon..."

Hightower steadies himself, one hand briefly touching the ring post for balance. Then he bends his knees and leaps -- a big man in dirty jeans dropping from the sky.

The diving knee comes down like a guillotine, smashing into Jarvis' sternum with a sickening thud. The champion's body jackknifes and then flattens out, all the air driven out of him in a single, awful moment.

Mark Bravo: "West. Memphis. Avalanche! He just drove that knee through the champion's chest!"

Hightower rolls off the impact and immediately crawls back over, shoving Jarvis onto his back and hooking both legs deep, folding him nearly in half.

Referee: "ONE! TWO! THREE!"

DING!

The ref signals to the timekeeper, then to the announce table. The graphic on the screen updates:

JARVIS VALENTINE - 1

DAVID HIGHTOWER - 1

John Phillips: "And there it is -- David Hightower ties it up! One fall apiece after that devastating West Memphis Avalanche!"

Mark Bravo: "Look at Jarvis. He's not just down a fall's worth of energy, he's down a full tank. We're tied on the scoreboard, but the champion is in deep, deep trouble and we're not even to the halfway mark."

Hightower rolls to his knees, sweat dripping, chest heaving, but there's a grim satisfaction in his eyes. Jarvis lies motionless on the mat, clutching weakly at his ribs and throat as the clock keeps ticking down and the Iron Man war evens... at least in numbers.

The clock rolls past 18:00 as David Hightower pushes off his knees and stands, looming over the champion he's just flattened.

Jarvis Valentine rolls to his side, one arm wrapped around his ribs, the other clutching at his throat. Every breath looks like it hurts.

John Phillips: "We're tied at one fall apiece, but if you're just joining us, David Hightower has already choked Jarvis with that tow chain on the floor, got himself disqualified, and then evened it up with the West

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Memphis Avalanche. The champion is paying for that early one-nothing lead with interest."

Mark Bravo: "And don't forget, this is a title match now. Thirty minutes for the UTA Championship, one week before Black Horizon. Sean Jackson is somewhere watching this and taking notes."

The referee kneels by Jarvis, checking him, asking if he can continue. Jarvis nods, teeth gritted, and uses the official's shoulder to pull himself up, stubborn as ever.

Hightower doesn't give him more than that. He steps back in, grabs a wrist, and yanks him into a short-arm clothesline that nearly turns the champion inside out. Jarvis crashes down again, back arching in pain.

David drops down into another cover, forearm grinding into Jarvis' face.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis kicks out at two, slower, but still alive.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine will not quit, will not stay down, but the question is how much more he can absorb before his body just stops answering."

Hightower snarls under his breath and hauls him back up, shoving him into the corner again. He starts another barrage of heavy shots, but this time, as he cocks his arm for a fourth clothesline, Jarvis ducks under it and stumbles out of the corner on instinct.

Hightower turns--

Right into a wild, desperate discus clothesline from Jarvis. It's not pretty, but it connects flush, catching David square in the chest and jaw and staggering the bigger man back a few steps.

Mark Bravo: "Jarvis digging deep, throwing that discus clothesline with everything he has left!"

Jarvis nearly falls to his knees from his own momentum, but he catches himself on the ropes, sucking in air. Hightower shakes it off, annoyed, and stomps back in, swinging a big right hand.

Jarvis ducks under, snatches a waistlock from behind, and with a grunt of effort somehow pops his hips and sends the bigger man over with a German suplex. It's not high-angle, but it's enough to put Hightower on his back.

Jarvis bridges as best he can, pain etched on his face.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Hightower powers out at two, shoving Jarvis off.

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John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine starting to string a little offense together now! Champion and challenger tied at one all, just under fifteen minutes to go in this Iron Man Match!"

Both men roll away and push up almost at the same time, slower now, sweat pouring. The crowd in Raleigh claps in rhythm, willing the champion back into the fight.

They meet in the middle again. Hightower swings a heavy lariat--

Jarvis ducks, snatches the arm, and yanks him down into a neckbreaker slam, driving the back of David's head and neck into the canvas. Hightower sits up on instinct, stunned.

Jarvis hits the ropes, comes back, and nails a running bulldog, spiking the bigger man face-first into the mat.

Mark Bravo: "That's the champion we're used to seeing! Neckbreaker slam into the running bulldog, chaining his offense together!"

Jarvis doesn't cover. Instead he rolls Hightower onto his back and backs into the corner, sucking in ragged breaths, hand pressed to his ribs. The clock ticks: 13:12.

He slaps the top turnbuckle twice, psyching himself up, then steps out and hauls David up across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. The crowd surges to its feet as he staggers under the weight.

John Phillips: "No way-- is he thinking Patriot Plunge already?!"

Jarvis' legs shake, the damage to his ribs and chest making every step a struggle, but he manages to set his feet, adjusts his grip...

...and Hightower hammers him in the side of the head with three short elbows. Jarvis' knees buckle and he loses the load, David slipping free behind him.

Jarvis turns, dazed--

--and Hightower blasts him with another Drop The Hammer, that double sledge crashing down across the champion's upper back, sending him sprawling to his knees.

Mark Bravo: "That might've been Jarvis' best shot, and Hightower snuffed it out like it was nothing."

David grabs Jarvis by the trunks and the neck, shoves him chest-first into the ropes, and as the champion rebounds backwards, Hightower wraps those thick arms around his waist and rattles off a sloppy but brutal back suplex, dumping Jarvis on the back of his head and shoulders.

He floats over into a cover, forearm grinding across Jarvis' face again.

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Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis kicks out, just barely beating the three.

John Phillips: "Another near fall for Hightower! The champion refusing to stay down, but it's taking everything he's got!"

David sits back on his knees, breathing heavily, sweat dripping off the end of his nose. He looks at the big screen where the clock is ticking: 11:39. Score still 1-1.

He snarls, gets to his feet, and drags Jarvis up again, shoving him into the corner one more time. He cocks back for another corner clothesline--

--Jarvis ducks out of the way at the last second. Hightower slams chest-first into the turnbuckles.

The champion stumbles in behind him, grabs him around the waist, and with a primal yell, rips Hightower backward with a big German suplex that lands him almost on the back of his neck. The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine with a HUGE German suplex! Where did he find that strength?!"

Jarvis doesn't bridge this time -- he's too hurt. Instead he rolls through, both men flat for a moment. Then Jarvis crawls, draping an arm over Hightower's chest.

Referee: "One! Two! Thr--!"

Hightower kicks out at the last instant, the crowd groaning.

Mark Bravo: "So close! The champion almost went up two to one there!"

Jarvis rolls away, grabbing at his ribs again, sucking wind. Hightower stirs, slower now, the repeated dumps starting to catch up to him too.

The champion uses the ropes to get to his feet, eyes glassy but focused. He waits, timing it, as Hightower pushes up to all fours, then to one knee.

Jarvis hits the ropes behind him, rebounds, and as David turns--

--he explodes forward with that discus clothesline again, this one catching Hightower flush and dropping him to one knee.

Jarvis doesn't stop. He grabs the dazed big man from the side, hauls him in, and drives him down with a crisp DDT in the center of the ring.

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John Phillips: "DDT! Jarvis chaining the discus clothesline into that DDT, trying to keep the big man down long enough to steal a fall!"

Jarvis rolls Hightower onto his back and hooks the far leg tight, leaning all his weight into it.

Referee: "ONE! TWO! THREE!"

DING!

The referee signals the fall and the crowd erupts as the scoreboard updates again:

JARVIS VALENTINE - 2

DAVID HIGHTOWER - 1

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine pulls ahead! The champion now leads two falls to one with just under ten minutes left in this Iron Man Match!"

Mark Bravo: "Listen to this place! He got brained with a chain, choked half to death, dropped with the West Memphis Avalanche, and somehow he has clawed his way into the lead!"

Jarvis rolls to his back, both men down as the clock hits 9:52 and continues to tick. The referee checks on them both, then starts urging them to their feet.

Hightower's eyes are wide and wild now, anger replacing the earlier cold control. Jarvis drags himself upright with the ropes, clutching his ribs but standing his ground.

The champion has the lead. The challenger has the rage. And there's still time left on the clock for this Iron Man title fight to twist again.

The clock rolls under nine minutes as both men drag themselves up, the scoreboard reading 2-1 in favor of Jarvis Valentine.

Hightower's face is flushed, sweat dripping, but the look in his eyes has gone from grim to downright mean. Jarvis leans on the ropes, one arm wrapped tight around his ribs, breathing like every inhale cuts.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine somehow pulled ahead, two falls to one, but the champion is hanging on by a thread here in Raleigh."

Mark Bravo: "And the man across from him is David Hightower, who's been told his whole life that bleeding and hurting are just parts of the day. This is where he lives."

They stagger toward center. Hightower fires first -- a heavy right hand that snaps Jarvis' head back. Jarvis answers with a shot of his own, not as hard, but dead on the jaw. Another from Hightower. Another from

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Jarvis. The crowd roars with each connection.

Hightower cuts the exchange off with a knee to the gut, folding Jarvis over. He snatches the champion up, underhooks his arms, and drives a series of short, brutal headbutts down into the back of Jarvis' neck.

Jarvis drops to both knees, arms hanging limp.

John Phillips: "Hightower targeting the neck and upper spine now after all those suplexes, trying to take away Jarvis' ability to lift and throw."

David hauls him back up, shoves him into the ropes, and as Jarvis rebounds, he bends, scoops, and launches him with a massive back body drop. Jarvis hits and bounces, rolling onto his stomach, clutching the small of his back.

Hightower doesn't bother with anything fancy. He steps in, drops a big elbow across Jarvis' spine, then another, then another.

The clock flashes: 7:42.

He drags Jarvis up one more time, walks him into the near corner, and rocks him with a short, stiff forearm under the jaw. The champion sags. Hightower climbs to the second rope on the inside, towering over him, and starts raining down clubbing shots to the side of the head, using the top rope for leverage.

Referee: "One! Two! Three! Four!"

At four, Hightower hops down, grabs Jarvis by the wrist and pulls him out of the corner a step -- then bulldozes straight through him with another "Drop The Hammer" double sledge, driving that forearm-through-both-fists straight into the champion's chest.

Jarvis hits the mat flat on his back, arms flung out.

Mark Bravo: "He's going after that chest and those ribs again - that's all the oxygen Jarvis has left, and Hightower's crushing it out of him."

David doesn't hesitate. He stomps toward the ropes, steps out onto the apron, and begins to climb again -- slower this time, but determined.

John Phillips: "We've already seen what happens when David Hightower leaves his feet. The last West Memphis Avalanche nearly drove Jarvis through the ring."

Hightower reaches the second rope... then the top. He steadies himself, looks down at the champion sprawled dead center, and takes a breath.

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He leaps.

The diving knee drop comes down like a dropped cinder block, smashing into Jarvis' chest again. The champion jackknifes violently and then goes limp, both arms wrapping around his ribs on instinct.

Mark Bravo: "Another West Memphis Avalanche! Right to the heart of the champion!"

Hightower rolls from the impact and immediately drags himself over, yanking Jarvis away from the ropes by the leg and covering him, hooking both legs deep.

Referee: "ONE! TWO! THREE!"

DING!

The ref signals to the timekeeper and the scoreboard updates again:

JARVIS VALENTINE - 2

DAVID HIGHTOWER - 2

John Phillips: "And just like that, we are tied again! Two falls each with just over six minutes left on the clock!"

Mark Bravo: "The champion's ribs are wrecked, his neck's a mess, and he's gone from up one, to tied, to up one, and now we're right back where we started -- dead even, and hurt on both sides."

Hightower rolls to his back, spent from the effort, chest heaving. Jarvis lies motionless, one boot twitching as he tries to will himself to move. The crowd is split between anxious silence and rhythmic clapping, trying to revive both men.

The clock: 5:58.

Slowly, they start to stir.

Hightower is up first, using the ropes. Jarvis follows, dragging himself up on the opposite side, a hand pressed hard to his chest as if he can hold it together by force.

They meet in the center again, wobbling. Hightower swings heavy -- Jarvis ducks, barely, and grabs a waistlock from behind. He tries another German suplex, but this time his back and ribs give out; he can't get the lift. Hightower pries his hands apart and hammers him with a back elbow.

Jarvis stumbles into the ropes but rebounds with a sudden, desperate clothesline. It rocks Hightower but doesn't drop him. The two collide again, trading close-range bombs, each shot slower, but every one landing flush.

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John Phillips: "This isn't pretty anymore; this is pride. Champion and challenger just throwing whatever's left in the tank at each other."

Hightower ducks a wild swing and shoves Jarvis chest-first into the buckles. As the champion staggers back, David grabs him from behind for another back suplex--

--Jarvis shifts his weight, rolls forward, and slips out under the arm, dropping to a knee behind him. He pops up and shoves Hightower chest-first into the same corner, then hits the opposite ropes.

As David turns, Jarvis barrels in with a running clothesline from the corner, smashing Hightower back into the buckles. The big man slumps down to a seated position.

Mark Bravo: "There's that corner line we've seen before from Jarvis! Every piece of offense now could swing this whole match."

Jarvis staggers back out, sucking wind, then forces himself to the middle of the ring, hand outstretched toward the ropes, measuring.

He takes another breath, steps in, and reaches down to haul Hightower up across his shoulders again, going for the Patriot Plunge. The audience rises with him, the buzz swelling.

John Phillips: "If he hits the Patriot Plunge at this stage, that could be three-two with not much time left--"

But the ribs won't hold. Jarvis' knees buckle, pain screaming through his chest. Hightower slips out the back again, landing behind him, and drives a clubbing shot to the kidneys, sending the champion sprawling to his knees.

David reaches for him, but Jarvis grabs the front of his jeans, yanking him forward while dropping to his side, sending Hightower throat-first across the middle rope. The big man recoils, grabbing at his neck.

Jarvis crawls to the ropes, pulls himself up, and hits them again, rebounding into a low-angled running bulldog that spikes Hightower down. He rolls him over and drapes an arm across.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Hightower powers out at two, shoving Jarvis off.

Mark Bravo: "So close again, but it stays two to two! Both men just one good shot away from stealing this thing!"

The clock: 3:11.

Both men stay down, rolling in opposite directions, each clutching their respective wounds -- Jarvis his ribs

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and throat, Hightower the back of his neck and shoulders.

The referee starts a count, but both begin to move at six, dragging themselves to their feet on opposite sides of the ring.

John Phillips: "Under three minutes remaining, tied at two falls apiece. The next mistake or the next miracle might decide who walks out of Raleigh as UTA Champion."

Jarvis and Hightower turn toward each other, eyes glassy but locked in, as the clock rolls toward 2:30 -- the Iron Man Match dead even, the title hanging in the balance, and the closing minutes looming over the PNC Arena.

Jarvis and Hightower stagger out of their corners again, the clock in the corner of the screen ticking down past 2:20. The Raleigh crowd is red-hot, every strike these two throw met with a chorus of noise.

They start to circle--

--and then the lights dip.

A familiar drum machine heartbeat pulses through the arena.

Then, clear as day, that first eerie line from Phil Collins hits the sound system.

John Phillips: "...No. No way. No way!"

"In The Air Tonight" washes over the PNC Arena, and the reaction is instant and nuclear.

John Phillips: "OH MY GOD! IT'S SEAN JACKSON! IT'S SEAN JACKSON!"

Mark Bravo: "Jarvis Valentine's opponent at Black Horizon has just walked into the building, and there is *no* love lost between Sean Jackson and *either* of those men in the ring!"

The camera whips to the stage.

There he is.

Sean Jackson steps out through the curtain in a dark tailored suit, tie loose, that cold, cruel smirk spread across his face. He stops at the top of the ramp, soaking in the wall of boos and scattered cheers, then raises one hand in the familiar "hook 'em horns" gesture, slowly pivoting his gaze from the squared circle to the hard-cam.

John Phillips: "Three-time UTA World Champion, former NeWA World Heavyweight Champion... Sean Jackson is here in Raleigh, and he is staring down the man he meets in seven days for the UTA

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Championship!"

Mark Bravo: "And don't forget David Hightower. Jackson's burned bridges and bodies all over this business. This is not a man walking into friendly territory."

In the ring, Jarvis has one hand on the top rope, the other on his ribs, staring up the ramp at Sean, anger and unease warring on his face. Across from him, Hightower turns toward the entrance as well, jaw tightening, eyes narrowing. He doesn't like this either -- different reasons, same grim reaction.

John Phillips: "We are tied at two falls apiece in a thirty-minute Iron Man Match for the UTA Championship, and now the man waiting at Black Horizon is walking down the ramp like he owns the place."

Sean begins a slow, deliberate walk toward the ring, in step with the beat, eyes never leaving the two broken bodies inside the ropes. As the famous drum fill builds toward the first big hit, he stops halfway down, just outside the "splash zone," and folds his arms.

Mark Bravo: "In fact... wait... John, are we about to watch Sean Jackson hand-pick which of these two men he wants next week? Is that what this is? Scouting? Or is he here to tip the scales?"

Sean smirks wider at the commentary, mouthing something about "options" as he lifts his chin toward Jarvis, then shifts his gaze to Hightower, measuring the big man like another slab of meat to carve through.

The referee leans over the ropes, shouting down at him.

Referee: "You stay out of this, Sean! You don't touch them!"

Jackson raises both hands in mock innocence, taking a half-step back. He taps his temple with one finger, then points at Jarvis, calling out over the crowd.

Sean Jackson: "Tick-tock, champ. Don't let me distract you."

Jarvis snarls, shouting something back that the cameras don't quite catch -- but it's enough of a moment. Hightower doesn't waste it.

He barrels in from behind, clubbing Jarvis across the back of the neck with a double axehandle and sending the champion sprawling chest-first to the canvas. The crowd boos as Sean laughs quietly on the ramp.

John Phillips: "Jarvis Valentine took his eyes off the prize for half a second, and David Hightower made him pay for it!"

Hightower drops to a knee and rolls Jarvis up from behind, stacking him tight with a handful of waist and all his weight bearing down.

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Referee: "One! Two--!"

Jarvis kicks out at two and three-quarters, the PNC Arena exhaling in a rush.

Mark Bravo: "Almost stole it! Hightower almost went up three to two right in front of Sean Jackson!"

The clock flashes: 1:34.

Sean checks an invisible watch on his wrist and grins, making a little "time's running out" gesture toward the ring.

Back inside, Hightower drags Jarvis up, but the champion suddenly fires up, hammering short shots into David's ribs -- one, two, three. The crowd rallies behind him, clapping in rhythm. Hightower answers with a knee to the gut, cutting him off again, but there's less snap on it now.

The two men collide in the middle of the ring, trading forearms as Sean Jackson watches like a vulture from the ramp, arms folded, lips curling with every stiff shot landed.

John Phillips: "Under ninety seconds left, still tied at two falls apiece, and Sean Jackson is standing right there watching the man -- or men -- he might leave broken at Black Horizon."

Mark Bravo: "Is he here to pick his victim, John, or to make sure this match takes just enough out of Jarvis Valentine that next week is a slaughter?"

Hightower rocks Jarvis with another forearm. Jarvis fires back with one of his own, both men swaying on their feet as the roar in Raleigh builds and the clock drops toward a single minute -- Sean Jackson smirking on the ramp, the UTA Championship hanging in the balance, and no clear winner yet in sight.

The forearm exchange in the center of the ring is breaking down into wild swings when the entire mood in the arena shifts.

Sean Jackson drops the smug stance on the ramp... and starts marching to the ring.

John Phillips: "Wait a second, where's he going? Sean Jackson is coming down to ringside!"

Mark Bravo: "There is less than a minute on the clock! Stay out of this, Sean!"

Jarvis stumbles Hightower back with a final shot and both men sag against opposite ropes, eyes flicking toward the movement at ringside.

Sean circles to the steps, walks up them slow, and for a heartbeat it looks like he might just stand there and watch.

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Then he explodes through the ropes.

Jackson slides in and charges straight at Jarvis Valentine, blasting him with a running forearm to the side of the head that sends the champion spinning to the mat.

John Phillips: "Oh come on! Sean Jackson just attacked Jarvis Valentine!"

David Hightower pushes off his ropes, roaring, and lunges at Sean--

--only to eat a high knee under the jaw that staggers him to a knee. Jackson grabs him by the back of the head and hurls him shoulder-first into the ring post, the big man crashing down in a heap.

The referee instantly calls for the bell, waving his hands frantically.

DING DING DING!

The boos are deafening.

John Phillips: "The referee has thrown it out! Sean Jackson just ruined this Iron Man Match!"

Mark Bravo: "We were tied at two falls apiece, the UTA Championship hanging in the balance, and now it's chaos in Raleigh!"

Sean stomps Jarvis once in the ribs for good measure, then turns and puts a boot to Hightower's spine as he tries to rise. The challenger lurches forward, catching himself on the middle rope, coughing hard.

The referee ducks out of the ring, yelling for help, as the crowd rains hatred down on Jackson. He just stands in the center, adjusting his tie like nothing happened.

John Phillips: "With neither man having the advantage when Sean struck, we don't even have a clear winner of this Iron Man Match!"

Mark Bravo: "And that might be the point, John! Leave both men damaged, leave the title picture in disarray, walk into Black Horizon with all the leverage!"

Suddenly, the sound system detonates with a shotgun blast and a dirty southern riff.

"Shock N Rolla... HERE 2 SHOW YA..."

John Phillips: "Wait a minute--"

Mark Bravo: "You gotta be kidding me!"

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CHANCE VON CRANK comes flying out from the back, shirt half-open, still a little soaked from earlier beer duty, and the place comes unglued.

John Phillips: "Shock-N-Rolla himself, CHANCE VON CRANK, is back out here!"

CVC barrels down the ramp at full speed, slides under the bottom rope, and pops up swinging.

He clocks Sean Jackson with a wild right hand.

Then another.

Then a third that sends Sean stumbling backward toward the ropes.

Mark Bravo: "Jackson picked the wrong night to try and hijack the main event!"

CVC keeps firing, windmilling like a bar fight gone wrong, until Sean has no choice but to dip through the ropes and drop to the floor, hands up in front of his face.

Jarvis is on one knee in the corner. Hightower is clutching the middle rope, snarling. They both get to their feet, drifting toward the same side of the ring.

Sean backs up a few steps at ringside, straightening his jacket, staring up at the three men in the ring: Chance Von Crank, Jarvis Valentine, David Hightower. The crowd chants against him, a low, venomous roar.

Jackson just smiles.

He raises both hands, palms out, mouthing, "Hey, hey, I'm done," and starts backing up the ramp, never taking his eyes off the ring.

John Phillips: "Sean Jackson came in here and tried to tear this whole thing apart, and now he's just... walking away from the wreckage he made."

CVC turns, chest heaving, looking from Jarvis to Hightower to the referee on the floor.

Chance Von Crank: "Hell no. Hell *no*. It ain't goin' down like that."

He stomps over to the ropes closest to the timekeeper, jabbing a finger toward the desk.

Chance Von Crank: "Put ninety seconds back on that clock!"

The crowd roars at the idea.

Chance Von Crank: "You heard me! We're restartin' this sombitch from ninety seconds! We *gotta* have a

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winner tonight!"

John Phillips: "There you have it, folks! Chance Von Crank, the host of the Wheel of Chance, is making the rules tonight in Raleigh!"

Mark Bravo: "We're going back to a minute and a half on the clock, tied at two, and we are *guaranteed* a winner! But John... after that attack from Sean Jackson, what do Jarvis Valentine and David Hightower have left?!"

The camera cuts to the big screen as the timekeeper and referee confer. The clock graphic resets, this time flashing boldly:

1:30

Jarvis leans in his corner, clutching his ribs, eyes burning. Hightower stretches his neck, rolling his shoulders, chain-scarred back rising and falling with deep breaths. CVC slaps the top turnbuckle, hyping the crowd, then points to the referee.

Chance Von Crank: "Ring the bell! Let's finish it!"

The referee nods, checks both men one last time, and steps to the center.

DING!

The clock starts ticking from ninety seconds. Jarvis Valentine and David Hightower turn toward each other one more time -- battered, bruised, and now thrust into a sudden death sprint for the UTA Championship.

The reset clock flashes 1:30 as Jarvis Valentine and David Hightower push out of their corners, both men visibly rocked from Sean Jackson's cheap shots.

Jarvis' eyes are glassy, his hand clamped over his ribs. Every breath looks like a knife. Across from him, Hightower rolls his right shoulder, still wincing where it met cold steel a minute ago. Neither of them is fresh. Neither of them is right.

John Phillips: "To answer the question -- that attack from Sean Jackson has changed everything. Jarvis Valentine's already damaged ribs and neck are even worse, David Hightower got driven shoulder-first into the post, and now they've got ninety seconds to try and kill each other for the UTA Championship."

Mark Bravo: "And the sickest part, John? Sean Jackson's somewhere back there smiling about it. No matter who wins, he's walking into Black Horizon with a target that's already half-broken."

They close the distance and Hightower swings first, a big looping right hand. Jarvis slips it by half a step -- not clean, but enough -- and snaps a jab into David's jaw. It doesn't drop him, but it stings.

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Hightower answers with a short headbutt that drops Jarvis to a knee, the champion's legs dipping out from under him.

Clock: 1:12.

David hooks Jarvis under the arms, trying to muscle him up for another high-impact slam, but his bad shoulder gives a little. Jarvis slips free, dropping behind him and collapsing forward into the back of Hightower's knee with a desperate chop block.

The big man drops to one knee, bellowing.

John Phillips: "You can see it -- Hightower's shoulder isn't right after that shot into the post. He can't muscle Jarvis around like he did earlier, and the champion is exploiting every crack he can find."

Jarvis staggers to his feet, clinging to the ropes for balance. He hits them, bounces in, and drives a running neckbreaker slam that snaps Hightower backward to the mat.

The impact jars Jarvis' own already-abused neck; he rolls away clutching at it, grimacing.

Mark Bravo: "That's the other side of Sean's attack -- every move Jarvis hits that involves his neck and chest is taking a toll on him too. He's fighting his opponent and his own body at the same time."

Clock: 0:55.

Jarvis crawls back over, drapes an arm across Hightower's chest.

Referee: "One! Two--!"

Hightower powers out at two, shoving Jarvis off with that good arm.

Both men roll opposite ways again, the crowd on its feet, the noise a constant roar now.

They rise in stages -- first a knee, then a shaky stand. Jarvis charges first this time, swinging a clothesline.

Hightower eats it and doesn't go down, growling through the impact. He swings back with "Drop The Hammer," both fists clamped together in a double sledge aimed at Jarvis' already-wrecked chest.

The champion sees it at the last second and sidesteps, grabbing David's arm as it passes and spinning under into a rough inside cradle, stacking the big man up on his shoulders.

Referee: "ONE! TWO--!"

Hightower explodes free at two and three-quarters, rolling through and lunging to his feet, fury etched on his

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face.

John Phillips: "Jarvis almost stole it! That's the champion's ring IQ on display, but it still stays tied at two apiece!"

Clock: 0:32.

Both men scramble up at the same time and collide mid-ring. Hightower buries a knee into Jarvis' gut, folding him over with a choked gasp, then hooks him for a suplex.

He tries to muscle him up... and his bad shoulder buckles again.

Jarvis drops back to his feet behind him, shoves Hightower chest-first into the ropes, and as he rebounds, the champion wraps him up and somehow, someway, hoists him onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "No way! After everything tonight, after that attack from Sean Jackson, Jarvis Valentine has David Hightower up for the Patriot Plunge!"

Jarvis' legs wobble. His ribs scream. His neck quivers. For a moment, it looks like he'll collapse under the weight.

Then he plants his feet, roars, and drops.

He swings Hightower through and spikes him with the Patriot Plunge, driving him face-first into the canvas with that fireman's carry DDT. Both men bounce from the impact and lie still.

Mark Bravo: "He hit it! He hit it, but can he cover him?!"

Clock: 0:14.

Jarvis rolls, clawing his way across Hightower's body, draping an arm across his chest and hooking a leg as best he can.

Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Referee: "THREE!"

DING!

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The crowd erupts as the scoreboard graphic slams into place:

JARVIS VALENTINE - 3

DAVID HIGHTOWER - 2

Clock: 0:08 and running.

John Phillips: "He got him! Jarvis Valentine, somehow, some way, goes up three to two with under ten seconds left!"

Hightower kicks a leg weakly, but there's no time, no fuel left. Jarvis rolls away, clutching his ribs and neck, barely able to sit up as the referee hovers between them, counting down the final seconds with the crowd.

Fans: "FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE!"

DING! DING! DING!

The bell rings for the last time and the place blows up.

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen... the winner of this match, with three falls to two... and *STILL* UTA Champion... JARVIS! VALENTINE!"

The referee helps Jarvis to his feet and hands him the UTA Championship. The champion can barely lift it, holding the belt against his chest more for balance than celebration.

John Phillips: "You want to talk about how Sean Jackson's attack affected the match? It damn near broke Jarvis Valentine in half. It nearly handed this entire thing to David Hightower. But in the end, the champion gutted out one more Patriot Plunge, one more three-count, and he survives in Raleigh with the title still around his waist!"

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but look at him, John. That's not the same man who walked into the PNC Arena tonight. Sean Jackson didn't just try to rob him of a victory -- he took pieces of Jarvis with him. And in seven days at Black Horizon, the 'Mental Breakdown' is coming for a champion who can barely stand up."

Jarvis stumbles to the ropes, pointing the belt down the camera lens, sweat and pain etched into every line of his face. On the stage, the camera catches a glimpse of Sean Jackson again -- back at the curtain, arms folded, a slow, cruel smile on his lips as he nods once, like a man who just saw exactly what he wanted to see.

In the ring, David Hightower sits up, glare burning a hole through Jarvis and then up the ramp toward Sean. He slaps the mat once in frustration, then rolls out, nursing his shoulder, leaving the champion alone under the lights.

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Jarvis raises the belt one more time with his good arm as "American Flags" thunders through the building, the image clear -- a battered champion standing tall for now, a looming challenger in the shadows, and Black Horizon waiting just one week away.

Show Credits

Segment: "Disclaimer" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Introduction" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Spin the Wheel #1" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "First Reactions" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Eric Dane Jr. vs. Susanita Ybanez" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Spin the Wheel #2" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Ringside" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "No Doubt" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Maxx Mayhem vs. Rosa Delgado" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Spin the Wheel #3" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Let the Spotlight Rest" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Valentina Blaze vs. Chris Ross" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Spin the Wheel #4" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Unpleasant" - Written by Ben, tony.

Segment: "That's the Job" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Gunner Van Patton vs. B.R. Ellis" - Written by Ben, tony.

Segment: "Spin the Wheel #5" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Deal" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "The Right Tool Needed for the Job" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Teddy bear... With teeth" - Written by Ben.

Match: "David Hightower vs. Jarvis Valentine" - Written by Ben.

Results Compiled by the eFed Management Suite