

Victory: 04.03.2026

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Introduction

The screen is black.

A low hum builds under the surface before the UTA logo flashes onto the screen in white and gold. That hum erupts into a crashing wall of sound as the opening video for **VICTORY** hits. Images slam across the screen in rapid-fire succession.

Chris Ross standing with the UTA Championship over his shoulder.

Hakuryu staring into the camera without blinking.

Marie Van Claudio raising the Women's Championship high.

Gunnar Van Patton with the WrestleZone Championship, a chaos-soaked grin stretched across his face.

Rosa Delgado throwing forearms in the corner.

Valentina Blaze soaking in the attention of the crowd with absolute confidence.

Kairo Bey exploding through a curtain of neon light.

Dahlia Cross twisting an opponent to the mat with cold precision.

Maxwell Jett standing on the second rope, arms spread wide, mouthing off to thousands.

Tyger II lowering his head, the camera catching the gleam in his eyes beneath the mask.

Vance Stone marching forward like a wrecking ball in boots.

Samuel Scythe seated in the darkness, expression unreadable.

The music swells.

Then--

BOOM!

Pyro explodes across the stage as the camera cuts live to a packed arena bathed in pulsing red, gold, and

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white lights. Fans are already on their feet, signs waving everywhere as the roar from the crowd crashes over the broadcast.

The hard camera sweeps across the venue. Ringside is alive. Flashing lights. A loud, ready crowd. The feeling of anticipation hangs over everything.

The camera lands on the commentary desk where **John Phillips** and **Mark Bravo** are seated, both dressed sharp, both fired up.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to **Victory**! We are one week removed from another huge chapter in United Toughness Alliance history, and tonight the road keeps moving forward in a big way!"

Mark Bravo: "Big way? John, this whole show is chaos wrapped in opportunities. Everybody wants in. Everybody wants gold. Everybody wants momentum. And tonight, somebody is getting one giant step closer to the Fighting Championship."

John Phillips: "That is the story hanging over this entire broadcast. The recently cashed in Fighting Championship has opened the door, and tonight we begin sorting through the contenders who believe they deserve that spot at **Victorious**."

Mark Bravo: "And let me tell you something, I love this. No politics. No hiding. No excuses. Win your match, survive the bracket, and you get your shot. That's how it should be."

John Phillips: "We've got two qualifying matches tonight, and then later on, the winners of those two bouts will meet one-on-one to determine who advances to **Victorious** to challenge the winner of next week's bracket for the Fighting Championship."

Mark Bravo: "Which means if you want that title match, tonight is not a one-win kind of night. You've got to do it twice. That changes everything. That changes pacing, strategy, survival, ego, all of it."

John Phillips: "And what an opening qualifier we have. Rosa Delgado goes one on one with Valentina Blaze."

The camera cuts to a full-screen match graphic of **ROSA DELGADO vs. VALENTINA BLAZE**.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado has built a reputation on toughness, grit, and a refusal to back down from anybody. She knows exactly what this opportunity means."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but she's standing across the ring from Valentina Blaze, and Valentina doesn't walk into these moments hoping to win. She walks in expecting it. That woman carries herself like the spotlight already belongs to her."

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has never lacked confidence."

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Mark Bravo: "And why should she? You need ego in this business. You need swagger. Rosa's got the fight, sure, but Valentina? She has the kind of belief that can overwhelm people before the bell even rings."

John Phillips: "The winner of that one moves on, but they'll have no time to celebrate because another qualifier is set for tonight as Kairo Bey takes on Dahlia Cross."

The screen changes to **KAIRO BEY vs. DAHLIA CROSS**.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey is one of the most explosive competitors in UTA today. He can change the pace of a match in an instant."

Mark Bravo: "He's electric, no doubt. But Dahlia Cross is mean in a way you can't teach. She doesn't just want to beat you. She wants to take pieces of you with her on the way out."

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross has become one of the most dangerous names in UTA because of that exact mindset. She is technical, cruel, and relentless once she finds a weakness."

Mark Bravo: "And if Kairo gives her even one limb, one opening, one bad landing, she is going to turn that into a twenty-minute nightmare. That's the scary part. You don't always realize you're in danger with Dahlia until you can't get back up."

John Phillips: "And imagine the possibilities later tonight if it's Rosa versus Kairo, Valentina versus Dahlia, or any other combination that comes from these qualifiers. Every path is dangerous. Every outcome leads to a high-pressure final."

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes tonight so good. Nobody gets an easy road. You earn it or you go home."

The camera comes back to the desk as another graphic fills the screen.

VANCE STONE vs. SAMUEL SCYTHER

John Phillips: "We've also got singles action as Vance Stone goes one on one with Samuel Scythe."

Mark Bravo: "That one could get ugly in a hurry. Vance Stone is all force. He comes at you like he's trying to knock your chest through your spine."

John Phillips: "And Samuel Scythe is one of the more difficult men in this company to prepare for. He is methodical, unsettling, and dangerous in ways that don't always show up until the match starts slipping away from you."

Mark Bravo: "That's a fight where one guy wants to break your body and the other guy wants to crawl into your head. I wouldn't want to be in there with either one of them."

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John Phillips: "Then there is a match that already has people talking all over the arena and all over social media."

The graphic changes again.

MAXWELL JETT vs. CHRIS ROSS

John Phillips: "Maxwell 'Max' Jett prodded Chris Ross into this match last week by getting him so riled up he demanded this match."

Mark Bravo: "You know what? Say what you want about Maxwell Jett, but that is a headline-grabbing statement. That is a man telling the world, 'I am the Best in the World, and I want the title.'"

John Phillips: "There are plenty who would argue he's stirring the pot for his own benefit."

Mark Bravo: "Of course he is! That's called being smart, John! But here's the part he better not overlook--Chris Ross technically asked for this match. Maxwell just made it happen."

John Phillips: "Chris Ross looks to nip this in the bud and put away Maxwell Jett for good."

Mark Bravo: "That's if he can beat 'The Best in the World'"

The bracket graphic fills the screen. Two qualifiers on one side. The final match beneath them.

John Phillips: "Later tonight, the winners of Rosa Delgado versus Valentina Blaze and Kairo Bey versus Dahlia Cross will meet in the Fighting Championship Qualifier Final."

Mark Bravo: "One more match. One more war. One more chance. And the winner moves on to **Victorious** to fight for a championship opportunity. You cannot ask for clearer stakes than that."

John Phillips: "This is the kind of night that can launch a contender, transform a career, and rewrite the shape of the Fighting Championship picture all at once."

Mark Bravo: "And let's be honest, everybody in that bracket sees the same thing. Gold. Legitimacy. A chance to put their name in a spot where nobody can ignore it anymore."

The crowd volume swells again as the camera pans to the ring.

John Phillips: "The stage is set. The bracket is ready. The pressure is on."

Mark Bravo: "Let's quit talking about it and start swinging."

John Phillips: "This is **Victory**--and we are live!"

The camera zooms toward the ring as the crowd roars and the broadcast rolls forward.

Rosa Delgado vs. Valentina Blaze

The lights in the arena dim, the noise of the crowd shifting from general anticipation into something tighter, more focused. A low blue-gray wash settles over the stage as the camera pans across the audience, then back toward the entrance.

John Phillips: "We are set to kick off tonight with one of our Fighting Championship qualifying matches, and this is a fascinating one. Rosa Delgado and Valentina Blaze could not be more different in how they go about getting the job done."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but they've both got one thing in common tonight, John. Win once and you're still not done. Win twice and suddenly you're one step away from a championship match at **Victorious**. That changes how you breathe, how you pace yourself, how you fight."

A sharp snare cracks through the speakers.

Then another.

Then the opening pulse of "**Steel My Heart**" by **The Vanguards** hits, hard and steady.

The reaction from the crowd swells as Rosa Delgado steps through the curtain.

She does not explode onto the stage.

She does not throw her arms wide.

She does not waste a second pretending this is about spectacle.

The house lights stay in that warm steel-blue tone as Rosa pauses just beyond the curtain, reaches up, and taps her left elbow pad twice.

Once.

Then again.

It is small. Routine. Intentional.

Her eyes stay locked on the ring.

John Phillips: "That tells you everything you need to know about Rosa Delgado right there. No extra

motion. No wasted energy. She is all business."

Mark Bravo: "And she's the kind of woman you hate drawing in a qualifier like this, because she doesn't get discouraged when the match gets ugly. She likes ugly. She likes long. She likes dragging you into the kind of fight where technique turns into survival."

Rosa starts down the ramp at a measured pace, shoulders square, jaw set, her expression unreadable but focused. There is no playing to the crowd on the way down. No taunting. No overconfidence. Just quiet purpose.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado has built a reputation as a blue-collar technician, someone who gets sharper the longer a match goes. She will grind on you early, work position, wear you down, and once she finds an opening, especially around that left arm, she can turn a match in a hurry."

Mark Bravo: "That's the scary part. You may think you're hanging in there with her, then all of a sudden your arm's been softened up for six straight minutes and now every counter's a little slower, every strike's a little weaker, and she smells blood."

Rosa reaches the halfway point of the ramp and briefly rolls her shoulders, never breaking stride. The camera catches her eyes for a closer shot now, the calm intensity there impossible to miss.

John Phillips: "We've seen Rosa Delgado in all kinds of situations over the past several months, but tonight this is about advancement. This is about opportunity. This is about proving she belongs in the Fighting Championship picture."

Mark Bravo: "And don't forget, she's stubborn as hell. That might be her best trait. You don't move her off her plan easy. You don't rattle her just because the other person's flashy or fast."

At ringside, Rosa turns the corner and walks alongside the apron. She takes one quick look out into the crowd, not soaking it in, just acknowledging the atmosphere, then plants both hands on the apron.

In one clean motion, she pulls herself up to the edge.

She wipes one boot on the apron, then the other, and steps through the ropes.

Inside the ring, Rosa paces to the center once, then back to her corner, loosening her wrists. The camera catches her eyes flick once toward the hard cam, then back to the entrance. There is a seriousness to her posture that says she already knows what kind of pace she wants and exactly where she intends to drag this match.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado does not take unnecessary risks. She'd rather out-position you, outlast you, and make you pay for every mistake."

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Mark Bravo: "That's why Valentina Blaze better be careful coming out here all fired up. Rosa wants you emotional. Rosa wants you rushing. Rosa wants one bad step so she can start tearing into something and never let go."

Rosa settles into the corner and bounces once on the balls of her feet, then reaches up and taps that left elbow pad two more times. Her eyes stay fixed on the entrance. Waiting.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado is ready."

Mark Bravo: "And that is a dangerous woman to start the night with."

The camera lingers on Rosa in the corner as the crowd buzz builds again, knowing Valentina Blaze is next.

Rosa Delgado waits in the corner, hands on the top rope, shoulders loose, eyes locked on the stage.

Then the lights drop.

A hush rolls over the arena for a split second before a pulse of red and gold bursts across the stage in time with the opening beat of "**Light It Up**". The crowd answers immediately with a loud, rising roar as flame-like graphics ripple across the screens and a sharp spotlight cuts through the dark.

Valentina Blaze steps through the curtain.

And unlike Rosa, she does not arrive quietly.

She hits the stage with energy already pouring off of her, one arm out, chin high, eyes bright, feeding off the reaction from the crowd like she was born for moments exactly like this. Her hair catches the lights as she turns her head from one side of the arena to the other, taking in every cheer, every reaching hand, every camera flash.

John Phillips: "And here comes Valentina Blaze, and you can feel the difference in temperature the second she steps out here."

Mark Bravo: "That's because she doesn't just walk into a building, John. She ignites it. Rosa Delgado came out here looking to go to work. Valentina Blaze came out here looking to set the whole night on fire."

Valentina takes three quick steps forward, then stops center stage and throws her hand up, fingers flaring into her familiar signal.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

The crowd erupts and answers her right back.

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Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Valentina grins wide at that, the kind of grin that can read as joy one second and dangerous confidence the next. She bounces once on the balls of her feet, then starts down the ramp with a fast, eager stride, slapping a few outstretched hands without ever losing sight of the ring.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze thrives in this kind of atmosphere. She is emotional, explosive, fast, and when she starts building momentum, she can avalanche over an opponent in seconds."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and Rosa better not make the mistake of thinking all this energy means Valentina's careless. She'll play to the crowd, sure, but the second she sees an opening, that smile disappears and a knee goes flying into your face."

On the way down the ramp, Valentina points toward the ring, then to herself, then back to the ring again, a silent promise that she knows exactly what this match means. The camera gets a close shot of her expression now--still alive with adrenaline, but with a sharpened edge underneath it. This is not just fun. This is ambition.

John Phillips: "This is a huge opportunity for Valentina Blaze. She has all the charisma in the world, but tonight is about proving she can push through the grind of a qualifying format and outlast everyone standing in her way."

Mark Bravo: "And if she gets rolling? Good luck stopping her. She's got that kind of offense that comes in waves. One shot becomes three. Three becomes six. And before you know it, she's on the ropes or the top turnbuckle and you're wondering how the match got away from you."

Valentina reaches ringside and circles with extra bounce in her step, running one hand along the apron before hopping onto it in one fluid motion. She turns toward the crowd and spreads her arms, soaking in another swell of noise, then dips through the ropes and pops into the ring like she's spring-loaded.

Inside, she immediately climbs the second turnbuckle in the near corner and throws the hand sign up again.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

The fans roar right back to her.

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

John Phillips: "There is no question who the crowd is riding with here early."

Mark Bravo: "That can help you, or it can hurt you. If she gets too caught up in all this, Rosa Delgado will snatch that arm, drag her to the mat, and turn all these people into helpless witnesses."

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Valentina drops down from the ropes and pivots toward Rosa's corner. The smile fades just a touch. Not completely. Just enough. She nods once at Rosa as if acknowledging the challenge, then takes a few backward steps into her own corner, rolling her neck and shaking out her arms.

Across the ring, Rosa never moves.

The contrast is immediate and perfect.

One corner holds a woman vibrating with life, fire, and momentum.

The other holds a woman as still and cold as a loaded trap.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado. Valentina Blaze. One advances, one goes home from the qualifier picture. What a way to open **Victory**."

Mark Bravo: "This is gonna be good."

The referee steps into the center of the ring and gestures for both women to come forward for final instructions as the crowd continues to buzz.

The referee stands between them in the center of the ring, hands out, eyes moving from Rosa Delgado to Valentina Blaze as he delivers the final instructions.

Valentina bounces lightly in place, shoulders loose, head tilted just slightly, never taking her eyes off Rosa.

Rosa doesn't move at all.

She just stares right back.

John Phillips: "Here we go. Two very different styles. Two very different temperaments. One very high-stakes match."

Mark Bravo: "And if you're Valentina, you better not let this turn into a Rosa Delgado kind of fight. Keep it moving. Keep it hot. Keep it uncomfortable for Rosa. Because if Rosa gets to set the pace, she'll strangle the whole thing."

The referee looks to one corner.

Then the other.

Then signals for the bell.

DING DING DING!

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The crowd responds immediately, a fresh wave of noise crashing over the arena as Rosa eases out of her corner with measured steps and Valentina circles wide with a little more bounce, a little more energy, a little more visible emotion.

They start slow.

No rush.

Just a circle.

Rosa's hands are lower, ready to catch, ready to clamp on.

Valentina's are more active, twitching, feinting, showing one level and threatening another.

John Phillips: "You can already see the difference in approach. Rosa is patient. Valentina is looking for a spark."

Mark Bravo: "And that first clean exchange matters. If Valentina wins it, this place gets louder and Rosa has to answer. If Rosa wins it, suddenly all that noise starts sounding a lot farther away."

Valentina darts in first, reaching for the wrist.

Rosa swats the hand away.

Valentina grins.

They circle again.

This time Rosa steps in, looking for a collar-and-elbow tie-up, but Valentina slips off to the side before full contact, forcing a reset and drawing a quick cheer from the crowd for the movement alone.

Mark Bravo: "That's smart. Don't just stand there and let Rosa get both hands on you."

John Phillips: "Valentina knows exactly what Rosa wants. The moment Delgado gets a hold, she starts turning this into a grinding positional battle."

Valentina claps once, nodding to herself, then comes in again.

This time they meet.

Collar and elbow.

The impact is solid. Neither woman gives much ground at first, boots digging into the mat, shoulders

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straining. Rosa immediately tries to turn the angle, trying to twist Valentina off-line and steer her backward. Valentina resists, pushing through the pressure with a burst of energy and forcing them into a tight rotation near center ring.

John Phillips: "Good strength from both women here."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but look at Rosa's hips. She's already thinking two moves ahead. She's not just tying up--she's building a trap."

Rosa suddenly slides from the tie-up into a side headlock, wrenching it on tight and leaning her weight down into Valentina's neck and shoulder. Valentina immediately plants a hand at Rosa's hip and tries to shove her off, but Rosa digs in deeper, feet wide, control heavy and deliberate.

John Phillips: "There it is. Rosa Delgado gets the first real hold of the match."

Mark Bravo: "And she's gonna make every second of it annoying. That's what Rosa does. She doesn't just hold you. She irritates you. She wears on you."

Valentina tries to power Rosa toward the ropes, but Rosa shifts her weight and keeps the hold clamped on. Valentina stomps once, adjusts, then drives forward harder, finally forcing Rosa into the ropes.

The referee steps in.

Referee: "Break! Break it clean!"

Rosa holds the headlock one extra beat before releasing and stepping back.

Valentina straightens up--

and immediately fires a sharp forearm into Rosa's chest.

The crowd pops.

Rosa absorbs it, takes half a step back--

then answers with a stiff kick to the thigh.

SMACK!

Valentina winces.

Mark Bravo: "There it is! Receipt sent."

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John Phillips: "And Rosa goes right to the leg there, trying to slow down some of that explosiveness from Valentina Blaze."

Valentina shakes it off and comes right back with another forearm, faster this time, catching Rosa up near the jawline. Rosa turns with the shot but stays upright. Valentina whips her toward the ropes--Rosa reverses--Valentina rebounds--Rosa drops down early--Valentina hurdles over--hits the far ropes--Rosa pops up looking for a back elbow--Valentina ducks under it and spins through--then snaps off a running dropkick right into Rosa's chest.

Rosa stumbles backward into the ropes, surprised more than hurt, and the crowd cheers as Valentina kips up to her feet with fire in her eyes.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

The audience roars right back.

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze with the first real burst of offense in this match!"

Mark Bravo: "That's what I'm talking about! Don't let Rosa settle. Hit her, move, hit her again, make her wrestle your pace!"

Rosa pushes off the ropes, expression tightening now, and steps back toward center. Valentina doesn't wait. She charges in with another forearm, then another, forcing Rosa backward toward the corner. The crowd volume climbs with each shot.

John Phillips: "Valentina trying to build momentum early."

Valentina grabs the wrist and attempts an Irish whip into the corner--

but Rosa plants her feet.

Stops it cold.

Then yanks Valentina forward and down into a short-arm takedown, instantly floating over and trapping the left arm under her body. The transition is quick, nasty, and efficient.

The crowd gives an impressed murmur as Rosa drives a knee across Valentina's shoulder and starts pulling back on the wrist.

John Phillips: "And just like that, Rosa turns the tide."

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Mark Bravo: "That's why she's dangerous! One opening. One little mistake. And now all of a sudden Valentina's underneath her with that arm stretched out."

Valentina tries to roll through, but Rosa follows her, maintaining control and shifting into a grounded arm wringer, twisting the wrist and elbow at a brutal angle before planting another knee into the upper arm.

Valentina grimaces and kicks her legs, trying to create space.

John Phillips: "This is exactly the kind of fight Rosa Delgado wants. Slow it down. Pick a target. Keep chipping away."

Rosa rises with the wrist still trapped and drags Valentina to her feet. She twists the arm once more, then snaps a short kick right into the tricep. Valentina winces hard. Rosa doesn't hesitate. Another twist. Another kick. Then a shoulder-first yank that sends Valentina stumbling forward a step.

Mark Bravo: "See? That's not flashy, but it adds up. Every little shot is a tax. By the time you realize how much you've paid, you've got nothing left."

Valentina tries to fire back with her free hand, but Rosa sees it coming and ducks under, wrenching the arm again before pulling Valentina into the corner. Rosa drives her shoulder into Valentina's midsection once--twice--then backs up and drills a rising knee into the same side of the body, keeping the trapped arm pinned awkwardly against the ropes.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado in control now, and she's making Valentina work from underneath."

The referee waves it off.

Referee: "There are no pins in a fighting championship match!"

Rosa steps away with both palms raised, expression cool.

Valentina takes a breath in the corner, rolling the shoulder, trying to shake life back into the arm.

Rosa rushes back in--

but Valentina explodes out of the corner with a boot to the face.

Rosa rocks back.

Valentina jumps up onto the middle rope and launches forward with a flying clothesline from the corner that catches Rosa flush and sends her tumbling backward to the mat.

The crowd erupts.

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John Phillips: "What a counter by Valentina Blaze!"

Mark Bravo: "That's the spark! That's the spark she needed!"

Valentina lands a little awkwardly and clutches at the left arm for half a second--but only for half a second. She shakes it out, sees Rosa starting to rise, and hits the ropes. On the rebound, she leaps and drives both knees into Rosa's face and upper chest in a quick snapping strike that sends Rosa rolling toward the bottom rope.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze just changed the rhythm again!"

Mark Bravo: "And Rosa felt every bit of that one!"

Valentina pops back to her feet and pumps her good arm once, adrenaline surging again as the crowd roars behind her. Rosa is on the outside edge of the ring now, one knee down, one arm draped over the bottom rope, regrouping and glaring back in.

Inside the ring, Valentina takes a step toward the ropes, energy building, the audience sensing that the pace may be about to jump again.

John Phillips: "An excellent opening stretch to this qualifier, and neither woman willing to give an inch."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but now we find out something important--does Valentina stay smart here, or does she get greedy?"

Valentina points out at Rosa, then bounces in place as the crowd volume continues to rise.

The referee checks on Rosa from inside the ring while Rosa slowly pulls herself up on the apron, eyes narrowed, breathing a little heavier now.

Rosa Delgado rises slowly on the apron, one hand hooked over the top rope, the other brushing at her jaw as she stares back into the ring.

Valentina Blaze is already in motion.

She points right at Rosa, the crowd behind her rising with the moment, and then breaks into a sprint toward the ropes.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze looking to keep the pressure on!"

Mark Bravo: "This is what I was talking about! Don't give Rosa time to breathe!"

Valentina hits the ropes, rebounds at full speed, and throws herself into a low sliding strike aimed at Rosa's

legs near the apron--

but Rosa jerks her feet up just in time.

Valentina slides under the bottom rope and pops back up, turning fast--

and Rosa slingshots herself in over the top with a sharp shoulder block that catches Valentina flush and drives her backward two steps.

John Phillips: "Beautiful timing from Rosa Delgado!"

Valentina tries to recover immediately, swinging with a wild forearm, but Rosa ducks under it and drives a kick into the back of Valentina's left thigh. Valentina stumbles. Rosa snatches the wrist, twists through, and yanks Valentina down to a knee with a vicious arm wringer that bends the shoulder and elbow at a cruel angle.

Mark Bravo: "And there she goes right back to work! That's the problem with Rosa--you can win an exchange and still lose the next three because she never panics!"

Valentina grits her teeth, trying to roll through, but Rosa stays attached. She steps over the arm, pulls Valentina down flat, then drops a knee right across the shoulder joint. Valentina jolts and curls inward, cradling the arm for a second before Rosa peels her back open again.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado is dissecting that arm now. Every bit of explosion Valentina wants to generate runs through that shoulder."

Rosa drags Valentina up by the wrist and steps in close, driving a short forearm into the side of the neck. Then another. Valentina fires a short elbow back with the free arm--Rosa absorbs it--wrenches the arm again--then snaps a quick spinning backfist that clips Valentina behind the ear and sends her reeling toward the ropes.

The crowd gasps at the impact.

Mark Bravo: "That one landed ugly."

Rosa sees Valentina wobble and advances with purpose, not reckless, just certain. She reaches for the arm again--but this time Valentina digs deep and counters with a sudden knee to the ribs. Rosa doubles just a little. Valentina follows with another shot, then a third, forcing enough space to pull free and hit the ropes.

The crowd comes alive.

Valentina rebounds with speed--

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Rosa steps forward to intercept--

Valentina leaps and snaps off a one-armed hurricanrana that sends Rosa tumbling across the ring.

John Phillips: "What a counter by Valentina Blaze!"

Mark Bravo: "That's guts right there! She didn't have the arm she wanted, but she still found the opening!"

Rosa rolls through quickly and rises, but Valentina is already back on her. A sharp forearm to the jaw. A spinning heel kick to the side of the head. Rosa staggers into the corner, and Valentina charges in with a running back elbow that smashes Rosa into the buckles.

The fans erupt again.

Valentina Blaze: "COME ON!"

She grabs the top rope with her good hand, jumps up, and rains down punches from the second turnbuckle as the crowd counts along.

Crowd: "ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR! FIVE! SIX! SEVEN!"

Rosa plants her feet.

Eight--

Rosa catches Valentina around the hips.

Nine--

Rosa walks her out of the corner.

Ten never comes.

Instead Rosa drops Valentina hard across the mat with a hammerlock back suplex, folding her high on the shoulders and upper back.

The crowd lets out a loud groan.

John Phillips: "Hammerlock back suplex! Rosa Delgado just shut the door in a hurry!"

Mark Bravo: "That's nasty! That's real nasty! And with that arm already worked over? Valentina felt all of that!"

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Valentina rolls onto her side, clutching the shoulder and upper arm, face twisted in pain now. Rosa sits up first, breathing hard but still composed, then crawls over into a cover.

Referee: "No pins!"

Rosa lets go frustrated.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado forgetting there are no pins in this match."

Rosa wastes no time protesting. She simply grabs the left arm again, threads her leg over it, and starts cranking back on the shoulder while driving the point of her elbow down into the bicep. Valentina tries to sit up and fight through it, but Rosa shifts her weight, grinding her back down and keeping the limb trapped.

Mark Bravo: "This is where Rosa is a nightmare. She's not just hurting you. She's making you carry her match."

Valentina claws at the mat, trying to slide toward the ropes. Rosa sees it and drags her away from them by the wrist, then stands and yanks her up into another twist of the arm. Valentina spins under to relieve the pressure, but Rosa catches her out of the turn and whips her hard into the corner.

Valentina hits sternum-first, bounces backward--

and Rosa catches her with a rolling elbow that snaps her head around.

John Phillips: "There's that setup shot!"

Mark Bravo: "Rosa's got her stunned!"

Valentina sags in the corner, blinking hard, trying to find her bearings as Rosa steps in, breathing heavier now, eyes fixed, crowd buzzing because they can feel a shift. Rosa backs up two steps and claps her hands once, rallying herself as she sizes Valentina up.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado may be closing in on something big here!"

She charges--

but Valentina explodes out of the corner with a desperate superkick off the injured side, catching Rosa under the chin.

Rosa stumbles backward, stunned.

The arena erupts.

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Mark Bravo: "OH! She caught her! She caught her!"

Valentina shakes the bad arm out, grits through the pain, and runs the ropes. Rosa turns just in time to get drilled by a flying forearm that sends her crashing onto her back near center ring. Valentina doesn't stop there. She kips up, winces from the shoulder, then heads for the apron to the delight of the crowd.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze digging deep!"

Mark Bravo: "This woman runs on adrenaline and bad decisions and somehow it keeps working!"

Valentina steps onto the apron and grabs the top rope for balance, measuring Rosa as she rises unsteadily inside the ring. The fans are up now, noise rolling through the building as Valentina launches herself inward with a springboard roundhouse--

but Rosa ducks it at the last second.

Valentina lands on her feet, turns--

Rosa blasts her in the chest with a shotgun dropkick that sends Valentina flying backward into the turnbuckles.

The impact is violent.

Valentina hits hard, arms flung over the ropes, chest heaving.

John Phillips: "What a counter from Rosa Delgado!"

Rosa is up and moving immediately. She rushes into the corner, hooks Valentina by the waist, and tries to lift for *Steel Magnolia*--

but Valentina fights like hell, throwing frantic elbows with her free arm, one after another into the side of Rosa's head.

Rosa's grip loosens.

Valentina drops behind her.

Shoves her forward into the buckles.

Rosa turns around--

Valentina jumps and drives both knees up into her chest and jaw in one fluid burst.

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Rosa drops to a knee.

The crowd swells again.

John Phillips: "Back and forth they go! What an opening contest this has been!"

Mark Bravo: "And now both of them are starting to feel it! Rosa's control is getting broken up by those explosions from Blaze, but Valentina's arm is hanging on by a prayer!"

Valentina stumbles toward the ropes, shaking out the shoulder, while Rosa kneels near center ring, one hand on the mat, one on her jaw, trying to reset.

Both women look exhausted already.

Both women look angry.

The referee checks their spacing, watching closely, as the crowd senses the next exchange could swing this thing in a huge way.

Rosa Delgado remains on one knee near center ring, one hand braced on the canvas, the other rubbing at her jaw as she tries to shake the stars loose.

Across from her, Valentina Blaze is near the ropes, flexing and shaking out that damaged left arm, her face tight with pain but lit up with pure refusal.

The crowd is roaring.

John Phillips: "Important reminder here in this Fighting Championship qualifier--there are no pinfalls. You do not steal this one with a quick cover. You have to knock your opponent out, force them to submit, or leave the referee with no choice but to stop it."

Mark Bravo: "That changes everything. You can hurt somebody, you can drop somebody, you can rattle the whole building--but if you don't finish them, they get back up and keep coming."

Valentina wipes sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist and steps forward first.

Rosa rises with her.

They meet in the center again, both breathing harder now, both marked up, both carrying visible damage. Valentina swings first with a sharp forearm. Rosa answers with one of her own. Valentina fires back. Rosa plants and returns it even harder.

The crowd starts to rise with every shot.

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John Phillips: "Now we are getting into that dangerous part of the fight where technique and adrenaline start colliding."

Mark Bravo: "And when adrenaline takes over, sometimes the smarter fighter gets meaner. Sometimes the wild fighter gets even wilder."

Valentina lands another forearm, then tries to follow with a spinning back kick--but Rosa catches the leg under one arm.

Valentina's eyes widen.

Rosa yanks her forward and clubs her across the chest with a short, brutal forearm. Then another. Then she sweeps the standing leg and dumps Valentina hard to the mat, still hanging onto the trapped limb.

Before Valentina can scramble away, Rosa steps over and twists, trapping the left arm and shoulder into a vicious seated armbar variation. Valentina cries out instantly as Rosa cranks back and pulls the limb tight against the angle of her hips.

John Phillips: "Submission attempt by Rosa Delgado!"

Mark Bravo: "That's deep! That is deep! And that arm has already been softened up all match long!"

The referee drops to one knee beside them.

Referee: "Valentina! Talk to me! Do you wanna quit?"

Valentina Blaze: "NO!"

Valentina grits her teeth and tries to sit up, but Rosa leans back even farther, face twisted with effort now, wrenching the hold tighter and forcing Valentina flat again. Valentina pounds the mat once with her free hand--not a tap, just frustration--and starts clawing her way inch by inch, trying to turn her hips, trying to create some kind of angle to slip free.

John Phillips: "This is where Rosa Delgado is at her absolute best. She is patient, she is punishing, and she has no issue making this a miserable fight."

Mark Bravo: "And the rope break is not the same comfort blanket here when somebody's trying to rip your shoulder out. You still gotta survive long enough to get there."

Valentina kicks her legs, twists her torso, and finally manages to roll just enough to take some pressure off the shoulder. Rosa adjusts instantly, trying to re-center the hold--but Valentina throws a frantic upkick with her free leg that catches Rosa on the side of the head.

Rosa's grip loosens.

Valentina kicks again.

This one lands flush on the cheek.

Rosa breaks the hold and falls back to a knee.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze survives!"

Mark Bravo: "Barely! But barely counts!"

Valentina scrambles backward toward the ropes, cradling the arm against her body and trying to suck air back into her lungs. Rosa is already coming after her, not rushing, but closing space with that same relentless calm that has defined her all night.

Valentina drags herself up using the ropes.

Rosa steps in and drives a hard kick into the left shoulder.

Valentina cries out.

Rosa follows with another kick, this time to the ribs, then grabs the wrist and whips Valentina across the ring. Valentina hits the far ropes hard, rebounds--

and Rosa drills her with a spinning backfist that snaps her head around and sends her dropping to both knees.

The crowd gasps.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze is rocked!"

Mark Bravo: "Now this is where the referee starts looking real close! You don't have to pin anybody in these rules--you just have to leave them unable to continue!"

Rosa steps in front of the kneeling Valentina and grabs her by the chin with one hand, forcing her face upward. The referee hovers nearby, watching the eyes, watching the balance, watching the responsiveness.

Referee: "Valentina! You with me?"

Valentina blinks hard, jaw clenched, and slaps Rosa's hand away with her good arm.

The crowd roars their approval.

Mark Bravo: "There you go! That's how you answer!"

Rosa nods once, almost like she respects the defiance, then grabs Valentina and hauls her upright. She hooks for *Steel Magnolia* again, trying to fold Valentina over and spike her--

but Valentina twists free at the last second, stumbling behind Rosa on unsteady legs.

Rosa turns--

Valentina fires a desperate jumping knee to the jaw.

Rosa staggers back.

Valentina hits the ropes--

comes flying back--

and lands a running bulldog that snaps Rosa face-first into the canvas.

The arena erupts all over again.

John Phillips: "What a counter by Valentina Blaze!"

Mark Bravo: "She's got life! She's got life!"

Valentina pushes up using only one arm for a moment, chest heaving, then pounds her good fist against her own heart twice before screaming out to the crowd.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Rosa is already rolling, trying to get to a base, but Valentina sees the opening and takes off for the corner. She climbs to the second rope in one fluid burst, measuring Rosa as Rosa struggles up to hands and knees.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze thinking something big here!"

Valentina launches forward, driving her knees into Rosa's upper chest and shoulders with the *Blaze Trigger*, the jumping high-knee strike off the middle rope catching Rosa flush and knocking her flat onto her back.

The building comes unglued.

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Mark Bravo: "SHE NAILED IT!"

John Phillips: "Blaze Trigger! Blaze Trigger connects!"

Valentina lands hard and immediately grabs at the bad shoulder, pain flashing across her face, but she forces herself back to her feet anyway. Rosa is down. Not moving much. Breathing, but stunned badly.

The referee steps in closer now, eyes on Rosa.

Referee: "Rosa! Rosa, talk to me!"

The crowd noise swells into one huge wave as Valentina backs into the corner, wincing, shaking the arm out, and staring across the ring at Rosa Delgado like she knows this is the moment. The moment to finish. The moment to survive. The moment to advance.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze may have Rosa Delgado exactly where she wants her!"

Mark Bravo: "One more shot! Just one clean shot under these rules and this whole thing could be over!"

Rosa slowly rolls to her side, trying to push herself up through sheer instinct, but the motion is sluggish now, disoriented, unsteady.

Valentina sees it.

She charges out of the corner, looking to put Rosa away for good--

Valentina Blaze charges out of the corner with everything she has left.

Rosa Delgado is still on all fours, trying to push herself upright through instinct alone, her head hanging for just a second too long.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze looking to close the door!"

Mark Bravo: "This is it! This is where you find out if Rosa's toughness can save her, or if Valentina's fire burns all the way through!"

Valentina leaves her feet and drives a brutal running knee into the side of Rosa's head, the shot turning Delgado over onto her back and sending a collective jolt through the crowd.

John Phillips: "Another knee! Rosa got blasted!"

Valentina staggers past the impact, catching herself on the ropes, breathing like a woman running on fumes and raw willpower. Her left arm is hanging now, barely cooperating, but her eyes are alive. Locked in.

Desperate. Believing.

The referee kneels beside Rosa immediately.

Referee: "Rosa! Rosa, stay with me! Can you continue?"

Rosa blinks hard, face glassy for a moment, then turns and starts dragging herself toward the ropes. The crowd roars at the effort alone.

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado is refusing to stay down!"

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes her terrifying! She doesn't know how to quit clean!"

Valentina sees Rosa trying to rise and bites down through the pain in her shoulder. She storms back in, grabs Rosa by the head and waistband, and tries to haul her upright--but Rosa fires a short right hand to the body. Then another. Then a chopping forearm with what little balance she has left.

Valentina stumbles back a step.

Rosa pushes up to one knee--

and swings wildly with a backfist.

Valentina ducks it.

Rosa turns through--

and Valentina catches her flush with a superkick under the jaw.

The arena explodes.

John Phillips: "SUPERKICK! SUPERKICK FROM VALENTINA BLAZE!"

Rosa collapses backward to the mat in a heap, limbs slack for the first time all match.

The referee drops beside her again, checking immediately.

Referee: "Rosa! Rosa, talk to me!"

Valentina backs away two steps, chest heaving, eyes wide, every muscle in her body screaming. She looks like she can barely stand, but then she sees Rosa twitch, sees Rosa starting to roll again, and a look of disbelief flashes across her face.

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Mark Bravo: "She's still trying to get up! You have got to be kidding me!"

John Phillips: "Rosa Delgado's survival instinct is unbelievable!"

Rosa drags one arm under herself.

Then the other.

She gets to hands and knees again.

The crowd rises even higher, sensing both the danger and the drama. Valentina wipes sweat and hair from her face with her good hand, shakes her head once, then starts feeding off the people all around her.

Valentina Blaze: "COME ON!"

The audience answers with a thunderous roar.

Crowd: "VAL-EN-TI-NA! VAL-EN-TI-NA!"

John Phillips: "Listen to this crowd! They are trying to will Valentina Blaze through the finish line!"

Mark Bravo: "And she needs them, John! She has emptied the tank! But sometimes the tank doesn't matter when the heart takes over!"

Valentina sprints to the far ropes.

She rebounds at full speed as Rosa lurches upward again, dazed and barely vertical.

Valentina leaps--

spins through--

and drills Rosa with *Wildfire*, the spinning heel kick catching Rosa flush on the side of the head with a crack that echoes through the arena.

Rosa's body goes limp as she crashes to the canvas.

The building erupts into absolute bedlam.

John Phillips: "WILDFIRE! WILDFIRE CONNECTS!"

Mark Bravo: "SHE GOT ALL OF IT! SHE GOT ALL OF IT!"

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Valentina drops to one knee on impact, clutching her bad shoulder and grimacing in agony, but her eyes stay fixed on Rosa.

Rosa doesn't move.

Not right away.

The referee is on her instantly, kneeling down, waving his hands, checking her condition.

Referee: "Rosa! Rosa, can you hear me? Rosa!"

The camera moves in tight.

Rosa's chest rises and falls.

Her eyes blink once.

But when she tries to move, there is nothing there. No base. No recovery. No real answer.

The referee looks to the timekeeper.

Then back to Rosa.

Then he waves it off.

John Phillips: "That's it! The referee has seen enough!"

Mark Bravo: "Valentina Blaze did it! Somehow, somehow, she pulled it off!"

DING DING DING!

The bell rings and the crowd erupts into one massive standing ovation as Valentina falls back to a seated position near the ropes, exhausted, emotional, and hurting, but victorious.

John Phillips: "What a performance from Valentina Blaze! She survives the arm work, survives the control of Rosa Delgado, survives the grinding pace Rosa wanted, and in the end finds just enough firepower to score the stoppage!"

Mark Bravo: "That wasn't pretty, and she won't care! She got dragged into deep water, she got tied up, twisted up, nearly ripped apart, and she still found a way to light the match on fire at the end!"

The referee helps guide Valentina up to her feet and raises her good arm. Valentina winces but throws her head back and screams to the rafters, adrenaline and relief washing over her all at once.

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Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner by referee stoppage... **VALENTINA BLAZE!**"

The crowd roars again.

Valentina turns toward them, breathing hard, then beats her fist against her chest once more before shouting out.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

In the background, officials check on Rosa Delgado, who has started to stir but still looks dazed from the final kick. She rolls to her side, frustrated, angry, knowing how close she was and how quickly it slipped away.

John Phillips: "A heartbreaking loss for Rosa Delgado, who had long stretches of this fight exactly where she wanted it."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but in fighting rules, you can't just control somebody. You've got to finish them. And tonight, Valentina Blaze was the one who found the finish."

Valentina backs toward the ropes and points up the ramp, still running on adrenaline as she looks toward what comes next. One qualifier down. One advance secured. And later tonight, one more fight still waiting.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze moves on in the Fighting Championship bracket, and later tonight she'll meet the winner of Kairo Bey and Dahlia Cross in the qualifier final!"

Mark Bravo: "And after what she just went through, whoever wins that next one better be ready to see a woman with nothing left to lose."

The camera lingers on Valentina standing tall, battered but alive with momentum, as **Victory** heads on to the next chapter of the night.

Burn Bright, Fight Hard

Backstage, the camera opens on Melissa Cartwright standing in front of a black-and-gold **Victory** backdrop, microphone in hand, every bit as composed and polished as ever.

Beside her stands Maxwell "Max" Jett.

He is dressed like money and arrogance had a tailor. Designer jacket. Open collar. Gold watch. Expensive shoes. The kind of smug expression that makes it clear he believes this interview is not a privilege for him,

but for everyone else.

He adjusts one cuff, glances at the camera, then gives Melissa a look that says she may begin now.

Melissa Cartwright: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome my guest at this time... Maxwell 'Max' Jett."

MMJ gives a tiny nod, like applause would be appropriate even in an empty hallway.

Melissa Cartwright: "Max, last week Chris Ross made it clear that he was done listening to your comments, and as a result, tonight you will challenge for the UTA Championship. Before that match, I want to ask you plainly--what is your mindset heading into the biggest opportunity of your career?"

MMJ smirks.

Not because he is nervous.

Because the question almost amuses him.

He exhales through his nose, slowly, then looks straight into the camera.

Maxwell Jett: "Melissa, you say 'biggest opportunity of my career' like I'm some starving kid who just got called up from the minors. I didn't have to live in a house with seven others and compete for my spot. I was chosen."

He shakes his head with a little laugh.

Maxwell Jett: "No. Let me correct that for you. Tonight is not some gift. It's not some miracle. It's not some magical moment where Maxwell Jett gets to prove he belongs in the ring with Chris Ross."

He points at himself.

Maxwell Jett: "Tonight is the night the rest of the world catches up to what I've been saying from day one."

He takes a half-step closer to the camera.

Maxwell Jett: "I am the best in the world."

He lets it sit there.

Because of course he does.

Maxwell Jett: "Chris Ross can carry that title around all he wants. He can make his little intense faces. He can puff out his chest. He can play the fighting champion. But while Chris has been busy pretending he's the

man around here, I've been doing what actual stars do."

He spreads his arms.

Maxwell Jett: "Talking. Walking. Performing. Delivering. Stealing every room I walk into and every second of television I'm on."

Melissa tilts the microphone slightly.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris Ross would likely argue that all you've done is run your mouth until he decided to shut it for you himself."

MMJ chuckles.

Maxwell Jett: "And there it is. That's the Chris Ross problem in a nutshell. He thinks this is about emotion. He thinks this is about pride. He thinks demanding a title match because his feelings got hurt somehow makes him a dangerous man."

He leans in a little, grin widening.

Maxwell Jett: "No, Melissa. What it makes him... is stupid."

The grin turns meaner.

Maxwell Jett: "Because last week, Chris Ross did exactly what I wanted him to do. He got emotional. He got personal. He got baited. And now instead of sitting in the back protecting that title and pretending he's above me, he has to stand across the ring from me with the biggest prize in this company on the line."

He straightens up and smooths the front of his jacket.

Maxwell Jett: "So before we go any further, let me just say congratulations to Chris' little girlfriend, Valentina Blaze, for winning her match tonight."

He gives a few slow, mocking claps.

Maxwell Jett: "Really. Good for her. Good for them. I'm sure they're both having a wonderful evening. I'm sure Chris is somewhere in the back all proud, all emotional, all wrapped up in this cute little story."

He rolls his eyes.

Maxwell Jett: "But while she's out there winning qualifiers and he's out there playing proud boyfriend, I'm over here preparing to do something far more important."

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He taps Melissa's microphone lightly with one finger, then points at the lens.

Maxwell Jett: "I'm about to become UTA Champion."

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris Ross is not just any champion, Max. He has proven time and again that when the pressure is highest, he rises to another level. Do you truly believe your confidence alone is enough to overcome a champion like that?"

MMJ looks offended by the question.

Actually offended.

Maxwell Jett: "Confidence alone?"

He laughs once, sharp and bitter.

Maxwell Jett: "Melissa, this is the problem with people like you. You see confidence and you assume that's all there is. You hear greatness talk like greatness and you think it's ego because you've never stood close enough to the real thing before."

He points to his head.

Maxwell Jett: "I am smarter than Chris Ross."

He points to his chest.

Maxwell Jett: "I am better under pressure than Chris Ross."

Then to the floor, as if planting his flag.

Maxwell Jett: "And bell to bell? I am more complete than Chris Ross."

His smirk returns.

Maxwell Jett: "The only difference is he got the belt first."

Melissa keeps her calm, but there is a firmness in her tone now.

Melissa Cartwright: "Then what happens tonight if Chris Ross proves you wrong?"

MMJ goes still.

Very still.

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The smile disappears.

When he answers, it comes out low and certain.

Maxwell Jett: "He won't."

A beat.

Maxwell Jett: "Because men like Chris Ross have a shelf life. They burn bright, they fight hard, they soak up the cheers, and then one day they run into somebody who is simply better than them in every way that matters."

He steps in close enough now that the camera has no choice but to favor him.

Maxwell Jett: "Tonight, Chris Ross doesn't lose to an underdog. He doesn't lose to a fluke. He doesn't lose to a hungry challenger having the night of his life."

He smiles again.

Cold this time.

Maxwell Jett: "Tonight, Chris Ross loses to the best in the world."

He turns to leave, but then stops, glancing back over one shoulder.

Maxwell Jett: "And when it's over, Melissa, make sure you say it correctly."

He points to himself.

Maxwell Jett: "UTA Champion Maxwell Jett."

He walks out of frame, leaving Melissa standing there for a beat before she turns back toward the camera.

Melissa Cartwright: "Maxwell Jett challenges Chris Ross for the UTA Championship later tonight."

The segment fades out.

Ahead of Yourself

Backstage, the camera cuts into a dimly lit interview alcove that has been converted more into a private watch area than anything official. A rolling production monitor sits on a crate against the wall, its glow casting flickering light across four familiar faces.

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Amy Harrison stands in front, the International Championship around her waist.

To one side are Trey Mack and Clovis Black, both Tag Team Championships in The New Empire's possession.

And beside them stands Valkyrie Knoxx, arms folded, expression unreadable, watching the screen without blinking.

On the monitor, Valentina Blaze is still celebrating in the ring after her hard-fought win over Rosa Delgado.

Amy Harrison suddenly laughs.

Not a polite laugh.

Not a short one.

A mean, sharp, delighted cackle that bounces off the hallway walls.

Amy Harrison: "The MMA fighter couldn't win an MMA style match!"

She laughs again, shaking her head as she watches the replay on the monitor.

Amy Harrison: "Oh, that is rich. That is just rich."

She smirks, folding one arm beneath her chest while the other hand taps against the side plate of the title around her waist.

Amy Harrison: "I'm glad I cut that dead weight when I did."

Trey Mack smirks.

Clovis Black says nothing, but the corner of his mouth curls upward.

Valkyrie Knoxx remains stoic, though her eyes flick briefly toward Amy before returning to the monitor.

Amy turns away from the screen and toward the rest of The New Empire, all swagger and satisfaction now.

She points toward them one by one.

Amy Harrison: "Now you..."

Her finger moves from Trey to Clovis and then toward the Tag Team Championships draped proudly over their shoulders.

Amy Harrison: "Look at that. The Tag Championships home in The New Empire."

She taps the plate at her waist again.

Amy Harrison: "The International Championship where it belongs..."

Then she looks at Valkyrie.

Up and down.

A thin smile spreads across her face.

Amy Harrison: "Now to just get gold on Valkyrie and we will run the UTA!"

Voice: "Still running your mouth, huh?"

The atmosphere changes instantly.

Amy's smile fades.

Trey Mack and Clovis Black both turn at once.

Valkyrie's chin tilts ever so slightly, her posture sharpening.

The camera slowly pans back and widens to reveal Marie Van Claudio standing just beyond the group, the UTA Women's Championship resting on her shoulder.

She wears a confident smile, but there is something colder underneath it tonight. Something deliberate. Something pointed.

Marie Van Claudio: "I wouldn't get too ahead of yourself."

She steps forward without hesitation.

As she passes Valkyrie, she cuts her eyes toward her with open disdain, the kind of glance that says enough without a word needing to be spoken.

Valkyrie doesn't move.

Doesn't blink.

Doesn't react.

But the tension crackles all the same.

Marie's attention settles back on Amy.

Marie Van Claudio: "She's not in line for any of the titles any time soon, and well..."

Her eyes drop to the International Championship around Amy's waist.

She gives the belt a small nod, almost like she's amused by it.

Marie Van Claudio: "At *Victorious*... you're going to have to vacate that little belt you have."

Amy's hand instantly clamps down over the title plate at her waist.

She half-turns, instinctively shielding it, her expression flashing from irritation to something much closer to alarm.

Amy Harrison: "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!"

Marie smiles wider now, clearly enjoying every second of this.

Marie Van Claudio: "I'm not here to fight, Amy. No, we can do that at *Victorious*."

Amy Harrison: "Then why are you here?!"

Marie steps even closer, lowering her voice just enough that it forces everyone else in the hallway to lean into the moment.

Marie Van Claudio: "I'm here to be a constant reminder that your days are numbered."

The two women move closer until there is barely any air between them.

Eye to eye.

Almost nose to nose.

Amy's jaw tightens.

Marie's smile never leaves.

Trey Mack shifts subtly, ready if he needs to move.

Clovis Black squares his shoulders.

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Valkyrie Knoxx stays still as a statue, watching the confrontation with quiet intensity.

Amy Harrison: "Marie... I'm practicing a lot of restraint right now. But unless you want to end up on the bad end of an Empire beatdown, I'd recommend you leave."

Marie slowly raises both hands in mock surrender, though the smirk on her face makes the gesture feel more insulting than calming.

Marie Van Claudio: "I'm going. I'm going."

She takes a slow step back, never taking her eyes off Amy.

Marie Van Claudio: "Just enjoy being a champion while you can."

Marie turns and walks off down the hallway, the Women's Championship still over her shoulder as the camera follows her for a step before cutting back to the group.

Amy doesn't move right away.

Her hand is still locked over the International Championship.

The smugness from earlier is gone now.

Not completely.

But enough.

Enough for concern to creep into her face.

Enough for doubt to slip in through the cracks.

Trey Mack glances toward Clovis.

Clovis glances toward Valkyrie.

Valkyrie says nothing.

She simply watches Amy, then the hallway where Marie disappeared, the quiet around them suddenly much heavier than before.

The camera lingers on Amy clutching the title tighter as the segment fades out.

United States Implications

Backstage, the camera finds Melissa Cartwright standing in front of a UTA backdrop, microphone in hand, poised and professional as ever.

Beside her stands Susanita Ybanez, the United States Championship resting proudly over her shoulder. Susanita looks calm, composed, and every bit like a champion who has no intention of backing down from anyone.

Melissa Cartwright: "Melissa Cartwright here backstage now with the United States Champion, Susanita Ybanez."

Susanita gives a respectful nod.

Melissa Cartwright: "Susanita, *Victorious* is fast approaching, and as of right now it seems you still do not have an official challenger for the United States Championship. Does that concern you at all?"

Susanita adjusts the title on her shoulder and answers without hesitation.

Susanita Ybanez: "No."

A simple answer.

Firm.

Confident.

Susanita Ybanez: "It does not matter who it is."

She places one hand on the faceplate of the championship.

Susanita Ybanez: "I said when I won this title that I would be a fighting champion. I meant that."

Susanita Ybanez: "If someone wants this championship, they can come ask for it. They can come fight for it. I will defend it against all comers."

Melissa Cartwright: "So you're not waiting for management to hand you a name?"

Susanita shakes her head.

Susanita Ybanez: "No. A champion should not hide."

Susanita Ybanez: "A champion should not stall."

Susanita Ybanez: "If I walk into *Victorious*, I walk in ready."

Voice: "That is exactly what a champion should say."

The mood shifts immediately.

Melissa turns.

Susanita does too.

Into frame walk Eli Creed and Troy Lindz.

Creed is calm as always, hands loosely folded, expression almost warm if you didn't know better. Beside him stands Troy Lindz, transformed and focused, carrying himself with a completely different discipline than the version of Troy many in UTA first came to know.

Melissa Cartwright: "Eli Creed. Troy Lindz."

Creed gives Melissa a polite nod before turning his attention to Susanita.

Eli Creed: "My name is Eli Creed... and I'm here to help."

The crowd can be heard faintly booing somewhere in the distance at the sound of his voice on the monitor feed.

Creed smiles slightly and continues.

Eli Creed: "You speak about courage. About responsibility. About defending your title against all comers."

He gestures toward Troy.

Eli Creed: "Then perhaps it is time to do exactly that."

Susanita keeps her eyes on him, cautious but unshaken.

Eli Creed: "You see, people still look at Troy Lindz and see the old version."

Eli Creed: "The flamboyance. The chaos. The noise."

He slowly turns to Troy, almost admiring the work in front of him.

Eli Creed: "But what stands beside me now is something far more dangerous."

Eli Creed: "This is discipline."

Eli Creed: "This is transformation."

Eli Creed: "This is a soul that has been broken, bent, and rebuilt into something the rest of this company is only beginning to understand."

Troy says nothing at first. They simply stare at Susanita, focused, composed, no wasted energy.

Creed steps forward just a little.

Eli Creed: "It is now time to right some wrongs."

Eli Creed: "And one of those wrongs is Troy Lindz not standing where they belong."

He looks directly at Susanita's championship.

Eli Creed: "I want Troy Lindz to challenge for the United States Championship at *Victorious*."

Melissa looks to Susanita immediately, sensing the moment.

Melissa Cartwright: "Susanita?"

Susanita glances from Creed to Troy, then down at the championship, then back up again.

There is no fear in her face.

Only certainty.

Susanita Ybanez: "If Troy wants this match..."

She steps a little closer, title still on her shoulder.

Susanita Ybanez: "Then Troy has it."

The moment lands.

Susanita Ybanez: "At *Victorious*... I will defend the United States Championship against Troy Lindz."

Melissa reacts immediately.

Melissa Cartwright: "Then it is official! At *Victorious*, Susanita Ybanez will defend the United States Championship against Troy Lindz!"

Troy gives a small nod. No theatrics. No flamboyant gesture. Just a quiet acceptance of the opportunity.

Creed, however, looks deeply satisfied.

Eli Creed: "Good."

Eli Creed: "Then another lesson awaits."

Melissa shifts slightly, looking back to Creed.

Melissa Cartwright: "Speaking of lessons... Kairo Bey's match is next. Do you plan to go out there with Troy tonight, Eli?"

Creed's expression changes only slightly, but enough to show this question interests him.

Eli Creed: "No."

Melissa blinks, a little surprised.

Melissa Cartwright: "No?"

Eli Creed: "No."

He folds his hands again.

Eli Creed: "I want Kairo Bey to realize his need to embrace the Creed Method on his own tonight."

That line hangs there.

Heavy.

Intentional.

Eli Creed: "True transformation cannot be forced."

Eli Creed: "It has to be chosen."

He looks directly into the camera now, that eerie calm back in full.

Eli Creed: "Pain will speak to him. Failure will speak to him. And if he is ready..."

Creed's eyes drift toward Troy.

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Eli Creed: "He will finally understand."

Susanita watches him carefully, clearly not buying into the sermon, but also not wasting words on it. She simply shifts the title on her shoulder and keeps her posture strong.

Susanita Ybanez: "Then at *Victorious*, Troy can try to understand me."

Troy's eyes narrow slightly at that, focused and accepting the challenge without needing to say a word.

Melissa turns back to camera.

Melissa Cartwright: "A huge development backstage. Susanita Ybanez will defend the United States Championship against Troy Lindz at *Victorious*... and as for Kairo Bey, it appears the Creed Method continues to hover over his every move."

The camera lingers for one final moment on the four of them--Susanita standing tall with the title, Troy composed and ready, Eli Creed quietly pleased, and Melissa caught in the middle of another major development--before the segment fades out.

Kairo Bey vs. Dahlia Cross

The camera returns to ringside, where the crowd is still buzzing from Valentina Blaze's hard-fought win. The lights in the arena settle into a darker, moodier mix of violet and gold as the atmosphere shifts once again.

John Phillips: "What a way to begin the night, and now we move right into our second Fighting Championship qualifier."

Mark Bravo: "And this one is dangerous in a completely different way. Because when Dahlia Cross walks into a fight, she doesn't just want to win it. She wants to leave something broken behind her."

John Phillips: "But standing across from her tonight will be one of the most explosive athletes in all of UTA, Kairo Bey. A man with speed, charisma, and enormous upside--if he can keep himself focused."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and that's the question, isn't it? Focused on what? Focused on this match? Or focused on everything that's been hanging around him lately with Eli Creed and this whole Creed Method situation?"

John Phillips: "That story has absolutely not gone away. There continues to be speculation about whether or not Kairo Bey may be considering aligning himself with the Creed Method."

Mark Bravo: "And if I'm him, why wouldn't I consider it? You can say what you want about Eli Creed, but the man gets inside people's heads. He makes them feel seen. He makes them feel chosen. That's powerful."

John Phillips: "Or manipulative."

Mark Bravo: "Same thing, depending on whether it works."

The opening beat of Kairo Bey's music hits, sharp and rhythmic, and the crowd responds immediately with a loud swell of cheers as pulsing neon lights race down the stage.

Kairo Bey steps through the curtain.

He looks ready.

But he also looks like a man with more on his mind than just the fight in front of him.

His body language is energetic, sure. He rolls his neck. Bounces on the balls of his feet. Takes a quick breath and surveys the crowd. But there's something a little tighter in his expression tonight. Something more distant behind the usual flash.

John Phillips: "And here comes Kairo Bey."

Mark Bravo: "You can feel the electricity every time he walks out here. He's got it. Whatever *it* is, Kairo Bey has it."

Kairo steps onto the stage and points out toward the crowd, earning another reaction. The lights reflect off the metallic details of his gear as he paces a few steps forward, then stops center stage and looks toward the ring.

He doesn't smile much.

Not tonight.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey has all the physical tools in the world, but the conversation surrounding him lately has been less about ability and more about influence. Is Eli Creed getting into his head? Is the Creed Method becoming a real possibility?"

Mark Bravo: "And maybe that's unfair to Kairo. Maybe the guy's just trying to sort through his options. Maybe he's tired of people telling him what he should be. Maybe he likes hearing somebody tell him what he *could* be."

Kairo begins his walk to the ring, moving with that sleek, athletic confidence that always makes him stand out. He slaps a few hands on the way down, but even that feels more automatic than celebratory tonight. His eyes keep drifting back toward the ring, then briefly out into the distance, like he is trying to shut out a voice only he can hear.

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John Phillips: "Whatever is going on in Kairo Bey's head, this is not the kind of opponent you want to face if you are even one percent distracted."

Mark Bravo: "Nope. Dahlia Cross is the kind of woman who sees hesitation like blood in the water."

Kairo reaches ringside and circles toward the steps instead of sliding right in. He pauses there for a second, one hand on the steel post, eyes fixed on the mat, taking a deeper breath now.

John Phillips: "A huge opportunity here tonight. Fighting Championship rules. No pinfalls. No shortcuts. You have to stop your opponent or make them submit."

Mark Bravo: "Which is why this match might tell us a lot about Kairo. If he's all in, this is a statement opportunity. If his head's somewhere else, Dahlia Cross is going to drag him into hell."

Kairo runs up the steps and steps through the ropes, then immediately bounces into the center of the ring and throws his arms out, finally letting a little of that familiar energy show. The crowd cheers him loudly, and for a second he seems to feed off it. For a second, he looks like himself again.

But only for a second.

The camera catches his face as he lowers his arms, and there is still that flicker of tension in his eyes. Uncertainty. Frustration. Temptation. Maybe all three.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey wants this. You can see it."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but the question is whether wanting this is stronger than whatever else is pulling at him right now."

Kairo backs into his corner, eyes fixed on the stage now, waiting for Dahlia Cross to emerge.

Kairo Bey waits in the corner, bouncing lightly in place, rolling one shoulder, then the other, trying to stay loose as the crowd buzz hangs over the arena.

Then the lights change.

The color drains out of the building and gets replaced by something colder. Darker. A deep, venomous mix of shadow and sickly white light creeps across the stage as the opening of Dahlia Cross's music bleeds through the speakers.

The reaction from the crowd turns instantly.

Boos. Uneasy noise. A different kind of energy.

Dahlia Cross steps through the curtain.

There is nothing flashy about her arrival.

Nothing inviting.

Nothing warm.

She walks with slow, deliberate confidence, every step measured, every movement controlled, her eyes locked on the ring like she already sees what she intends to do once she gets there.

John Phillips: "And here comes Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah... and the whole building just got colder."

Dahlia pauses just beyond the curtain and tilts her head slightly, staring down at Kairo Bey from the stage. There is no smile on her face. No big entrance motion. Just that cruel little stillness she carries so well, like the violence is already decided and everyone else is the last to know.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is one of the most dangerous women in all of UTA because everything she does feels intentional. She doesn't waste motion. She doesn't waste energy. She picks at weaknesses and she keeps digging until there's nothing left."

Mark Bravo: "And under Fighting Championship rules? She might be even worse. No pins. No lucky cradle. No getting caught for three. You either survive her or you don't."

Dahlia starts down the ramp now, slow and steady, her focus never wavering. The camera cuts briefly to Kairo in the ring. He doesn't take his eyes off her. He looks ready, but there is tension in his jaw now. He knows exactly what kind of fight this is about to become.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross has built her reputation on precision and cruelty, and this format gives her every opportunity to make this the kind of match she wants."

Mark Bravo: "And don't think she doesn't know about everything surrounding Kairo Bey either. If there's any uncertainty in him right now, if there's any distraction from this Creed Method talk, Dahlia is exactly the kind of person who will sense it and punish it."

Dahlia reaches the halfway point of the ramp and finally gives the crowd the slightest reaction--a sideways glance, cold and dismissive, like their noise means less than nothing to her. Then her eyes return to the ring.

John Phillips: "That question continues to follow Kairo Bey. Will he or won't he? Will he align himself with Eli Creed and the Creed Method? Or does he stay his own man?"

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Mark Bravo: "And every week that question lingers, it gets louder. Every week he doesn't answer it, it starts hanging over everything he does. Even tonight. Even in a qualifier like this."

John Phillips: "Which is why this match matters so much. A win here, in this environment, against this opponent, might do a lot to quiet those questions."

Mark Bravo: "Or a loss could make those questions even louder."

Dahlia reaches ringside and walks a deliberate circle around the ring, one hand trailing along the apron as she studies Kairo from different angles. Not admiring him. Assessing him. Measuring distance. Looking for habits. Looking for tells.

Kairo turns with her from inside the ring, keeping her in sight, staying light on his feet.

John Phillips: "You can see it already. Dahlia Cross isn't just making an entrance. She's scouting."

Mark Bravo: "That's because she treats a match like surgery, John. She wants to know where to cut before she picks up the knife."

Dahlia stops at the base of the steps and looks up at Kairo one more time. Then, without any wasted movement, she ascends to the apron and steps through the ropes.

Once inside, she doesn't pose. Doesn't taunt. Doesn't acknowledge the crowd. She simply walks toward the center of the ring, then turns and backs into her corner, never breaking eye contact with Kairo.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey brings the explosiveness. Dahlia Cross brings the malice. And with no pinfalls to fall back on, this one could get very dangerous very quickly."

Mark Bravo: "And I'm telling you right now--if Kairo's head is anywhere but right here, right now, Dahlia Cross is going to make him regret it."

The referee steps between them and looks to both corners as the crowd rises with anticipation.

Kairo stretches his neck side to side and nods once, trying to lock in.

Dahlia just stares.

Cold. Calm. Ready.

The referee steps into the middle of the ring, eyes moving from Kairo Bey to Dahlia Cross as he gives the final instructions.

Kairo nods along, shoulders loose but breathing controlled, trying to settle himself.

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Dahlia says nothing.

She just stares at him.

John Phillips: "This is a huge moment for Kairo Bey, and not just because of the bracket. He needs this. He needs this win badly."

Mark Bravo: "No question. Forget the qualifier for a second. Forget the championship path for a second. This man needs something to go right. He's had a rough stretch, Eli Creed has been snooping around, people keep asking if he's gonna join the Creed Method--Kairo Bey could really use a win just to get out of his own head."

John Phillips: "Because if he doesn't, those questions only keep getting louder. Every loss makes the pressure worse. Every setback makes people wonder if Eli Creed's message starts sounding more and more tempting."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the danger, right? When a guy with all the talent in the world starts doubting himself, that's when a voice like Eli Creed slithers in and starts sounding like the answer."

The referee looks to one corner.

Then the other.

Then calls for the bell.

DING DING DING!

The crowd swells as both competitors ease out of their corners, but there is an immediate difference in the energy between them.

Kairo is light on his feet, circling, hands twitching, trying to stay mobile.

Dahlia is slow and methodical, giving ground only when she chooses to, her eyes following every feint, every shift, every bounce.

John Phillips: "No pinfalls in this qualifier. Knockout, submission, or referee stoppage only."

Mark Bravo: "And that puts even more pressure on Kairo. He can't just outscore Dahlia. He can't just catch her for three. He has to beat her. He has to finish her."

They circle once.

Twice.

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Kairo flashes a quick step in, then out, trying to draw a reaction.

Dahlia doesn't bite.

He feints low with one shoulder, then shuffles left, trying again.

Still nothing.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is giving him absolutely nothing to work with early."

Mark Bravo: "Because she knows Kairo wants rhythm. He wants space. He wants one opening so he can turn this into a track meet. Dahlia wants him thinking. Dahlia wants him hesitating."

Kairo finally darts in with a quick low kick to the thigh.

SMACK!

Dahlia absorbs it without much reaction.

Kairo bounces back out.

Then in again with a second one to the calf.

This time Dahlia turns slightly with it, already adjusting.

John Phillips: "Smart start by Kairo Bey. Stick and move. Make Dahlia reset. Don't let her plant and start picking him apart."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the kind of stuff that can help him mentally too. Just settle in. Breathe. Get your offense going. Remind yourself who you are."

Kairo circles again, looking sharper now, and suddenly bursts forward with a jab-cross-leg kick combination that snaps Dahlia's head back with the right hand and forces her to give up a step from the kick.

The crowd pops.

John Phillips: "Nice combination from Kairo!"

Mark Bravo: "That's better! That's the Kairo Bey people have been waiting to see!"

Kairo points to himself and nods, feeding off the reaction just a little, then steps back in with more confidence. He flicks another jab, then changes levels as if considering a takedown entry--but Dahlia meets him with a sudden knee up the middle that catches him in the body and halts him in place.

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Kairo folds slightly.

Dahlia immediately clubs him across the back of the neck with a forearm and follows with a short kick to the ribs before Kairo can fully recover.

John Phillips: "And there is the answer from Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "That's what she does. You think you've got momentum, then boom--she reminds you how fast this can turn."

Kairo stumbles backward a step and resets his stance, one arm briefly wrapping around his midsection. Dahlia advances without rush, hands up, chin tucked, every step precise. Kairo throws a low kick again, trying to keep her off him, but Dahlia catches the timing this time and checks it with her shin.

Kairo grimaces immediately.

John Phillips: "That one hurt Kairo Bey more than Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "And that's a problem. He needs this win, but if he starts pressing too hard because he knows he needs it, he's gonna make mistakes."

Dahlia takes another step in. Kairo circles away. Dahlia cuts him off. Kairo tries to angle back toward center, but Dahlia snaps a front kick straight into the stomach and forces him back again. Kairo exhales sharply, now breathing a little heavier than he wants to this early.

John Phillips: "You can see Kairo trying not to get frustrated."

Mark Bravo: "Because he knows what this match means. He knows how important this is. He knows one good win can start to quiet the noise, can start to push Eli Creed out of the conversation, can get him back on his own path."

John Phillips: "But right now, Dahlia Cross is making him work for every inch."

Kairo tries to change the pace again, springing in with a quick burst of punches before spinning off to the side and landing a sharp kick to the outside of Dahlia's knee. This time the shot lands clean. Dahlia's leg buckles just enough to show it had effect.

The crowd responds.

Kairo sees it and jumps on the opening, firing a fast jumping knee that clips Dahlia high on the chest and chin, sending her backward into the ropes.

John Phillips: "Good sequence by Kairo Bey!"

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Mark Bravo: "There you go! Stack good things together! That's how you get out of your own head!"

Kairo charges in, sensing momentum, and unloads with a flurry of body shots and forearms against the ropes. The crowd rises with each strike as he finally starts letting the fight come to him instead of forcing it.

John Phillips: "This is better from Kairo Bey! More decisive, more confident!"

Dahlia covers up for two shots--

then suddenly pivots and buries a short elbow into Kairo's temple.

Kairo stumbles sideways.

Dahlia grabs the back of his head and snaps him down into a vicious knee strike as he drops, the impact sending him sprawling to the mat near center ring.

The crowd gasps.

Mark Bravo: "And just like that, she cuts him off again!"

Dahlia doesn't go for a cover--because she doesn't need one. Instead she stands over Kairo for a second, watching him try to gather himself, then drives a hard kick into his right shoulder blade. Kairo rolls with the impact and tries to scramble away, but Dahlia follows him, stalking rather than rushing.

John Phillips: "That is the danger of fighting Dahlia Cross. She turns one defensive opening into immediate punishment."

Mark Bravo: "And now Kairo's got that look again. That little flash of frustration. That little flash of doubt. He has got to get rid of that right now."

Kairo pushes himself up to one knee, then to his feet, eyes narrowed, breathing through his mouth now. Dahlia steps in and slaps him across the face.

The crowd lets out a loud reaction.

Not a strike to win the fight.

A strike to insult him.

To provoke him.

To challenge what's left of his composure.

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John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross trying to get into Kairo Bey's head now."

Mark Bravo: "And that's where this gets dangerous. Because Kairo doesn't just need to win this match--he needs to prove to himself that he can keep it together and do this his way."

Kairo stares at her.

Jaw tight.

Chest rising and falling.

The slap clearly got to him.

Dahlia stares right back, expression cold, almost inviting him to lose his discipline.

Kairo Bey stands frozen for half a second after the slap.

Not stunned.

Offended.

The mark on his cheek is already visible under the lights, but it is the look in his eyes that matters more. Dahlia Cross wanted a reaction. Wanted emotion. Wanted him fighting angry instead of fighting smart.

John Phillips: "This is the moment right here. Kairo Bey has to make a choice."

Mark Bravo: "Exactly. He can swing wild because his pride got touched, or he can remember why he needs this so badly and stay on task."

Kairo takes one slow breath through his nose.

Then another.

He nods once to himself.

The crowd murmurs, sensing the reset.

Dahlia steps forward again, maybe expecting the lunge, maybe hoping for it--but Kairo doesn't give it to her. Instead, he flicks a quick low kick to the outside of her lead leg, then slides out before she can answer. Dahlia pivots. Kairo circles. Another calf kick. Another exit.

John Phillips: "That's discipline from Kairo Bey."

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Mark Bravo: "And that's huge. That's exactly what he needs right now. Not just for this fight--for himself."

Dahlia advances with a little more urgency now, and Kairo meets her with a snapping jab, then another, then a right hand to the body before darting off to the side. Dahlia turns to track him--

and Kairo jumps in with a sharp step-up knee that catches her high on the chest.

The crowd pops.

John Phillips: "Good burst there from Bey!"

Kairo lands, circles, then suddenly explodes back in with a fast combination.

Left jab.

Right cross.

Left hook to the body.

Right low kick.

Dahlia absorbs the first two but the hook folds her slightly and the kick knocks her stance wider than she wants. Kairo sees it and follows with a spinning back kick to the midsection that drives her backward two full steps.

The fans roar louder now.

Mark Bravo: "There he is! There he is! That's the guy who can quiet all that noise in his head!"

John Phillips: "This is the kind of run Kairo Bey needed. Sharp, decisive offense. No hesitation. No overthinking."

Kairo nods to himself again, visibly gaining confidence. He motions for Dahlia to come on. She does, eyes narrowed, calm cracking just a little now as she realizes the fight is starting to tilt. She throws a sharp right hand--Kairo slips it. She swings again--Kairo ducks under and answers with a clean roundhouse to the ribs that lands with a loud smack.

Dahlia grunts and backs off a step.

Kairo rushes the opening, driving her toward the corner with a flurry of punches and forearms. The crowd rises with him as he unloads, each strike a little sharper, each step forward a little more committed.

John Phillips: "Best stretch of the fight so far for Kairo Bey!"

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Mark Bravo: "And listen to these people! They know what this means! He needs this! He needs to feel a win getting close!"

Dahlia shells up in the corner for a moment, then suddenly throws a slicing elbow over the top that clips Kairo on the ear. Kairo stumbles just enough for Dahlia to grab the back of his neck and drive a knee up into the body. Then another. Kairo doubles over. Dahlia tries to cinch a front facelock--

but Kairo bursts out of it with a lift, driving Dahlia backward into the turnbuckles hard enough to shake the ring.

The crowd roars.

John Phillips: "Excellent counter by Kairo!"

Dahlia winces but immediately slashes a forearm across his face. Kairo answers with one of his own. Dahlia again. Kairo again. The exchange gets mean in a hurry, both of them standing chest to chest now in the corner, trading shots that sound heavier with every blow.

Mark Bravo: "Now we're in it! Now it's becoming a fight-fight!"

Dahlia lands a short elbow to the temple.

Kairo fires back with a head kick.

Dahlia barely gets a forearm up in time, but the impact still knocks her sideways into the ropes. She tries to reset--Kairo doesn't let her. He sprints in with a leaping forearm that blasts her through the ropes and onto the apron.

Kairo doesn't hesitate. He hits the far ropes, rebounds, and launches himself through the middle and top with a suicide dive that wipes Dahlia out on the floor.

The building comes alive.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey laying it all on the line!"

Mark Bravo: "That's a man fighting like he knows he needs this one!"

Both competitors sprawl on the floor for a second, the referee already leaning out over the ropes to watch closely under the Fighting Championship rules. Kairo gets up first, pumping his fists once as the crowd cheers him on. He grabs Dahlia by the wrist and pulls her upright, then whips her shoulder-first into the barricade.

Dahlia crashes hard and drops to one knee.

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John Phillips: "Kairo Bey has taken full control here!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at him! He looks alive again!"

Kairo paces in a tight circle on the floor, adrenaline surging, then turns back and drives a jumping knee into Dahlia against the barricade. The impact folds her down further, one arm hooked over the rail as she struggles to stay upright. Kairo points back toward the ring, shouting something to the crowd that gets another pop.

John Phillips: "This might be exactly what Kairo Bey needed--not just a lead in the fight, but belief."

Mark Bravo: "That's it right there. Sometimes you don't need a speech. You don't need Eli Creed whispering in your ear. You need one good sequence where you remember, 'Oh yeah... I'm that guy.'"

Kairo hauls Dahlia up and rolls her back into the ring. He climbs to the apron, then to the top rope in one smooth motion, the crowd rising as he steadies himself. Dahlia is on hands and knees near center ring, dazed, trying to push herself up.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey thinking high risk!"

Mark Bravo: "And if he hits this, Dahlia Cross might be in serious danger of getting stopped!"

Kairo launches with a diving double stomp aimed at Dahlia's upper back--

but Dahlia rolls at the last possible second.

Kairo crashes feet-first to the mat and buckles hard on landing.

The crowd gasps.

Dahlia is on him instantly.

She blasts the back of his knee with a low kick.

Kairo drops to one leg.

Then she spins and drills him with a brutal elbow to the side of the head that sends him collapsing fully onto the canvas.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross turned it around in an instant!"

Mark Bravo: "That's the danger! That's always the danger with her! One mistake and she makes you pay double!"

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Kairo rolls onto his back, blinking, trying to shake the impact loose, but Dahlia doesn't give him time. She grabs the leg he landed awkwardly on and twists, stepping through into a kneebar variation that has Kairo immediately shouting in pain.

John Phillips: "Submission attempt by Dahlia Cross!"

Mark Bravo: "And now she's attacking the leg! That takes away the speed, the jumps, the explosiveness--everything Kairo needs!"

The referee drops beside them.

Referee: "Kairo! Do you give it up?"

Kairo Bey: "No!"

Dahlia cranks harder, face still emotionless, almost clinical, as Kairo claws at the mat and tries to turn his hips. The crowd rallies behind him, clapping, stomping, trying to will him through it as the pain starts to flood across his face.

John Phillips: "Just when it felt like Kairo Bey was finding his footing, Dahlia Cross found a way to rip it right back away from him."

Mark Bravo: "And now we find out how bad Kairo wants this. Because he said no to Eli Creed. He said no to the whispers. He said no to the doubt. But can he say no to this pain?"

Kairo grits his teeth, digs his elbows into the mat, and starts dragging both of them inch by inch toward the ropes, his free leg kicking, his hands clawing, refusing to let the moment slip away.

Kairo Bey digs his elbows into the canvas and drags himself forward an inch at a time, face twisted in pain, teeth bared, the tendons in his neck standing out as he tries to pull both his own weight and Dahlia Cross with him.

The crowd is alive now, clapping and shouting, desperate to will him onward.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey is fighting through it! He is doing everything he can to stay alive in this qualifier!"

Mark Bravo: "That's pride! That's desperation! That's a man who knows he needs this win and refuses to let it slip without a fight!"

Kairo reaches forward with one hand--

fingertips brushing the canvas ahead--

trying to inch closer, trying to create hope--

but Dahlia Cross suddenly plants both palms against the mat, pushes herself up, and yanks him violently backward.

The crowd groans.

John Phillips: "Oh no!"

Dahlia doesn't release the hold.

She drags Kairo back toward center ring with cold precision, then sits deeper, folding his leg tighter against her body. Kairo cries out and pounds the mat in pain--not a submission, just raw agony--as Dahlia repositions her grip, clamps down around the ankle, and torques the knee at an even uglier angle.

Mark Bravo: "She pulled him right back! And now she's got it deeper! She's got it way deeper!"

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is not interested in just making Kairo Bey uncomfortable. She is trying to rip that leg apart!"

Kairo throws his head back and shouts, both hands clawing at the mat as he tries to push up on his forearms. But every attempt to turn his hips only seems to make the pressure worse. Dahlia stays seated low and heavy, face expressionless, wrenching on the hold like she is dismantling a machine piece by piece.

Referee: "Kairo! Kairo, talk to me! Do you want me to stop it?"

Kairo Bey: "NO!"

The crowd roars in support, but it's mixed now with concern.

Real concern.

John Phillips: "This is a frightening scene for Kairo Bey. He will not quit, but at a certain point the referee may have to make a decision for him."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the worst part, because this guy needed this win so badly. He needed something to stop the slide. He needed something to shut the noise out. And now he's trapped in the exact kind of situation that can make all that noise get even louder."

Kairo tries one more time to crawl, trying to drag himself with sheer will, but his arms give out and he collapses flat to the mat, both fists slamming the canvas in pain. Dahlia adjusts again, threading her legs even tighter and pulling back with a deeper arch.

Kairo screams.

The camera cuts to faces in the crowd, wincing at the sight.

John Phillips: "This has gone from a submission attempt to a full-blown danger zone."

Mark Bravo: "He's not getting out! He's not getting out! He doesn't want to say it, but he may not have a choice!"

The referee drops lower, looking directly into Kairo's face now, checking his responsiveness, checking the position of the knee and ankle, seeing the panic and the pain and the total lack of escape.

Referee: "Kairo! Kairo, I need you to answer me!"

Kairo shakes his head wildly, sweat flying, still refusing, still fighting, still trying to push up with nothing left.

Kairo Bey: "DON'T-- STOP--!"

Dahlia pulls back harder.

Kairo lets out another yell, this one sharper, more desperate than the ones before it.

The referee looks at the trapped leg one more time.

Looks at Kairo's face.

Looks at the hold.

Then immediately waves his arms.

Referee: "That's it! That's it! Ring the bell!"

DING DING DING!

The crowd erupts into a chaotic mix of boos, shock, and stunned reaction as Dahlia Cross finally releases the hold and rolls away to one knee, calm as ever, as if what she just did was simply inevitable.

John Phillips: "The referee has stopped this fight! Dahlia Cross wins by referee stoppage!"

Mark Bravo: "Kairo Bey would not quit, but the referee had no choice! That was for his safety!"

Kairo immediately grabs at the leg, rolling onto his side, agony written all over his face as he pounds the mat once in frustration. Officials rush into the ring to check on him while Dahlia stands slowly in the corner,

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breathing controlled, not celebrating so much as accepting the result she always believed was coming.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner by referee stoppage... **DAHLIA CROSS!**"

The boos grow louder now as Dahlia steps forward and has her arm raised. She barely acknowledges it. Her eyes drop to Kairo instead, who is still clutching at the leg, furious, embarrassed, devastated.

John Phillips: "An absolutely crushing result for Kairo Bey. He needed this win in the worst way. He needed momentum. He needed clarity. He needed something to silence the questions surrounding him."

Mark Bravo: "And instead, the questions are only gonna get louder. That's the brutal truth. With Eli Creed snooping around, with all this talk about the Creed Method, with this string of losses now stretching even further--Kairo Bey is in a bad place right now."

John Phillips: "But full credit to Dahlia Cross. She weathered Kairo's best burst, found the opening, attacked the leg, and once she got that submission locked in, she never gave him another inch."

Mark Bravo: "That woman is terrifying. And now she moves on to meet Valentina Blaze later tonight in the qualifier final."

The camera lingers on Kairo as he sits up with help from the officials, face full of pain and disbelief, his hands pressing into his hair as the weight of another loss settles over him. He looks like a man trying not to hear all the voices waiting for him in the aftermath.

Across the ring, Dahlia Cross exits without another glance, having done exactly what she came to do.

Contracted

Elsewhere, the camera catches the office door swinging open.

Out walks David Hightower first, wearing the kind of grin that immediately signals he has either gotten exactly what he wanted... or is about to become someone else's problem.

Behind him comes Buck Hightower, looming and quiet as ever, shoulders wide, expression unreadable, the human equivalent of a bar fight waiting to happen.

Dakota Hightower steps out last, looking altogether too pleased with herself, that easy Southern calm on her face making the whole thing feel even more suspicious.

The three of them make it about three steps into the hallway before another voice cuts in from off camera.

Emily Hightower: "Dad?"

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The camera pans and finds Emily standing there, caught somewhere between confusion and instant suspicion the second she sees all three of them leaving Scott Stevens' office together.

Her eyes go from David... to Buck... to Dakota... then back to David.

Emily Hightower: "Dad why were you guys in Scott's office?"

David smiles.

Not a small smile.

A big, proud, almost ridiculous grin that makes it very clear he has been waiting to say this out loud.

David Hightower: "We're all now contracted!"

Emily freezes.

Then blinks.

Then her whole face twists into disbelief.

Emily Hightower: "WHAT?!"

She points straight at David.

Emily Hightower: "DAD, YOU ARE LIKE OVER 50!!!!!"

Dakota immediately snorts.

Buck grunts what might be a laugh.

David's smile vanishes in an instant, replaced by the offended pride of a man who absolutely believes age only applies to weaker people.

David Hightower: "And?"

He steps forward and jabs a thumb into his own chest.

David Hightower: "If it weren't for Sean Jackson's sorry hide, I would be holdin' that world title!"

The energy rises immediately.

David is no longer just answering Emily.

He is giving a speech to history itself.

David Hightower: "I beat Jarvis Valentine's ass from pillar to post!"

He throws a hand out down the hallway like Chris Ross is somehow standing there waiting to hear this.

David Hightower: "Chris Ross would be irrelevant!"

Emily stares at him like she cannot decide whether to argue, laugh, or call for medical.

Emily Hightower: "Oh my God..."

David keeps going anyway, because of course he does.

David Hightower: "You think I can't still go? I got more fight in me right now than half this locker room put together!"

Buck nods once, like this is all perfectly reasonable.

Buck Hightower: "He ain't wrong."

Dakota folds her arms and smiles sweetly.

Dakota Hightower: "He does yell a lot for an old man, but he ain't wrong."

David points at her.

David Hightower: "Exactly!"

Emily throws both hands up.

Emily Hightower: "No! Not exactly! This is insane!"

She points from one sibling to the other.

Emily Hightower: "Buck getting signed? Fine, whatever. Dakota getting signed? Sure, okay, I can at least follow that."

Then she points right back at David.

Emily Hightower: "But you?!"

David squares up, fully offended again.

David Hightower: "Girl, I will knock the rust off this whole company."

Dakota bites back another smile.

Buck looks like he genuinely wants to see that happen.

Buck Hightower: "I'd watch it."

Dakota Hightower: "I'd sell tickets."

Emily drags a hand down her face.

Emily Hightower: "I cannot believe this is my family."

David steps in, suddenly a little prouder, a little more serious beneath the bluster.

David Hightower: "Better believe it."

He gestures between all of them.

David Hightower: "The Hightowers are in this thing for real now."

He points toward Scott Stevens' office over his shoulder.

David Hightower: "Paperwork's signed. Ink's dry. And now this company's got itself a whole lot more Hightower than it knows what to do with."

Emily looks from David to Buck to Dakota again, still overwhelmed by the news, still trying to process the fact that what used to be "the family hanging around" has now officially become "the family works here."

Emily Hightower: "This is gonna be a disaster."

Dakota smiles.

Dakota Hightower: "Maybe."

Buck cracks his knuckles once.

Buck Hightower: "Maybe for everybody else."

David throws an arm wide like he's introducing the greatest attraction in wrestling history.

David Hightower: "That's right."

He slaps Buck on the shoulder.

David Hightower: "Mad Dog."

Then motions to Dakota.

David Hightower: "Southern Steel."

Then taps his own chest with a grin that comes roaring back in full force.

David Hightower: "And the toughest damn dog in the yard."

Emily just closes her eyes for a second like she's trying to survive this revelation on a spiritual level.

Emily Hightower: "I already have a headache."

David laughs loudly and throws an arm around her shoulders whether she wants it or not.

David Hightower: "Get used to it, baby girl."

He points down the hallway.

David Hightower: "Because the whole clan's here now."

The camera lingers on the four of them--Emily caught between horror and reluctant acceptance, Dakota amused, Buck looming, and David looking like a man who just signed himself into one more round with time itself.

Fade out.

The Quiet Hand That Moves the Board

Backstage is alive with noise - the crowd roaring through the walls, production staff rushing past, monitors flickering with the live broadcast. Inside the Brigade's locker room, Torunn Sigurjonsson stands behind Gunnar Van Patton, carefully removing the last of the stitches from the brutal head wound left by the Fatu Twins. Gunnar sits still, jaw clenched, refusing to show discomfort. Theron Tkachuk watches from the corner, silent and immovable.

Meanwhile, Arkady Bogatyr moves down the hallway outside, restless and hungry, snatching a chicken tender from a catering tray. He's mid-bite when a voice cuts through the corridor like a scalpel dipped in frost.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Bogatyr. A moment of your time."

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Arkady stops, turns, and narrows his eyes. Avril Selene Kinkade stands before him - immaculate, composed, and radiating aristocratic disdain. She looks at him as though he is an inconvenience she intends to remove with minimal effort.

Arkady Bogatyr: "What do you want, strigoi? I'm eating."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Yes, I noticed. Your palate remains as unrefined as your manners."

Her tone is cool, clipped, and effortlessly superior.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "This will not take long, provided you refrain from attempting wit."

Arkady snorts, folding his arms.

Arkady Bogatyr: "You always talk like you're allergic to normal words."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "I assure you, I am merely allergic to mediocrity."

She steps closer, her voice lowering into something precise and surgical.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Now listen carefully."

Arkady's eyes narrow, but he doesn't walk away.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Your pack is occupied. Torunn is removing stitches from Van Patton's skull as we speak. He is still recovering - eighty percent at best."

Arkady's jaw tightens. He glances toward the locker room.

Arkady Bogatyr: "Gunnar is fine. He'll fight."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "He will attempt to. There is a distinction."

Her diction is immaculate, every word chosen with care.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Hakuryu has earned the right to challenge any champion in this company. And he selected Van Patton. A man who is, at this very moment, having the remnants of a head wound tended to."

Arkady's eyes narrow.

Arkady Bogatyr: "Hakuryu hasn't touched us."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Not yet."

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She tilts her head, studying him with the calm precision of a barrister dismantling a witness.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "But he has declared his intent. And he is not a man who chooses lightly. He will strike when it benefits him most - and Van Patton is not at full strength."

Arkady's jaw works. He doesn't like the picture she's painting - but he can't deny it.

Arkady Bogatyr: "So what? Gunnar will still fight him."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "In his condition? Against a challenger of Hakuryu's calibre?"

Her voice is soft, aristocratic, devastating.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "He would be walking into a disadvantage. And if he falls, your entire little warband becomes exposed. Your alpha's soldiers lose their commander."

Arkady's eyes flicker - that hits him.

Arkady Bogatyr: "We protect him. All of us."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Yes. But protection requires foresight."

Her tone sharpens, elegant and exact.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Hakuryu is a threat. A serious one. And someone must intercept him before he reaches Van Patton."

Arkady crosses his arms, suspicious.

Arkady Bogatyr: "And you think that someone is me."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "I know it is."

Her tone is calm, confident, aristocratic.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "You are the one who moves first. The one who leaps before danger arrives. The one who absorbs the blow so your alpha does not have to. A wolverine interceptor."

Arkady's jaw tightens. He hates that she's right.

Arkady Bogatyr: "You're trying to use me."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "I am presenting you with necessity."

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She opens her designer clutch and withdraws a pristine folder.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "UTA management has authorised a match for later tonight. A chance for you to confront Hakuryu before he confronts Van Patton."

Arkady stares at the folder. His mind races - not slow, not foolish, but wild, instinctive, protective.

Arkady Bogatyr: "If I do this ... Gunnar is safer."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Precisely."

Her voice softens, almost warm - the most dangerous tone she has.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "You are his first line of defence. His vanguard. The one who meets the threat before it reaches him."

Arkady exhales sharply. That lands harder than anything else.

Arkady Bogatyr: "Fine. Give me the pen."

Avril places the pen in his hand with the elegance of a queen bestowing a title. Arkady signs - quick, decisive, committed.

Avril closes the folder with a soft, satisfied snap - the sound of a trap sealing shut.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Excellent. I shall handle the formalities. And do keep this between us. There is no need to burden Van Patton with the knowledge that you are compensating for his ... compromised state."

Arkady glares at her - but he doesn't disagree.

Arkady Bogatyr: "This is for Gunnar. Not for you."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Of course."

Her smile is small, elegant, victorious.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "That is why it will work."

She turns and glides away, heels clicking like a countdown.

Arkady stands alone, jaw set, eyes sharp - not dumb, not fooled, but convinced he is doing the right thing.

He grabs another chicken tender.

Arkady Bogatyr: "Hakuryu wants the boss? He goes through me first."

Now He Gets Me

Backstage, the camera cuts to a locker room door already half open, voices spilling into the hallway before the shot even fully settles.

Inside, the atmosphere is chaos.

Chris Ross is pacing like a caged animal, the UTA Championship in one hand, fury written all over his face. His jaw is clenched so tightly it looks like his teeth might crack. Every turn he makes is sharp, violent, loaded with the kind of anger that doesn't cool down--it builds.

Valentina Blaze is there with him, still sweaty from earlier, still feeling the effects of her own fight, but trying her best to get in front of him every time he heads toward the door.

Chris Ross: "Move."

Valentina Blaze: "Chris, no!"

Chris tries to step around her.

She cuts him off again, planting herself in front of him with both hands up.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris! Chris! This is what he wants!"

Chris turns away, running a hand over his face before slamming the title belt down onto a nearby bench with a loud metallic crack. He points back toward the hallway, toward the direction of the interview set, toward the ghost of Maxwell Jett's voice still hanging in the air.

Chris Ross: "He keeps talking. He keeps talking. Every week it's something. Every damn week it's something with this guy."

He grabs the championship off the bench again and throws it over his shoulder, not to pose with it, but because carrying it seems to ground him just enough to stop from punching through the nearest wall.

Chris Ross: "Now he's got your name in his mouth too?"

Valentina Blaze: "I know. I know."

Chris Ross: "No, you don't know, Valentina, because I'm the one trying real hard right now not to go find that little bastard and beat his teeth down his throat before bell time."

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Valentina steps closer, both hands pressing against his chest now as he starts moving again. Her left arm clearly isn't one hundred percent after her match, but she ignores it completely.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris... no! Chris! This is what he wants!"

Chris stares past her, nostrils flaring.

He looks like he could explode.

Valentina Blaze: "He wants you angry. He wants you reckless. He wants you going into this match trying to shut him up instead of trying to beat him."

Chris exhales hard through his nose and takes a step back, but not because he's calmer. Just because he's trying.

Chris Ross: "He talked about you."

Valentina Blaze: "I know he did."

Chris Ross: "He called you my little girlfriend on national television."

Valentina actually cracks a brief, incredulous smile at that, despite the tension.

Valentina Blaze: "Yeah, I heard him. Trust me, he's lucky I'm not the one going to his locker room."

Chris almost laughs.

Almost.

Instead, he shakes his head and starts pacing again, slower this time, but no less intense.

Chris Ross: "He thinks this is a game. He thinks because he can stand there in a nice jacket and say a bunch of cute little lines that this is a game."

Valentina watches him carefully, letting him pace now, letting some of the poison out.

Valentina Blaze: "Then don't play his game."

Chris stops.

Looks at her.

Valentina Blaze: "Beat him in yours."

A beat.

The words hang there.

Chris looks down at the championship over his shoulder, then back up at her.

Valentina Blaze: "Maxwell Jett wants this version of you. He wants the angry version. The wild version. The version that goes in there trying to hurt him instead of just winning."

She steps in closer.

Valentina Blaze: "You don't need to prove anything to him. You're the champion. He's the one who has to prove he belongs."

Chris looks away, jaw still tight, but now there's thought mixing in with the rage.

Chris Ross: "He's gonna regret saying your name."

Valentina Blaze: "Good."

Chris looks back at her.

Valentina Blaze: "But make him regret it when the bell rings."

The room goes quiet for a second.

Not peaceful.

Focused.

Chris slowly rolls his shoulders and adjusts the championship on his shoulder, breathing a little more evenly now. The anger is still there. It's not gone. It never really was going to be. But now it looks contained. Weaponized.

Chris Ross: "He wanted my attention."

Valentina nods.

Valentina Blaze: "He's got it."

Chris takes one step toward the camera, eyes hard, voice low.

Chris Ross: "Then later tonight, he can have all of it."

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Valentina steps beside him now, still a little battered from her own war earlier, but standing strong all the same. Chris glances at her once, then back to the camera.

Chris Ross: "He wanted to talk about my championship. He wanted to talk about my business. He wanted to talk about her."

He points straight into the lens.

Chris Ross: "Now he gets me."

The camera holds on Chris Ross--furious, focused, and very much ready for war--as the segment fades out.

Vance Stone vs. Samuel Scythe

Backstage, the camera cuts to one of the concrete service hallways deep in the arena. Black road cases line one wall. Crew members hustle in the distance. The low roar of the crowd bleeds faintly through the building, but here, in this corridor, the atmosphere feels tighter. Colder.

Ace Andrews walks with the smooth confidence of a man who believes every hallway belongs to him the second he enters it. His suit is immaculate. His expression smug. His tinted glasses catch the overhead light as he talks quietly out of the side of his mouth to the man walking beside him.

That man is Samuel Scythe.

Scythe is already in full match mode.

Hood up. Head slightly lowered. Shoulders tight. Breathing steady. Every step heavy with intent. He looks less like a wrestler heading toward gorilla and more like a weapon being carried toward a target.

Ace Andrews: "That's it. Keep that look. Keep that rage. Let these people finally understand what they invited into this company."

Samuel says nothing.

He just keeps walking.

Then--

Scott Stevens: "Ace. Ace... hold up."

The two men stop.

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Scott Stevens steps into frame from the side, already looking like he would rather be anywhere else than right here having this conversation. He keeps a cautious distance, eyes flicking to Samuel Scythe for only a second before returning to Ace Andrews.

Scott Stevens: "You've heard the news. You know what's been going on around here the last few weeks. Matches have been running long. Shows have been running long. We've had to make some adjustments tonight."

Ace's smirk fades into something more curious than concerned.

Samuel slowly lifts his head.

Scott Stevens: "Unfortunately, one of the decisions I had to make..."

He hesitates.

Just for a beat.

Then pushes through it.

Scott Stevens: "Samuel's match is cut tonight."

The hallway seems to drop ten degrees.

Ace blinks once.

Then glances at Samuel.

That glance says everything.

This is bad.

Samuel does not explode immediately.

That almost makes it worse.

He just stands there, shoulders rising once with a slow inhale, his face unreadable for half a second before the anger starts to spread across it like a stain.

Ace Andrews: "Scott..."

Ace adjusts one cuff and forces a small, humorless smile.

Ace Andrews: "I don't think that's very wise."

Scott squares up a little, trying to stay authoritative.

Scott Stevens: "It's not personal. It's time management. We had to make a call."

Ace gives a soft laugh.

Not because anything is funny.

Because Scott clearly does not understand the situation he has put himself in.

Ace Andrews: "No, Scott, I don't think you understand me."

He turns his head slightly, motioning toward Samuel without taking his eyes off Stevens.

Ace Andrews: "Once Samuel is in a match mindset, cancelling that match is... unwise."

Ace's tone lowers.

Ace Andrews: "People tend to... get hurt."

Scott's expression tightens.

Scott Stevens: "That sounds like a threat."

Ace Andrews: "That sounds like a warning."

Before Stevens can answer, movement appears in the background.

Vance Stone rounds the far corner heading toward position, tactical and direct as ever, his massive frame cutting through the hallway like a tank rolling into place. He slows when he sees the confrontation ahead, eyes narrowing beneath that thousand-yard stare.

Scott Stevens: "Vance-- hold up a second--"

He never gets the rest out.

Samuel Scythe suddenly surges forward.

Not a shove.

Not a lunge.

A full, violent detonation.

He blasts past Scott Stevens with a forearm that nearly spins the authority figure sideways out of his shoes, then barrels straight toward Vance Stone before the bigger man can fully brace.

Ace Andrews: "I warned you."

Scythe crashes into Vance with a running shoulder block that drives him back into a stack of road cases with a thunderous metallic bang. The cases rattle. Crew members scatter. The camera jolts trying to keep up.

Scott Stevens: "HEY! HEY! SECURITY! SECURITY!"

Vance fires back instantly, hammering Samuel with a heavy right hand to the side of the head. Scythe barely budes. He answers with a brutal headbutt that rocks Vance where he stands, then hammers him in the ribs with two savage body shots before grabbing him by the back of the neck and launching him face-first into a rolling production crate.

The crate tips over with a crash.

Vance drops to one knee.

Samuel doesn't let up.

He clubs Vance across the spine with a forearm, then snatches him up and plants him with a spinebuster right onto the concrete floor.

The impact is sickening.

Ace Andrews: "You reap what you sow."

Scott Stevens rushes forward a step, then stops himself immediately as Samuel turns and stares at him. That look alone is enough to freeze him in place.

Scott Stevens: "SECURITY! NOW!"

Vance rolls, trying to rise out of instinct more than stability, but Samuel is already on him again. He drags Stone up by the vest and drills him into the cinderblock wall with another violent slam, then rips him away and crushes him with a running powerslam onto the concrete.

Vance's arm bounces limply off the floor.

The damage is done.

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Security finally floods the hallway from both ends, yelling as they swarm the scene. It takes several guards to get between Samuel and the fallen Vance Stone, and even then Scythe looks like he might tear through all of them just to keep going.

Ace steps in close, placing one hand lightly against Samuel's chest.

Ace Andrews: "Enough. Enough. The message has been sent."

Samuel's chest heaves. His eyes never leave Vance. But after a tense second, he finally allows Ace to guide him backward, security still forming a wall between him and the wreckage on the floor.

Scott Stevens crouches near Vance Stone now, shouting for medical help, one hand waving frantically down the hall.

Scott Stevens: "Get medical down here! Now! Move!"

Ace adjusts his jacket, cool as ever, and looks back at Stevens with open contempt.

Ace Andrews: "You cancelled the match, Scott."

He nods toward Vance.

Ace Andrews: "The violence was still scheduled."

The camera cuts away.

Back at ringside, John Phillips and Mark Bravo are both standing halfway out of their chairs, stunned.

John Phillips: "My God! Absolute chaos backstage! Samuel Scythe has just annihilated Vance Stone in the hallway after being informed his match had been cut!"

Mark Bravo: "Ace Andrews told Scott Stevens not to do that! He flat-out told him it was a bad idea to cancel a match once Samuel was locked in!"

John Phillips: "That does not excuse what we just saw! Vance Stone got blindsided in a horrific assault, and Scott Stevens may have just learned in the harshest possible way that Samuel Scythe is exactly as dangerous as Ace Andrews has been claiming!"

Mark Bravo: "And think about this--Vance Stone is not some helpless guy back there! That is a monster in his own right! And Scythe ran through him on concrete like he was trying to make a point!"

John Phillips: "Medical personnel have got to be all over that situation right now. Vance Stone took repeated shots into road cases, the wall, and the floor itself. That was not a match. That was a mugging."

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Mark Bravo: "And now everybody in this company better understand what Ace Andrews meant when he said Scythe isn't here to play nice. He wasn't selling a gimmick. He was giving a warning."

John Phillips: "An unsettling, violent development here tonight on **Victory**, and we will update you as soon as we know more about the condition of Vance Stone."

Mark Bravo: "And Scott Stevens may want to find a lot more security, because I don't think this situation with Samuel Scythe is anywhere near over."

Wide Load

The camera cuts away from the heavy tension of the Samuel Scythe situation and lands in another corridor entirely.

The difference is immediate.

A loud horn blares.

HONK! HONK! HONK!

Then another.

And another.

Production assistants, stagehands, and one poor guy carrying a coil of cable all have to jump out of the way as Bobby Dean comes flying through the hallway in a mobility scooter like he's qualifying for the Daytona 500.

Bobby Dean: "Beep beep! Coming through! Wide load! Wide load!"

He leans dramatically into the turn as he zips around a corner--

only to immediately slam on the brakes when he rolls straight into a swarm of security personnel trying to hold Samuel Scythe back while Scott Stevens is still yelling over the chaos.

Bobby Dean: "Oh!"

He stares for half a second.

Then, naturally, begins smashing the horn.

HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK!

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Scott Stevens whips his head around and glares like he has finally reached the end of all human tolerance.

Scott Stevens: "GOD DAMN IT, BOBBY! NOW IS NOT THE TIME!"

Bobby freezes.

He blinks once.

Then lets out the loudest, most offended dramatic sigh humanly possible.

Bobby Dean: "Fiiiiine."

He slowly turns the scooter around with all the wounded dignity of a man who feels deeply disrespected for trying to help absolutely nobody.

As he rounds the corner again, he almost immediately bumps into another figure coming the opposite direction.

THUNK.

Bobby jerks the handlebars straight and looks up.

Bobby Dean: "ERIC!"

Eric Dane Jr. stops and looks down at him, already shaking his head. He reaches up and pulls his sunglasses down just enough to get a better look, like he needs to be absolutely certain this is the nonsense he thinks it is.

Eric Dane Jr.: "How's my *Victorious* opponent doing? Staying spry for our match, Bob-a-rino?"

Eric throws a few playful little shadowboxing punches in the air, grinning just enough to keep the mood light while also making it very clear he thinks this is going to be easy work.

Bobby perks up immediately.

Bobby Dean: "Sure have! I've even been trying a new diet!"

Eric pauses, eyebrows lifting with real curiosity for once.

Eric Dane Jr.: "That so?"

Bobby nods proudly.

Bobby Dean: "Yep! I'm down to just one donut a day!"

Eric looks almost impressed.

Almost.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Just one donut?"

Bobby smiles sheepishly.

Bobby Dean: "Well... one box."

Eric just grins.

The kind of grin that says everything without him needing to say much of anything at all. The kind of grin that says he already believes this match at *Victorious* is safely in his pocket.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Yeah, uh... good for you. I think I better get going."

He points back the way Bobby had just come from.

Bobby Dean: "Wouldn't go that way. I think someone found out that you don't get paid nightly."

Bobby's eyes widen.

Bobby Dean: "Hey, did you know they won't send a check for like four to six weeks after you appear?!"

Eric's eyebrow rises.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Uh... yeah. It's the way things work."

Bobby suddenly looks a little embarrassed.

A little shy.

A little like a man about to ask a question he already knows is ridiculous.

Bobby Dean: "Can I borrow a twenty?"

Eric sighs.

Long and patient and deeply resigned.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Sure thing, Bobby."

Bobby lights up instantly.

Bobby Dean: "Really?!"

Eric Dane Jr.: "But first..."

He points at Bobby, then at the scooter, then vaguely toward the future violence waiting for them at *Victorious*.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Let's talk about this match..."

Bobby slowly nudges the scooter forward now, suddenly very attentive. Eric turns and walks beside him, one hand in his pocket, the other gesturing as the two move farther down the corridor.

Bobby Dean: "I know it's hardcore, means no rules, right... I was thinking... what if we..."

Their voices continue as they disappear deeper into the hallway, Bobby talking animatedly from the scooter while Eric listens with amused disbelief.

The sound fades with them, the tension of the earlier segment replaced for just a moment by something absurd, awkward, and strangely endearing.

Pain is Honest

The camera cuts away from the noise of the arena and finds a quieter place outside the building.

The night air hangs still.

The distant hum of traffic and the muffled pulse of the arena are the only sounds as Kairo Bey sits alone on a low concrete barrier near the loading dock, still in his gear, still taped up, still wearing the aftermath of the fight he just lost.

His elbows rest on his knees.

His hands hang between them.

His head is tilted upward, eyes fixed on the sky, but it does not look like he is seeing much of anything.

He just looks tired.

Not physically.

Spiritually.

Like a man trying to find one good reason not to hate the sound of his own thoughts.

A shadow stretches over him.

Then a hand settles gently onto his shoulder.

Kairo does not flinch.

He already knows who it is.

The camera widens.

Eli Creed stands over him, calm as ever, one hand on Kairo's shoulder, the other hanging at his side. Behind him stands Troy Lindz, posture straight, expression composed, the living proof of everything Creed has been preaching for weeks.

Kairo exhales through his nose but does not look at either of them.

Eli Creed: "My name is Eli Creed... and I'm here to help you."

Kairo shuts his eyes for half a second.

Kairo Bey: "I really don't have the energy tonight, man."

Eli's hand remains on his shoulder.

Not forceful.

Not comforting.

Just present.

Eli Creed: "That's exactly why I'm here."

Kairo finally lowers his head from the sky and looks down at the pavement.

Eli slowly steps around him now, coming into view so Kairo cannot avoid the conversation without making a point of it.

Eli Creed: "You lost again tonight."

Kairo's jaw tightens instantly.

Eli Creed: "And before you say a word, before you blame me, before you decide I somehow had my hands in this..."

He gestures back toward the building.

Eli Creed: "I didn't come to ringside."

Kairo looks up at him now.

Just barely.

Eli Creed: "I stayed away on purpose."

A beat.

Eli Creed: "So you would know the truth."

Eli leans in slightly, voice still maddeningly calm.

Eli Creed: "It isn't me behind your losses, Kairo."

He taps two fingers lightly against the side of his own temple.

Eli Creed: "It's something within."

Kairo looks away again.

That one landed.

Eli Creed: "I've watched you. I've studied you. I've listened to the things you don't say out loud."

He begins pacing slowly in front of Kairo now, like a lecturer in front of a classroom of one.

Eli Creed: "You have the gifts. The speed. The charisma. The rhythm. The confidence when everything is flowing. But the second the fight gets ugly..."

He stops.

Looks right at him.

Eli Creed: "You fracture."

Kairo finally rises to his feet.

Not aggressive.

Just unable to keep sitting beneath it anymore.

Kairo Bey: "You don't know me."

Eli Creed: "No?"

Eli smiles faintly.

Eli Creed: "I know that every loss has sounded a little louder lately."

Eli Creed: "I know every missed opportunity has stayed with you a little longer."

Eli Creed: "I know that tonight wasn't just about losing a match."

He steps closer.

Eli Creed: "It was about feeling yourself slip again."

Kairo says nothing.

Because he can't.

Because if he speaks too quickly, it will sound like Eli is right.

Troy Lindz remains a step behind Creed, arms loose at their sides, expression unreadable. But there is no mockery there. No amusement. Just quiet certainty.

Eli turns and motions toward Troy.

Eli Creed: "I took no joy in your loss tonight."

Eli Creed: "Just like I took no joy in Troy's pain when they came to me broken, humiliated, and lost."

Troy's eyes stay locked on Kairo now.

Eli Creed: "But pain is honest."

Eli Creed: "Pain strips away performance."

Eli Creed: "Pain reveals what you really are when the lights stop flattering you."

Kairo's breathing gets heavier.

Not because he wants to fight.

Because he is losing ground.

Internally.

Eli Creed: "And what you are, Kairo... is unfinished."

The words linger.

Kairo looks down.

His shoulders sink just a little.

That proud energy that usually lives in him is still there somewhere, but right now it feels buried under too many bad nights and too many second guesses.

Kairo Bey: "So what, huh?"

His voice is low now.

Tired.

Kairo Bey: "What do you want me to say?"

Eli steps in closer, lowering his voice with him.

Eli Creed: "I want you to stop lying to yourself."

Eli Creed: "I want you to stop pretending that this version of you is enough."

Eli Creed: "I want you to stop fighting alone when alone is clearly not working."

He reaches out again, this time not to touch Kairo, but to offer him a hand.

Eli Creed: "Join me."

Eli Creed: "Join the Creed Method."

Eli Creed: "Let me break what's holding you back."

Eli Creed: "Let me bend what refuses to change."

Eli Creed: "And let me build the man you keep almost becoming."

Troy finally speaks.

Quietly.

Firmly.

Troy Lindz: "You don't have to keep losing to yourself."

Kairo looks at Troy.

Really looks at them.

At the composure.

At the discipline.

At the proof standing right in front of him.

Then he looks at Eli's outstretched hand.

Then down at the ground.

He is conflicted.

Badly.

The fight is all over his face.

His pride.

His doubt.

His fear of what this means.

His fear of what it means if he says no.

A long silence follows.

Long enough for the night air to feel even colder.

Long enough for the arena noise in the distance to sound like another world.

Kairo swallows hard.

Then slowly nods.

Once.

Barely.

But enough.

Kairo Bey: "...Okay."

Eli does not grin wide.

Does not celebrate.

That would be too human.

Instead, he gives the smallest, most satisfied smile imaginable. The smile of a man who never doubted this was coming.

Eli Creed: "Good."

Kairo lifts his eyes.

Still uncertain.

Still hurting.

Still not fully sure what he just agreed to.

But when Eli extends his hand again, Kairo takes it.

Eli closes both hands around his.

Eli Creed: "Now we begin."

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Troy steps forward to stand beside them, no words needed now. Just presence. Just acceptance into something larger and darker than Kairo may fully understand yet.

Eli releases the handshake and places one hand on Kairo's shoulder again, turning him slowly back toward the building.

Eli Creed: "Break."

Troy answers.

Troy Lindz: "Bend."

Eli's eyes remain on Kairo.

Eli Creed: "Build."

The camera lingers on the three of them outside in the night--Troy calm, Eli certain, and Kairo caught somewhere between regret and rebirth--as the segment fades to black.

Arkady Bogatyr vs Hakuryu

The UTA banner hangs above the ring, turning slowly in the recycled air of the building. Cameras sweep the crowd. Signs wave. The energy inside the arena is restless -- the kind that builds before something that matters.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are moments away from a matchup that, frankly, nobody saw coming when tonight's card was finalized. Arkady Bogatyr. Hakuryu. One on one."

Mark Bravo: "And I have been trying to figure out how this happened since the match was announced, John. Because this is not how the Unholy Wolf Brigade operates. Arkady Bogatyr does not take matches on his own. Everything runs through Gunnar Van Patton."

John Phillips: "And Gunnar Van Patton is here tonight. The Unholy Wolf Brigade is in this building. But as we understand it, Van Patton is still dealing with the aftermath of that brutal head wound -- the one inflicted by the Fatu Twins. He is here, but he is not one hundred percent."

Mark Bravo: "Not even close to one hundred percent from what I'm hearing. And yet somehow, Arkady Bogatyr has a match signed against Hakuryu tonight. A match that, as far as anyone can tell, Van Patton did not arrange."

John Phillips: "The details of how this match came together have not been made fully clear. What we know is that Arkady signed. What we don't know is the full story behind why."

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Mark Bravo: "And that's what's nagging at me, John. Arkady is reckless, sure. He's impulsive. But he is loyal to that Brigade above everything else. He doesn't go rogue. Something or someone put him in this match, and I'm not convinced Gunnar Van Patton knows it happened."

John Phillips: "Whatever the circumstances -- Arkady Bogatyr walks into that ring tonight alone. No Theron Tkachuk at ringside. And across from him, Hakuryu. A man who has made no secret of his intentions toward this roster's elite."

Mark Bravo: "Patience versus chaos, John. That's what this is. And I genuinely do not know which one wins tonight."

John Phillips: "Neither do I. We are moments away -- let's take you down to the ring."

The lights die.

Not dimmed. Not faded. Cut -- like someone yanked the cord out of the wall.

The silence that follows lasts exactly one heartbeat.

CLANG.

The sound tears through the darkness like a steel pipe cracked against concrete. Somewhere in the crowd, people flinch. Feet scuffle. Then -- before anyone can process it -- the opening industrial stomp of "Death March" detonates through the speakers, and the building comes apart.

John Phillips: "And here we go!"

Mark Bravo: "I don't even know where he is yet and I'm already on my feet!"

A lone spotlight snaps on. It finds an empty aisle seat -- rocking violently, still moving, as if something inhuman had launched itself off it at full speed. The crowd twists in every direction, searching, craning necks, standing on chairs.

Another noise. A thud against a railing.

A blur.

A flash of limbs.

The spotlight swings wildly -- hunting -- and then it catches him.

Arkady Bogatyr crouches atop a section divider three rows deep into the crowd, perched like something feral and unbroken. His knees are bent. One hand grips the metal rail. The other hangs loose at his side, fingers

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already twitching. His blue eyes are wide and wild under the strobing light, reflecting it back like a predator caught in a beam. The war paint streaked across his face and bare torso looks savage under the harsh spotlight -- jagged, asymmetrical, applied like a soldier who painted himself in the dark.

He reaches up and throws back the hood of his battered military jacket.

He yanks down his half mask.

The crowd sees him fully.

He grins.

Mark Bravo: "THERE HE IS! Three rows deep, John -- this man came through the crowd AGAIN!"

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr, ladies and gentlemen -- and as always, he does absolutely nothing the conventional way!"

The next heavy beat of "Death March" hits like a hammer, and Arkady moves.

He launches off the divider -- reckless, twisting, no hesitation -- and lands on the backs of two empty chairs before springing to the floor. Fans scatter. He darts between them, weaving through the crowd with sharp, parkour-precise agility, bouncing off seats, sliding across a railing, twisting his body in ways that look structurally impossible. He doesn't walk toward the ring. He rockets toward it. Every beat of the song syncs with a new burst of motion -- a vault, a slide, a spin, a low crouch, a dead sprint.

Mark Bravo: "Look at him go! There is no protocol for this man! There is no entrance ramp! There is just forward momentum and a complete disregard for everyone in his path!"

John Phillips: "The energy he brings every single time -- and tonight, with everything surrounding this match, that energy feels like something different. Something a little more urgent."

Mark Bravo: "He signed this match without the Brigade, John. Without Van Patton. You don't think that's sitting somewhere in the back of that wild little brain of his?"

He reaches the barricade and doesn't slow down. One foot plants on the metal edge. He vaults up, twists mid-air, and lands in a low crouch on the arena side as the song's chorus slams in. He scuttles to the apron, pops up, and slides under the bottom rope in one fluid, chaotic motion.

Inside the ring, he doesn't stop.

He prowls. He twitches. He circles the ropes like a wolf testing the fence of new territory -- one moment bouncing on the balls of his feet, the next hanging upside down off the second rope, staring into the hard camera with that grin that promises violence. He rips off his jacket and mask and flings them out of the ring

without looking.

Then -- on the next heavy downbeat -- he freezes.

Head tilted. Shoulders loose. Fingers tapping against his thigh in a rhythm only he understands.

The lights slam back on.

Arkady Bogatyr straightens. Cracks his neck. And flashes a smile that is equal parts dare and threat.

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr is ready. The Volkolak is in the building."

Mark Bravo: "Somebody go check on Hakuryu. Give him a moment to prepare himself emotionally."

The music cuts.

The arena holds its breath.

And then -- the gong.

Once.

Low. Resonant. Final.

A white spotlight appears near the entrance. Sinja steps out first -- white suit, white face paint -- and stops at the very edge of the ramp. He does not acknowledge the crowd. He does not look at Arkady. He faces forward, hands clasped, and waits as white smoke begins to pour across the stage.

The spiritual chants fill the arena.

The crowd's energy shifts. The boos begin to build -- low at first, then rolling, then loud.

Hakuryu walks out.

John Phillips: "And his opponent."

Mark Bravo: "The White Dragon."

He moves slowly. Deliberately. The takuhatsugasa hat tilts down, hiding his face entirely. The shakujo staff clicks against the ramp with each measured step. His white pilgrim robes drift in the manufactured smoke. He does not hurry. He does not look at the crowd. The boos wash over him like weather he has already accounted for and dismissed.

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John Phillips: "Hakuryu. A man who has been methodical, deliberate, and devastating since the moment he arrived in the UTA. He does not waste movement. He does not waste words. And he does not lose matches by accident."

Mark Bravo: "Look at the contrast, John. Look at it. One man just came flying through the third row like a feral animal. The other one is walking to the ring like he's arriving at a sentencing."

John Phillips: "And he's the one handing down the sentence."

Mark Bravo: "Every single time."

They reach the bottom of the ramp. Hakuryu stops. He raises his head slightly -- just enough -- and brings both hands together in a prayer formation. His lips move. Whatever he says, the microphones don't catch it. Then he proceeds up the ring steps, and Sinja moves ahead to hold the middle and top ropes open.

Hakuryu steps through.

He walks to the center of the ring.

He removes the takuhatsugasa hat. He removes his robes. He hands them to Sinja without looking, and Sinja takes them without a word and steps back to the floor.

Hakuryu rolls his neck once and moves to his corner.

Across the ring, Arkady is already twitching. Already bouncing. He tilts his head at Hakuryu the way a dog tilts its head at something it cannot quite classify. His fingers tap against the rope.

Mark Bravo: "John, I'll say it plainly -- I don't know what happens here tonight. And I cover a lot of matches. I usually have a feeling. Tonight I genuinely do not have a feeling."

John Phillips: "Then let's find out together. Arkady Bogatyr. Hakuryu. This one is next."

The referee moves to the center of the ring. He looks at both men.

He calls for the bell.

The bell rings.

Arkady does not circle.

He erupts.

A rapid-fire sequence of spinning back kicks launches from the moment his feet find the canvas -- one, two,

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three -- fast and sharp and relentless, driving Hakuryu backward a step at a time. Hakuryu absorbs them or backs away from them, neither panicked nor rattled, simply moving out of their path with the unhurried efficiency of a man who has decided not to be where the kicks are landing. Arkady pivots, adds a jumping roundhouse to the combination -- it catches Hakuryu across the forearm as he raises it -- and then Arkady is already at the ropes, already running, already committed to the next thing.

He rebounds.

Full speed.

*The **Katyusha** -- rebound handspring, the rotation explosive and precise, the twisting enzuigiri firing from the apex of the movement -- catches Hakuryu flush across the side of the head.*

The sound of it is immediate and ugly.

Hakuryu goes to one knee.

The crowd erupts.

Mark Bravo: "KATYUSHA! Right out of the gate -- Arkady Bogatyr just dropped Hakuryu to one knee with the opening salvo!"

John Phillips: "He is not giving him a single moment to settle! Not one moment!"

Arkady doesn't stop. He doesn't look at the crowd. He doesn't pose. He is already at the nearest corner, already going to the top rope -- one fluid RVD-style motion, automatic, like gravity reversed -- and he launches a corkscrew crossbody that catches Hakuryu as he tries to rise and sends him stumbling hard into the ropes.

The crowd is loud and getting louder.

Mark Bravo: "Arkady's trying to make this a brawl! He is trying to turn this into his kind of fight from the first second!"

John Phillips: "And Hakuryu is treating it like a hunt."

Hakuryu holds the ropes. He does not look panicked. He does not look hurt in the way that matters. He turns to face the center of the ring and looks at Arkady -- just looks at him -- with the flat, unhurried patience of a man waiting for a bus. Unbothered. Unhurried. Whatever the Katyusha cost him, he has already filed it away and moved on.

He lets Arkady come.

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Arkady comes.

The superkick arrives with no telegraphing whatsoever -- not a counter, not a desperation move, not a reaction. A measured, inevitable response. Arkady's next charge stops cold. The sound of boot against jaw travels to the back row.

John Phillips: "SUPERKICK -- and Arkady walks right into it!"

Mark Bravo: "It wasn't even fast, John! It was just -- there. Like it was always going to be there."

Hakuryu stands over Arkady for a moment. He looks down at him without expression. Then -- not for the crowd, not for the cameras, purely for the physics of damage -- he hits the backflip kick. The rotation is not showy. The rotation is leverage. The leg arrives with full centrifugal force and Arkady crumples under it.

Hakuryu steps back.

He watches him fall.

He does not move toward him. He does not follow up. He simply stands and watches the way a man watches something he has already made a decision about.

Mark Bravo: "Cold. John, that man is absolutely cold. No celebration, no emotion -- he just watches him go down like he's checking a box."

John Phillips: "He is not here to perform. He is here to dismantle."

Arkady peels himself off the canvas.

He is laughing.

It is loud and genuine and slightly unhinged -- the laugh of a man who just got hit by a truck and found it interesting. He rolls his shoulder, the one Hakuryu's kick just visited, and points at him. One finger. Like Hakuryu just did something impressive at a party.

Mark Bravo: "Is he -- is he laughing?!"

John Phillips: "That is Arkady Bogatyr. That has always been Arkady Bogatyr."

*He goes to the top rope again -- tightrope run, balance that should not be physically possible executed without a moment of hesitation -- and the **Sniper Elite** fires: the corner dropkick to the jaw landing flush as Hakuryu turns, snapping his head back, sending him stumbling out of the corner.*

John Phillips: "Sniper Elite! How does he have the balance for that?!"

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Mark Bravo: "He doesn't think about it, John! That's the whole point! A normal human being looks at that tightrope run and calculates the risk! Arkady just does it!"

Arkady slips to the apron in one fluid motion. He waits -- a half-beat, perfectly timed -- and then the springboard leaping sidekick launches as Hakuryu turns, catching him clean across the jaw.

Hakuryu goes down.

Arkady covers.

The referee drops.

One.

Two.

Hakuryu kicks out.

The crowd surges -- that collective lurch of a crowd that genuinely believed it for a second.

Mark Bravo: "TWO! TWO COUNT! I thought that was it!"

John Phillips: "Hakuryu kicks out -- but Arkady nearly had him! This crowd believed it!"

Arkady is on his feet before Hakuryu. Already bouncing. Already moving. He crouches nearby, twitching, weight shifting from foot to foot, fingers tapping a rhythm against his thigh -- energized by the near-fall rather than drained by it, feeding on the crowd's reaction, feeding on the chaos of his own making.

Hakuryu rises.

Slowly. Deliberately. He brushes down his gear with one hand -- a single, composed gesture -- and turns to face Arkady.

His face shows nothing.

But his head tilts.

Fractionally. Almost imperceptibly.

And for the first time since the bell rang, something behind his eyes has shifted -- not concern, not alarm, but the quiet recalibration of a man who has found something worth paying closer attention to.

John Phillips: "Look at Hakuryu. He's recalibrating. Arkady has made him think."

Mark Bravo: "He's dangerous when he's unpredictable, John. And right now, Arkady Bogatyr is the most unpredictable man on this planet."

John Phillips: "But Hakuryu is learning every twitch. Every single one."

Their eyes meet across the canvas.

Neither man moves.

The crowd hums.

They circle.

The crowd settles into the kind of quiet that isn't really quiet -- the low, electric hum of twenty thousand people holding something back. Hakuryu's head is still tilted that fraction. His eyes follow Arkady's movement with the patient attention of a man who has just found the page he was looking for.

Arkady feints left, cuts right, and shoots in low -- looking for a collar tie, looking for anything to grab onto. Hakuryu reads it and steps back, letting Arkady's momentum carry him past, then clamps a hand on the back of Arkady's neck and drives him face-first toward the canvas. Arkady twists mid-fall, gets a hand down, pushes off -- and they end up chest to chest on the mat, both men jockeying for position, Hakuryu trying to flatten him and Arkady refusing to be flattened.

Hakuryu shifts his weight, attempting to trap the left arm and roll Arkady onto his back. Arkady feels it coming and rolls with it instead of against it -- using the momentum, turning the roll into something deliberate -- and suddenly he is behind Hakuryu, one arm snaking around his head from behind.

Hakuryu tries to stand.

Arkady goes with him.

And the moment Hakuryu is halfway upright -- leveraged, extended, committed to the vertical -- Arkady drops.

*The **diamond cutter** fires from that half-standing position, wrenching Hakuryu's jaw into the canvas with a force that has no right to come from that angle, from that sequence, from a move born out of what looked like a defensive scramble two seconds ago.*

The arena detonates.

Mark Bravo: "DIAMOND CUTTER! OUT OF NOWHERE -- HE TURNED A REVERSAL INTO A DIAMOND CUTTER!"

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John Phillips: "From the mat! He hit that from the mat -- how does a man have the presence of mind to execute that in the middle of a grappling exchange?!"

Mark Bravo: "Because he's Arkady Bogatyr, John! He doesn't think about it -- he just does it! That's the whole terrifying point!"

Arkady covers.

The referee drops.

One.

Two.

Hakuryu kicks out.

The crowd cannot believe it. The sound they make is not a cheer -- it is a release of something held too tightly, a collective gasp that becomes noise halfway through, the kind of crowd reaction that means they genuinely believed it was over.

Mark Bravo: "HE KICKED OUT! How does he kick out of that?!"

John Phillips: "Hakuryu kicks out -- but this crowd believed it! For a full second, every person in this building thought Arkady Bogatyr had just won this match!"

Arkady is already moving. He doesn't look at the referee's hand. He doesn't react to the kickout with frustration or disbelief. He is already at the corner, already ascending -- one fluid automatic motion, boots finding the turnbuckle, body going to the top rope the way other men go through doorways -- and the crowd rises with him, recognizing the setup, recognizing what he is reaching for.

Hakuryu recovers.

*Fast. Faster than a man who just absorbed a diamond cutter has any right to be. He is upright before Arkady has fully settled on the top rope, and the **tornado kick** fires -- the rotation full and committed, the leg arriving with centrifugal force that snaps Arkady's trajectory sideways before he can launch. The top rope plan dissolves. Arkady grabs the ropes to keep from falling outside the ring entirely, hanging there for a half second before dropping back to the apron.*

John Phillips: "Hakuryu cuts him off! The tornado kick arrives at exactly the right moment -- Arkady loses the high ground!"

Mark Bravo: "That's the thing about Hakuryu, John -- he doesn't panic, he doesn't chase, he just waits until the moment presents itself and then he takes it. Every time."

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Arkady drops from the apron back into the ring and Hakuryu is already on him -- driving a **handspring back elbow smash** that catches Arkady square in the corner, the full force of Hakuryu's rotating body weight driving the elbow into Arkady's chest and sending him slumping against the turnbuckles. Hakuryu's boots find the canvas. He straightens. He steps back.

He does not celebrate.

He does not posture.

He stands at a measured distance and looks at Arkady against the turnbuckles -- arms loose at his sides, expression revealing nothing -- the way a man looks at something he has already made a calculation about.

Mark Bravo: "Look at him, John. Doesn't even blink. Just stands there and looks at him."

John Phillips: "He is not celebrating. He is noting. There is a profound difference, and with Hakuryu, that difference is everything."

Arkady peels himself off the turnbuckles. His chest is heaving now -- genuinely heaving, not performed effort but real effort, the kind that comes from taking a handspring elbow at full force after absorbing a tornado kick after burning the energy it takes to hit a diamond cutter from the mat. He shakes his head once, hard, the way a man shakes water from his ears. The grin finds its way back to his face.

It is still real.

But it is working harder than it was.

His eyes go to the top rope.

The crowd reads it before it happens. They are already standing.

He goes up -- one motion, no hesitation, automatic -- and the **Gibel turgruppy Dyatlova** launches from the top. His definitive finisher. The ultra high-altitude frog splash that climbs higher than anyone else on this roster climbs, that hangs in the air longer than physics seems to allow, that adds the extra rotation making it look like a man stepping off a building and choosing the angle of his fall.

Hakuryu rolls.

He is flat on the mat and then he is simply not -- one sharp roll to the side, timed at the precise last moment, and Arkady descends into nothing.

The canvas receives him entirely. Full body. No protection. The impact total and indiscriminate.

John Phillips: "HAKURYU MOVES! Arkady crashes -- the Gibel turgruppy Dyatlova connects with nothing

but the mat!"

Mark Bravo: "He hung up there, John. He was all the way up there -- and one roll. That's it. One roll and it's gone."

Arkady lies still for a moment -- not unconscious, just emptied, the wind driven out of him completely by the impact of his own finisher landing on canvas instead of a body. Then he starts moving. Because he always starts moving.

Hakuryu is already on his feet.

*He watches Arkady begin to push up -- chest off the mat, arms shaking with the effort -- and he assumes the prayer pose. Hands together. Eyes on Arkady. The ritualistic stillness before the **Koya Otoshi** -- his arms reaching for Arkady as he rises, looking to hook both arms for the crucifix powerbomb.*

Arkady feels the grab coming before he fully sees it.

He drops his weight, ducks under the hooking arms, twists sharply to his left -- his body folding in a way that seems structurally inadvisable -- and slips free of the grip before Hakuryu can lock it. He lands on his feet, spinning to face Hakuryu, already bouncing.

Both men stand.

Both men breathing harder than they were.

The center of the ring.

Hakuryu's head tilts.

Fractionally. That same tilt. But different now -- before it was recalibration, the adjustment of a man finding his footing. Now something else moves behind his eyes. Something quieter and more deliberate.

Not concern.

Interest.

He has found something worth studying.

John Phillips: "Both men standing -- and look at Hakuryu. Something has shifted."

Mark Bravo: "He's dangerous when he's unpredictable, John. But Hakuryu has been learning every twitch this entire match. And I think -- I think he just learned the one that matters."

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Hakuryu does not rush.

That is the first thing. He does not capitalize immediately, does not press the advantage the way a man running on adrenaline would. He stands in the center of the ring and lets Arkady move -- watches him bounce, watches him reset, watches the way his body finds its rhythm again after the near-execution of the Koya Otoshi.

John Phillips: "And we have a moment to breathe here -- both men resetting after that incredible exchange. Arkady escaped the Koya Otoshi but you have to wonder what it cost him to wriggle free of that."

Mark Bravo: "It cost him energy, John. Everything costs energy. And Hakuryu hasn't spent nearly as much of it as Arkady has tonight."

Arkady comes forward. He throws a spinning back kick -- fast, probing -- and follows it immediately with a jumping roundhouse that Hakuryu steps inside of, letting the leg pass over his shoulder before pushing Arkady back with a firm hand to the chest. Not a strike. A redirection.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu with the deflection -- not engaging, just redirecting. He is so fundamentally sound."

Mark Bravo: "He's making Arkady do all the work, John. Every combination Arkady throws, Hakuryu neutralizes it and gives nothing back. Arkady is burning the candle and Hakuryu is just -- watching it burn."

Arkady tries a low calf kick -- sharp and real, connecting against Hakuryu's lead leg. He chains a palm strike off it, quick and snapping, and Hakuryu deflects it with a forearm, converting the deflection into a shove that sends Arkady spinning toward the ropes. Arkady hits them, rebounds, throws a rapid-fire combination on the return -- body kick, jumping roundhouse, a feinted elbow that converts into a spinning back kick at the last second.

John Phillips: "Listen to that crowd -- they are responding to every single exchange! Arkady keeps finding new combinations, new angles --"

Mark Bravo: "And Hakuryu keeps not being where the combinations land! John, I have watched a lot of wrestling in my life and I have never seen anyone make evasion look this effortless. He makes it look like Arkady is missing on purpose."

Hakuryu backs away from all of it. Step by step. Measured. Unhurried. Giving ground without appearing to give ground, retreating without appearing to retreat -- moving toward the ropes with the controlled patience of a man who has chosen his position and is now simply occupying it.

He reaches the ropes.

He drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "And -- wait. Hakuryu is down to one knee. Is he hurt?"

Mark Bravo: "John, Arkady has been hitting him all night. The Katyusha connected flush in the opening minute. The diamond cutter came out of nowhere. It would make sense that the body is starting to register all of that."

John Phillips: "He's got a hand on the rope -- he looks like he's catching his breath --"

Mark Bravo: "John. Stop talking. Look at his eyes."

A beat of silence in the booth.

Hakuryu's eyes are open. They are clear. They are watching Arkady with the same flat, evaluative attention they have carried since the first gong. There is no pain in them. There is no fatigue. There is nothing in them except the patient, unhurried focus of a man who is exactly where he intended to be.

Mark Bravo: "Those are not the eyes of a hurt man."

John Phillips: "You think this is deliberate."

Mark Bravo: "I think Hakuryu has never done anything in his life that wasn't deliberate. And I think Arkady is about to find that out."

Arkady does not hear this.

He sees the knee on the canvas and the hand on the rope and the apparently labored breathing and his instincts do what his instincts always do.

They fire.

John Phillips: "Arkady is reading this as an opening -- he's going to the ropes --"

Mark Bravo: "Don't do it. Don't do it, don't do it --"

*Arkady hits the ropes. Full speed. No hesitation. He launches the **springboard meteora** -- both knees driving forward, the trajectory aimed at Hakuryu's chest and shoulders, everything committed, everything in.*

There is no abort.

There never is.

Hakuryu shifts.

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It is not dramatic. It is a controlled rotation of the torso -- precise, minimal, the absolute smallest amount of movement required -- so that the meteora lands imperfectly. Not a clean hit. Not a clean miss. The geometry fractionally wrong, Arkady's knees glancing rather than driving, the execution just imperfect enough.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu moves -- the meteora doesn't land clean --"

Arkady comes down.

And his body does what it has always done. What it has done ten thousand times across ten thousand reckless landings. The muscle memory is older than conscious thought. One knee drops to the canvas. The right hand presses flat against the mat -- fingers spread, palm down, arm fully extended -- absorbing the impact, bracing, taking the weight the way it has always taken the weight.

He does not think about it.

He never thinks about it.

Hakuryu does.

The right hand hits the canvas.

Hakuryu's stomp comes down directly onto the braced right arm. Full force. Precisely angled. Not a reactive counter born from desperation. A prepared one. The kind that requires you to have already decided -- before the sequence began, before the springboard launched, before Arkady even hit the ropes -- exactly where the arm would be and exactly what you would do to it when it arrived.

John Phillips: "-- OH. The arm. Hakuryu just drove a stomp directly onto that arm --"

Mark Bravo: "He was waiting for it, John. He set the whole thing up. The knee on the canvas, the hand on the rope -- all of it. He baited Arkady into that springboard and he knew exactly where that right hand was going to land."

John Phillips: "That is -- that is extraordinary and deeply unsettling preparation."

The sound Arkady makes is not a scream. It is something shorter and sharper and more honest than a scream -- a single bitten-off syllable, Russian, involuntary -- the kind of sound a body makes before the brain has time to decide whether to make it. He yanks the arm back. He rolls. He is on his feet in under two seconds because he is always on his feet in under two seconds.

But the right arm hangs differently.

It is barely visible -- the kind of thing you would miss if you were not looking for it. The arm held a fraction lower than the left. The right shoulder sitting wrong. The fingers of the right hand opening and closing in a

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slow, testing rhythm that has nothing to do with performance and everything to do with a nervous system sending urgent messages upward.

John Phillips: "Look at that arm. Mark -- look at the way he's holding that arm."

Mark Bravo: "He's testing it. He's trying to figure out how bad it is without letting Hakuryu see him figure out how bad it is. And John -- Hakuryu already knows how bad it is. He put it there."

Arkady rotates the shoulder. Shakes the arm out. Says something in Russian -- loud, dismissive, pointed at no one in particular -- and grins like the whole thing is a minor inconvenience on the best night of his life.

The grin does not reach his eyes.

John Phillips: "He's walking it off. He's trying to walk it off."

Mark Bravo: "That's what Arkady does, John. He laughs. He grins. He tells his body to shut up and keep going. But that arm -- John, that arm absorbed a full-force stomp at exactly the worst possible angle. You don't just walk that off."

Hakuryu stands over him.

He does not move toward him. He does not speak. He does not gesture or posture or perform. He simply stands and watches Arkady finish pretending -- with the unhurried patience of a man who has already decided what the next chapter looks like and is content to let this one conclude on its own.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu hasn't moved. He's just -- watching him."

Mark Bravo: "He's waiting for Arkady to finish the performance. Because he knows what comes next and Arkady doesn't. That landing looked wrong -- Hakuryu saw it, and he will not waste the chance."

John Phillips: "If that right arm is compromised -- if Hakuryu has genuinely identified a structural target in this match -- this changes everything. Everything about what Arkady can do from this point forward runs through that arm."

Mark Bravo: "The aerial game. The handsprings. The bracing on every landing. The striking combinations. All of it, John. All of it runs through that right arm."

Hakuryu takes one step forward.

Arkady sees it.

He bounces on the balls of his feet, rolls the shoulder one more time, and grins wider.

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He comes forward to meet him.

John Phillips: "And here we go. Hakuryu is moving -- and this match is about to become something very different."

Mark Bravo: "God help him."

Hakuryu moves with purpose.

Not urgency. Not aggression. Purpose -- the specific, directed movement of a man who has finished the research phase and is now beginning the work. He crosses the ring toward Arkady and the first thing he does is not a strike. It is a suplex -- but not thrown for the throw's sake. He hooks Arkady, lifts him, and angles the descent deliberately, positioning Arkady's body so that when they land, it is the right arm and shoulder that absorb the impact first. The canvas receives the right side of Arkady with a sound that is wrong in a specific way.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu with the suplex -- but look at the positioning. Look at how he angled that landing."

Mark Bravo: "That is not a suplex designed to get a pin, John. That is a suplex designed to land Arkady on that right arm. He's not throwing him -- he's placing him."

Hakuryu does not go for the cover.

He pins the limb instead -- dropping his weight across the right arm, trapping it beneath him, forcing Arkady to fight with his left hand just to free himself. Arkady bucks, twists, works with everything the left side of his body can give him -- and eventually wrenches free. But the time it takes. The effort it costs. Hakuryu watches him work for it without releasing a fraction of pressure before Arkady has fully earned his way out.

John Phillips: "He's not going for the pin -- he's trapping the arm. Making Arkady fight just to free his own limb."

Mark Bravo: "This is what I was afraid of, John. Hakuryu doesn't need a pin right now. He needs that arm. And every second Arkady spends fighting to free it is another second that arm is being compressed and torqued under Hakuryu's body weight."

Arkady gets free.

He scrambles upright, shaking the right arm out -- the motion faster now, more urgent, less performative -- and Hakuryu is already repositioning. He hooks Arkady again, different grip, different angle, different suplex variation -- but the same deliberate destination. The landing again positions the right arm and shoulder to take the brunt of the impact. The canvas again receives the right side first.

John Phillips: "Another suplex -- and again -- look at the angle. Look at where Arkady lands every single

time."

Mark Bravo: "He is not throwing him randomly, John. There is a zip code Hakuryu is delivering that right arm to with every single move. Same target. Different vehicle. Every time."

Again, Hakuryu does not cover.

He straightens. He stands over Arkady and looks down at him -- not with contempt, not with performance, but with the flat assessment of a man checking his work. He gives Arkady room. Enough room to try to rise, enough room to begin the process of recovery -- because Hakuryu is not interested in keeping him down. He is interested in what happens when Arkady tries to use the right arm to get up.

John Phillips: "He's letting him get up. Why is he letting him get up?"

Mark Bravo: "Because getting up costs him something, John. Watch the arm. Watch how Arkady gets up."

Arkady tries to push off the canvas with the right hand.

The arm shakes.

He recalibrates -- shifts his weight to the left, uses the left arm instead, drags himself upright with the left side doing the work the right side cannot.

Mark Bravo: "There it is. Did you see that? He went to push off with the right and it gave on him. He had to switch. He's already compensating."

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr compensating. That is not a sentence I ever expected to say in a match like this."

Hakuryu reads it.

*He is already moving -- the **backflip kick** not directed at the head, not directed at the body, but aimed specifically at the right shoulder and upper arm. The rotation used purely for leverage and impact. The leg arrives at the precise angle needed to drive into the joint with maximum force, and Arkady's right side absorbs it with a sound that makes the front row wince.*

John Phillips: "Backflip kick -- and he's not going for the head! He's targeting the shoulder! The right shoulder!"

Mark Bravo: "Surgical, John. Absolutely surgical. He is not trying to knock Arkady out. He is trying to take that arm apart piece by piece."

Arkady staggers.

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He does not go down -- because Arkady Bogatyr does not go down from one strike, has never gone down from one strike, will not go down from one strike -- but his right side dips, the shoulder dropping involuntarily, the arm hanging at a slightly wrong angle as the nerves fire their complaints upward.

John Phillips: "Arkady stays on his feet -- but look at that shoulder. Look at the way he's carrying that right side."

Mark Bravo: "He's trying not to show it, John. He is trying so hard not to show it. But you can't hide functional damage. The body tells the truth even when the face won't."

*Hakuryu follows immediately -- no pause, no breath, no space for Arkady to reset -- with a **tornado kick** directed at the same right shoulder. The centrifugal force of the rotation drives the leg into the joint from a different angle than the backflip kick, compounding the damage rather than simply repeating it. Arkady's arm swings wide from the impact, pulled in a direction the shoulder does not want to travel.*

John Phillips: "Tornado kick -- same target! He is hitting that shoulder from every conceivable angle!"

Mark Bravo: "He's not just inflaming it, John -- he's mapping it. He's finding every direction that arm can be hurt from and he's hitting every single one of them. This is not a wrestling match anymore. This is an anatomy lesson."

Arkady barks something -- sharp, Russian, defiant -- and tries to fire back with a left-handed palm strike. It connects. Hakuryu's head snaps back a fraction. A real shot, real force behind it, the left arm carrying everything Arkady has.

John Phillips: "Arkady fights back! Left hand -- and that connected!"

Mark Bravo: "He's not done, John! He is never done! But John -- it's one arm. He is fighting back with one arm and Hakuryu knows it."

Hakuryu absorbs the palm strike without retreating. He looks at Arkady -- just looks at him -- and moves to the ropes.

He assumes the prayer pose.

*Deliberate. Ritualistic. The hands coming together, the eyes closing for a single breath -- and then he ascends the ropes, walking them with the preternatural balance of a man who has done this ten thousand times, and the **Praying Rope-Walk Chop** comes down across the right shoulder with his full body weight behind it. The crack of it is enormous. The front row feels it.*

John Phillips: "PRAYING ROPE-WALK CHOP -- directly across the right shoulder -- good God almighty!"

Mark Bravo: "LISTEN TO THAT SOUND! John, that chop landed on a shoulder that has already been

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kicked twice from different angles and slammed into the canvas repeatedly! That is not a shoulder anymore -- that is a problem!"

Arkady drops to one knee.

He does not drop to both knees. He does not go all the way down. One knee finds the canvas and he grips the rope with his left hand and he holds himself there -- suspended between upright and fallen -- with the sheer stubborn force of a man who has decided that the floor is not an option.

John Phillips: "Arkady down to one knee -- and this crowd is willing him back up."

Mark Bravo: "Listen to them, John. Listen to this crowd. They know what they're watching. They know how much that man is hurting right now and they know he won't stop. That's why they're on their feet."

Hakuryu watches him from a standing position. Arms loose. Expression empty. He gives Arkady the room to rise -- because he wants him to rise, because what comes next requires him upright.

Arkady rises.

He assumes the prayer pose.

*Hands together. Eyes briefly closed. The ritual before the **Nenbutsu Bomb** -- and then he hooks Arkady, lifts him with the full strength of a 240-pound man who has spent this entire match conserving energy while his opponent burned it, and drives him down into a sitout powerbomb. The landing is angled. It is always angled. The right arm and shoulder drive into the canvas under the combined weight of both men, Hakuryu's force pressing down into the impact from above.*

John Phillips: "NENBUTSU BOMB! And again -- look at the landing! Every move, every single move, lands on that right arm!"

Mark Bravo: "He is deconstructing him, John. That is the only word for it. He is not beating Arkady Bogatyr. He is taking him apart with a blueprint."

This time Hakuryu does not go for the cover.

He stands.

He looks at the crowd for the first time -- not playing to them, not acknowledging their noise, just turning his gaze across the building the way a man turns to look out a window. Indifferent to what he sees. Indifferent to the reaction. He turns back to Arkady.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu looking out at this crowd -- and there is nothing there. No reaction to them. No acknowledgment. He is completely unmoved by twenty thousand people."

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Mark Bravo: "Those people don't exist to him right now, John. The only thing that exists to him is that right arm."

He assumes the prayer pose again.

Koya Otoshi -- the crucifix powerbomb setup, the arms hooking Arkady, lifting him, positioning him -- and the landing again drives the right arm into the canvas. Hakuryu straightens afterward. He looks down at Arkady on the mat.

John Phillips: "Koya Otoshi -- and Arkady hits the canvas right arm first. Again. Always the right arm."

Mark Bravo: "John, how many times has that arm absorbed a targeted impact in the last three minutes? How many times?"

John Phillips: "Too many. Far too many."

Hakuryu takes Arkady to the mat.

What follows is not a named hold. It is not a flashy submission with a title and a history. It is methodical, MMA-style wrenching of the right arm -- Hakuryu on the mat beside him, controlling the limb, applying torque to the joint in slow, sustained increments. Not enough to snap. Enough to stress. Enough to push the structures of the shoulder and elbow beyond what they were designed to tolerate for an extended period of time.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu has that right arm isolated on the mat -- he is just -- he is wrenching it. Slowly. Deliberately."

Mark Bravo: "There's no name for what he's doing right now, John. It's not a crossface. It's not an armbar. It's just -- damage. Sustained, targeted, methodical damage to a joint that has already been through hell tonight."

John Phillips: "The referee is checking on Arkady -- is he going to tap?"

Mark Bravo: "Arkady Bogatyr does not tap. That man would let his arm fall off before he tapped."

Arkady reaches.

With the left hand -- the only hand that works the way hands are supposed to work -- he reaches, stretches, drags himself inch by inch across the canvas toward the ropes. Hakuryu increases the torque as he moves, making every inch cost more than the last. Arkady's face is a mask of concentrated effort -- not pain, or not just pain, but the specific expression of a man who has reduced the entire universe to a single point of focus and is moving toward it one centimeter at a time.

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John Phillips: "He's reaching -- Arkady is trying to get to the ropes -- can he make it?"

Mark Bravo: "Come on. Come on --"

His left hand finds the bottom rope.

The referee calls for the break.

Hakuryu releases.

Clean. Immediately. Without drama or delay -- because he does not need the drama, and because he has already taken from this hold everything he came for.

John Phillips: "Arkady gets to the ropes! The referee calls the break and Hakuryu releases -- but Mark, how much did it cost him to get there?"

Mark Bravo: "Everything, John. That cost him everything. Look at that arm."

Arkady lies at the ropes, chest heaving.

He tries to lift the right arm.

It moves -- but not the way arms are supposed to move. It rises slowly, haltingly, stopping well below where it should stop, the hand unable to fully close into a grip. He tries again. The same result. He instinctively reaches with it and stops mid-motion -- the signal from his brain arriving before the arm can answer, the recalibration happening in real time.

John Phillips: "He cannot -- Mark, he cannot raise that arm above the chest."

Mark Bravo: "It's gone for him tonight, John. That arm is gone. He can still move. He can still fight. But that right arm -- Hakuryu has taken it away from him. Systematically. Deliberately. Over the course of the last several minutes, he has removed it from Arkady's arsenal one targeted impact at a time."

Hakuryu stands nearby.

He watches Arkady process what his right arm can and cannot do.

He does not move toward him.

He simply watches.

And waits.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu is not rushing. He is standing there watching Arkady figure out what he has left."

Mark Bravo: "Because he already knows what Arkady has left, John. He took the inventory. He is not rushing because there is nothing left to rush about."

John Phillips: "This is getting ugly. Arkady's arm is gone for him tonight. And the question now -- the only question -- is what does Arkady Bogatyr do when the body starts saying no and the mind keeps saying yes."

Mark Bravo: "John, I have watched that man do impossible things in that ring tonight. But I don't know. I genuinely do not know."

Arkady grabs the rope with his left hand.

He pulls himself to his feet.

He turns to face Hakuryu.

He is still standing.

The crowd reacts to Arkady standing with the kind of noise that isn't celebration -- it's something closer to grief dressed up as hope. They are on their feet because they cannot sit down, not because they believe this ends well. The sound they make is complicated. It has been complicated for several minutes now -- the excitement of the early exchanges curdled into something more uncomfortable, more honest, the sound of people watching a man they have come to care about walk into something they cannot stop.

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr is back on his feet. That man -- that man refuses to stay down."

Mark Bravo: "John, I have been in a lot of arenas. I have watched a lot of matches. I have seen tough men do tough things and I have used the word 'heart' more times than I can count to describe what I was watching. What I am watching right now is not that. What I am watching right now does not have a word. It is something past the word."

John Phillips: "He is running on pure will at this point. Pure, stubborn, absolute will."

Mark Bravo: "And Hakuryu is running on a plan. And John -- in my experience -- the plan usually beats the will."

Arkady bounces.

It is instinctive -- the bounce, the movement, the refusal to be still -- but it is different now in ways that are small and specific and devastating if you know what you are looking for. The right side of his body moves with him and against him simultaneously. The right arm swings slightly wrong, slightly late, like a second hand on a clock that has lost its calibration. The shoulder sits at that fractional wrong angle that has been growing

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more pronounced with every exchange, every landing, every targeted impact Hakuryu has delivered to it with the mechanical patience of a man following a blueprint.

He rolls the left shoulder.

He does not roll the right one.

He has learned, in the last several minutes, not to ask the right one for things it cannot give. He has recalibrated without acknowledging that he has recalibrated, the adjustment happening below the level of performance, the body making its own quiet decisions about what is and is not available to it.

John Phillips: "He's moving. He is still moving -- but Mark, watch the right side. Watch the way he's carrying that arm."

Mark Bravo: "It's not there, John. It is not there the way it was at the start of this match. He is compensating on every single movement and he knows it and Hakuryu knows it and the only person in this building pretending otherwise is Arkady Bogatyr. And God bless him for it. But it's not enough."

He shakes the right arm out -- a quick, sharp motion, the kind designed to look casual -- and the arm shakes back in a way he didn't request, a small tremor running through the shoulder that has nothing to do with performance and everything to do with a joint that has been systematically stressed beyond what it was designed to tolerate.

He comes forward.

*He hits the ropes -- left side leading instinctively now, the adjustment automatic -- and launches the **Katyusha**. The rebound handspring begins, the body committing to the rotation -- and the right arm plants for the handspring and the arm buckles.*

Not completely.

Not catastrophically.

But the plant is wrong in a specific, precise, terrible way -- the arm taking the weight and giving under it just enough to rob the rotation of its power, the handspring generating less velocity than it should, the twisting enzuigiri firing from a compromised position and arriving at Hakuryu's head at the wrong angle. It grazes the temple rather than connecting flush. It carries a fraction of the force it carried when it opened this match four minutes and a lifetime ago.

Arkady lands badly.

Left side absorbing what the right side cannot. His body tilting to compensate on the way down, the landing awkward and real and visible to everyone in the building.

The crowd inhales.

All of them.

At once.

John Phillips: "The Katyusha -- but the handspring -- Mark, the right arm buckled on the plant --"

Mark Bravo: "He couldn't generate the rotation, John. The whole move -- the whole mechanics of the Katyusha -- run through that right arm on the handspring plant. It's the foundation of the move. And the foundation just gave out on him. He still threw the enzuigiri. He still tried. But it wasn't what it was. It wasn't close to what it was."

John Phillips: "Hakuryu barely felt that."

Mark Bravo: "Barely. And the worst part -- Arkady knows it. Look at his face. Past the grin. Look at his eyes."

Arkady knows it.

The grin is still there -- it is always still there, it will be there when the building falls down around him, it is the last thing that will leave -- but it is working harder than it has ever worked. The body underneath it is sending signals the face refuses to transmit, conducting its own private conversation with gravity and physics and the accumulated damage of the last several minutes, a conversation that is reaching its conclusion without Arkady's input or permission.

He shakes the arm out again.

Longer this time.

More urgent.

Less performative.

John Phillips: "He's shaking it out -- trying to get some feeling back into that arm --"

Mark Bravo: "John, you can shake it out all you want. What Hakuryu has done to that arm tonight does not shake out. That is not stiffness. That is not a cramp. That is structural damage accumulated over multiple targeted impacts to the same joint from multiple angles over multiple minutes. You do not shake that out. You manage it. And managing it while trying to wrestle Hakuryu is a different problem entirely."

He tries the ropes again.

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This time a springboard -- launching off the left arm, trying to recalibrate the entire geometry of his aerial game on the fly, trying to rebuild the architecture of his offense around a single working limb in real time in the middle of a match against one of the most dangerous men on this roster. The audacity of the attempt alone is staggering. He makes it to the rope. He launches.

The geometry is wrong.

Without the right arm as a proper brace and anchor the trajectory is off -- fractionally, but fractionally is everything at this level -- the rotation slightly short, the body not quite where it needs to be when it arrives at the destination. He lands. The impact travels through the left side and finds the right shoulder anyway because the body is connected and damage does not respect the boundaries you try to draw around it. His face tells the truth for a single unguarded moment -- a flash of something genuine and unperformed crossing his features before the grin reclaims its territory.

John Phillips: "Arkady with the springboard -- compensating, trying to use the left arm -- but the landing, Mark --"

Mark Bravo: "He felt every inch of that, John. He is trying to fly with one wing and he almost made it and almost is the most heartbreaking word in the English language right now."

John Phillips: "Everything Arkady Bogatyr does in the air -- everything that makes him what he is, everything that has made this crowd react the way they've reacted all night -- it depends on that right arm absorbing impact on the way down. The handsprings. The bracing. The cat landings. The ability to adjust mid-air and redirect and recover. All of it. And that arm cannot do its job anymore."

Mark Bravo: "He is the most creative, the most reckless, the most purely alive aerial wrestler I have ever seen in that ring. And Hakuryu has taken his wings. John, Hakuryu has taken his wings."

Hakuryu does not wait.

He is on Arkady before the landing has fully settled -- hooking him clean, lifting, and driving the first suplex with the same deliberate positioning he has used all match. The landing places the right arm beneath them both, Hakuryu's weight pressing the compromised shoulder into the canvas from above. Arkady hits the mat and the sound he makes is involuntary and brief and immediately swallowed -- bitten back before it can become anything.

John Phillips: "Suplex -- right arm first. Again."

Mark Bravo: "Always right arm first, John. Always. Hook, lift, place. Same address. Every single time."

Hakuryu does not release.

He transitions directly into the second suplex -- different grip, different variation, identical destination -- and

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Arkady lands right side down again before he has finished processing the first landing. The third follows immediately, the sequence building with a momentum that gives Arkady no space, no air, no margin for the kind of improvisation that has defined his entire career. Three suplexes. Three landings. Three targeted impacts on the same destroyed joint in under fifteen seconds.

John Phillips: "Three suplexes in succession -- three times onto that right arm -- Arkady is in serious, serious trouble!"

Mark Bravo: "He cannot protect himself, John! He cannot post with that right arm, cannot brace, cannot do anything except absorb every landing directly on the side that is already gone! This crowd -- listen to this crowd! They know what they're watching!"

John Phillips: "This crowd has gone from excited to stunned. Listen to that sound -- that is not the sound of a crowd watching a competitive match anymore. That is the sound of twenty thousand people watching something they cannot stop."

Hakuryu assumes the prayer pose.

*The hands coming together. The brief, deliberate ritual stillness before the **Nenbutsu Bomb** -- and then the lift. The full strength of a 240-pound man who has spent this entire match conserving energy while his opponent burned every last reserve -- and the sitout powerbomb drives Arkady into the canvas, right arm and shoulder absorbing the combined weight of both men from above and below simultaneously.*

Arkady hits the mat.

He does not move.

Not immediately.

Not for a long moment.

The referee is there instantly -- crouching, checking, asking the question that referees ask.

John Phillips: "Nenbutsu Bomb -- and Arkady hits the canvas hard -- the referee is moving in --"

Mark Bravo: "..."

John Phillips: "Mark."

Mark Bravo: "I'm watching. I'm just -- I'm watching."

The arena is loud and feels very quiet.

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Arkady's left hand moves.

It is slow at first -- a twitch, a curl of fingers -- and then it becomes a wave. Sharp and dismissive and unmistakably, defiantly Arkady -- batting the referee away with a single motion that says not yet as clearly as any words could say it. Not yet. Not here. Not like this.

John Phillips: "He's responding -- Arkady is waving the referee off --"

Mark Bravo: "Don't you stop this match. Don't you dare stop this match."

He plants the left hand on the canvas.

The right arm lies at his side at the wrong angle. He does not try to use it. He has stopped trying to use it for things it cannot do -- the recalibration complete now, the body's inventory taken and accepted. He uses the left. He drags his own weight upward with one working arm and his legs and the specific, unreasonable, irreducible stubbornness of a man who learned somewhere in his bones that the floor is never the answer.

It takes longer than it has ever taken.

It is uglier than it has ever been.

The crowd watches every inch of it.

John Phillips: "He is getting up. Arkady Bogatyr is getting up."

Mark Bravo: "..."

John Phillips: "Mark --"

Mark Bravo: "I heard you. I know. I just -- yeah."

He gets up.

Upright. Facing Hakuryu. Right arm hanging at his side. Left hand balled into a fist. The grin back on his face like it never left -- because for Arkady Bogatyr it never leaves, it is structural, it is load-bearing, it is the last wall standing when everything else has come down.

He says something in Russian.

It is loud.

It is profane.

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It is directed at Hakuryu with a clarity and a specificity that requires no translation.

The crowd comes apart.

Mark Bravo: "HE IS UP! He got up, John! That man got UP!"

John Phillips: "ARKADY BOGATYR ON HIS FEET -- and this arena -- listen to this! LISTEN TO THIS!"

Mark Bravo: "Get him, Arkady! Come on!"

John Phillips: "Mark Bravo has abandoned all pretense of neutrality --"

Mark Bravo: "Yeah I have! Yeah I absolutely have! Sue me, John!"

The noise is enormous and sustained and real -- the kind of crowd reaction that cannot be manufactured or anticipated, that happens only when twenty thousand people feel the same thing at the same time and have no choice but to make sound about it.

And then it begins to settle.

Because Hakuryu has not moved.

He has stood and watched Arkady get up -- watched every inch of the process, catalogued every moment of it -- and his expression has not changed. Not a flicker. Not a reaction to the crowd noise or Arkady's defiance or the profanity directed at him in Russian. He looks at Arkady standing across from him and he looks at the right arm hanging at the wrong angle and he looks at the left hand balled into a fist and he takes his inventory.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu hasn't moved. He watched all of that and he hasn't moved."

Mark Bravo: "He didn't need to move, John. He just needed to watch. He needed to see exactly what Arkady has left. And now he knows."

John Phillips: "What does he have left, Mark? Honestly."

Mark Bravo: "He's got his legs. He's got his left arm. He's got that grin. And he's got more heart than any man I have ever seen in a wrestling ring. But John -- heart doesn't block a strike. Heart doesn't raise a broken arm. Heart doesn't protect the right side of your head when the right arm can't get there in time."

Arkady instinctively tries to raise the right arm.

It comes up wrong.

Too slow.

Stopping well below where it should stop, the hand unable to close into a proper grip, the shoulder refusing the instruction with the quiet finality of a joint that has been pushed past what it can give. He tries again. Same result. He reaches with it -- the reflex firing before the knowledge can stop it -- and pulls up mid-motion, recalibrating, shifting to the left.

John Phillips: "He cannot raise that right arm above the chest. Cannot close the hand. He is fighting one-armed now and there is no version of this where that is not a critical, critical problem."

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu took that arm away from him, John. Piece by piece, impact by impact, over the course of this match, he reached into Arkady Bogatyr's arsenal and he removed the right arm from it. And now he is standing there looking at what's left."

Hakuryu takes one step forward.

Then another.

Measured. Deliberate. The walk of a man arriving at a destination he has known about for some time.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu moving in -- and this crowd -- this crowd knows what's coming."

Mark Bravo: "So does Arkady. John -- so does Arkady."

Arkady comes forward to meet him.

Because he always comes forward.

Because that, at least, is still entirely his -- the will to move toward the thing that is coming rather than away from it, the refusal to let the end find him standing still.

He comes forward.

On one arm.

Into Hakuryu.

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr coming forward -- one arm -- into the teeth of whatever Hakuryu has planned -- and this is getting ugly. This is getting very, very ugly. Arkady's arm is gone for him tonight. And I don't know how this ends. I genuinely do not know how this ends."

Mark Bravo: "I do, John."

A beat.

Mark Bravo: "I just don't want to say it out loud."

Hakuryu does not meet him in the middle.

He lets Arkady come to him -- lets him close the distance, lets him burn what is left of the energy it takes to cross a wrestling ring on one working arm -- and then he moves.

To Arkady's right side.

Deliberately.

Precisely.

Not to his left. Not to the center. To the right -- the specific, considered positioning of a man who decided at the beginning of this match where he would be standing at the end of it. He places himself where the broken arm cannot reach him and cannot protect Arkady from him.

Mark Bravo: "John. John, look where he's standing."

John Phillips: "I see it."

Mark Bravo: "That is not an accident."

John Phillips: "No. It is not."

Arkady tries to turn. Tries to square up, to reposition, to put the left side between himself and what is coming. Hakuryu moves with him -- minimal, efficient, staying exactly where he needs to stay -- and the geometry works against Arkady with a thoroughness that has nothing accidental about it.

Mark Bravo: "He can't get him in front of him. Every time he adjusts, Hakuryu adjusts with him. He is completely trapped on his own right side and there is nothing he can do about it."

The first kick arrives.

It is not fast.

It does not need to be fast.

It lands on the right side of Arkady's jaw with the flat, ugly, unobstructed sound of a strike that has met no resistance whatsoever. No arm. No guard. No protection of any kind. Just Hakuryu's boot and Arkady's face and nothing in between.

Arkady's head snaps sideways.

He tries to raise the right arm.

It comes up wrong. Too slow. The signal from his brain making the journey and arriving in the space the kick has already vacated -- the arm moving through air, blocking nothing, protecting nothing, completing its motion in the empty aftermath of damage already done.

John Phillips: "The arm isn't getting there, Mark."

Mark Bravo: "It was never going to get there. That is the whole point. That has been the whole point since that stomp. Every suplex. Every targeted strike. Every wrenching hold on that mat. It was all so that right now, in this moment, that arm cannot answer. And Hakuryu has been patient enough to wait for this moment for the entire match."

Hakuryu does not pause.

He does not check his work.

He simply delivers the next kick.

Same side. Same address. The right jaw, the right temple -- precise, unhurried, arriving with the same measured force as the one before it. Not a man in a frenzy. Not a man running on adrenaline or anger or any of the emotions that make strikes wild and wasteful. A man who has calculated the exact amount of force required and is applying it with the patience of someone who has all the time in the world because the outcome has already been decided.

John Phillips: "Referee watching -- referee watching closely --"

Mark Bravo: "Step in. Come on. Step in."

Arkady tries.

A left-handed palm strike -- wild, thrown from instinct, the body doing what the body does when it has run out of everything except the reflex to fight back. It grazes Hakuryu's cheek. A real shot. A shot that on any other night, from a fully functional Arkady Bogatyr, would mean something.

Hakuryu rolls his head from it without breaking his rhythm.

He does not retreat.

He does not react.

He is simply not where the strike goes and then he is back and the next kick lands before Arkady can process the fact that the palm strike found nothing.

Mark Bravo: "He tried, John. You see that? He tried."

John Phillips: "He has been trying all night. That is not what is in question."

Another kick.

Clean.

The sound of it travels.

Another.

The same sound.

Another.

Arkady's head snaps right with each one -- a metronome of damage, regular and inevitable, the right side of his skull receiving blow after blow with no defense between it and what is being delivered to it. His right arm swings with each impact -- not blocking, just moving, the dead weight of a limb that has been removed from the equation swaying with the momentum of each strike like something that no longer belongs to him.

John Phillips: "These strikes are landing completely uncontested. Every single one of them, Mark. The arm is not getting there. It has not blocked a single strike."

Mark Bravo: "It can't, John. It physically cannot. And Hakuryu put himself on exactly the right side to make sure of that. This is -- John, this is an execution. There is no other word for it."

Arkady's legs begin making their own decisions.

It is gradual at first -- a slight buckle on the left knee, weight shifting without being asked to shift, the body conducting its own quiet negotiation with gravity that does not include the man who lives inside it. He overrides it. He always overrides it. He straightens the knee through will alone, resets his weight, keeps his feet.

Another kick.

The left knee buckles again.

Deeper this time.

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He overrides it again.

John Phillips: "He is losing his legs, Mark. He is fighting just to stay upright."

Mark Bravo: "He is fighting everything right now, John. He is fighting the arm and the legs and Hakuryu and twenty minutes of systematic destruction and he is still -- he is still on his feet. That man is still on his feet."

Another kick.

The right side of the head.

Clean.

Another.

The jaw.

Clean.

Another.

The temple.

And the focus in Arkady's eyes -- that restless, wild, electric blue focus that has driven every reckless aerial and every improvised sequence and every grinning defiant moment of this entire match -- dims.

Slowly.

Irreversibly.

Like a light source running out of whatever it runs on.

John Phillips: "Mark --"

Mark Bravo: "I see it."

John Phillips: "He's --"

Mark Bravo: "I see it, John. I see it."

His legs go.

Not dramatically. Not with a cinematic collapse or a final defiant gesture. The knees simply stop overriding.

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The weight shifts forward without being corrected. The canvas comes up to meet him the way the canvas eventually comes up to meet everyone -- without ceremony, without mercy, without regard for what the man falling onto it has given tonight.

He lands on his side.

The right arm lies beneath him at the wrong angle.

His chest barely rises.

His eyes are closed.

He does not try to rise.

He is not trying to rise.

The grin is gone.

Hakuryu looks down at him.

He crouches.

Slowly.

*With the unhurried deliberateness of a man who has nowhere else to be and nothing left to prove -- he hooks both arms and locks in the **Kasu obu Doragon**.*

The camel clutch goes on with full force. His weight drives down into the small of Arkady's back. His hands lace beneath Arkady's chin. He wrenches back -- completely, absolutely, with everything he has -- on a man who cannot feel it.

On a man who cannot tap.

On a man who is already gone.

John Phillips: "He's -- Hakuryu is applying the Kasu obu Doragon -- the match is already -- Arkady is unconscious --"

Mark Bravo: "This isn't for the submission, John. Arkady cannot tap. Hakuryu knows Arkady cannot tap. This is not for the submission."

John Phillips: "Then what is it for."

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Mark Bravo: "It's a message. It has always been a message."

The hold stays on.

Hakuryu wrenches back further -- past what would be necessary to win, past what would be necessary to submit a conscious opponent, further than the mechanics of competition require -- and holds it there with the cold, complete commitment of a man making a point to an audience that extends beyond this arena.

The referee steps in.

He lifts Arkady's right arm.

It falls.

He lifts it again.

It falls.

He calls for the bell.

The bell rings.

Hakuryu does not release immediately.

He holds the Kasu obu Doragon for one more long, deliberate moment -- wrenching back on an unconscious man in front of twenty thousand people -- and then he releases it.

On his own terms.

In his own time.

Because he decides when it ends.

He always decides.

John Phillips: "The referee has called for the bell. This match is over. Arkady Bogatyr has been rendered unconscious -- the arm could not protect him -- Hakuryu wins by referee stoppage --"

Mark Bravo: "He never quit. John. He never quit. Say it for the record."

John Phillips: "Arkady Bogatyr did not quit. He was stopped. And there is a difference. And it matters."

Hakuryu rises.

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He stands over Arkady's motionless body and looks down at him.

At the right arm lying at the wrong angle.

At the chest barely rising.

At the face -- finally, completely, utterly still. The grin gone. The twitching gone. The restless, electric, indestructible energy that has defined every single moment of Arkady Bogatyr's existence in this ring tonight -- gone.

The most terrible thing about it is the stillness.

The man who never stopped moving.

Not moving.

Hakuryu reaches down.

He hauls Arkady upright by the hair -- not with violence, not with rage, but with the cold contempt of a man lifting something that belongs to him -- and forces him into a kneeling position. Arkady cannot hold it. Cannot support his own weight. Cannot do anything except exist in the position Hakuryu has decided he should exist in.

Sinja steps through the ropes.

Hakuryu holds Arkady there -- one fist wrapped in his hair, Arkady's limp body propped into a kneeling display, his unconscious face pointed at the camera -- and he waits.

He speaks.

Hakuryu: ???????

Sinja: "Broken."

The arena is silent.

Hakuryu: ?Van Patton?????????

Sinja: "Van Patton. You are next."

Hakuryu says nothing more.

He holds Arkady there -- kneeling, limp, displayed -- and waits for what he knows is coming.

The answer comes fast.

The crowd erupts before they even clear the curtain.

Theron Tkachuk hits the ramp at a dead sprint -- not his usual cold, deliberate advance but something rawer than that, something that has dispensed entirely with the measured menace he carries like a second skin. Six foot six and two hundred and ninety two pounds moving at a speed that has no right to exist in a body that size, covering the distance between the curtain and the ring with the singular focus of a man who has reduced the entire universe to a single point.

Behind him, Torunn Sigurjonsson drives forward -- warpaint streaked across her face, fists already clenched, the unyielding forward momentum of a shieldmaiden who has already decided what happens when she reaches that ring.

Mark Bravo: "THERON! TORUNN -- HERE THEY COME --"

John Phillips: "The Brigade is on that ramp and they are MOVING --"

They hit the barricade without slowing. Clear it. Hit the apron. Breach the ropes.

Torunn goes immediately to Arkady -- dropping beside him, hands moving with the quick, practical efficiency of someone whose first instinct in a crisis is always to do the next necessary thing. She calls for the medics without looking up. Her face is a mask and whatever is underneath it is staying underneath it because there is work to do and the work comes first.

Theron does not go to Arkady.

Theron goes to Hakuryu.

He crosses the ring in four strides and gets in Hakuryu's face -- chest to chest, nose to nose, six foot six of barely contained northern fury pressed up against a man who has just spent the last twenty minutes systematically destroying his brother. He does not shove. He does not strike. He stands there with the cold, absolute stillness of a man who is holding something back not because he is afraid of what happens if he lets it go but because he has made a decision about when and where it goes.

His eyes do not blink.

Hakuryu looks up at him.

He does not step back.

He does not look away.

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He meets Theron's gaze with the flat, evaluative patience of a man who has looked at large, dangerous things before and found them interesting rather than alarming.

Sinja stands one step behind his master. Hands clasped. Face blank.

The referee gets between them -- pressing against Theron's chest with both hands, achieving approximately nothing. The crowd is deafening.

John Phillips: "Theron Tkachuk face to face with Hakuryu -- and this referee is trying to maintain some kind of order in this ring --"

Mark Bravo: "Good luck to him."

John Phillips: "Meanwhile Torunn Sigurjonsson is with Arkady -- the medics are entering the ring -- and Arkady has still not moved, Mark. He has not moved."

Theron and Hakuryu remain locked -- the air between them carrying the specific charge of something being postponed rather than prevented. The crowd noise is enormous and neither man acknowledges it. They exist in a private geography that the rest of the building is only permitted to observe.

Theron speaks.

He does not sign.

He does not reach for ASL -- does not use the language he uses when he is composed and deliberate and operating within the boundaries of his usual cold containment. He speaks out loud, in the blunt, sparse English he reserves for moments that have moved past the point where silence serves any purpose.

Two words.

Quiet enough that the cameras almost miss them.

Loud enough that Hakuryu hears every syllable.

Theron Tkachuk: "You're dead."

Hakuryu says nothing.

He simply looks at Theron, unimpressed.

And then -- the curtain parts.

Gunnar Van Patton comes through without music, without announcement, without anything except the

barely-contained forward momentum of a man whose body is several steps behind his intentions and has decided that is the body's problem. The leg brace. The limp. The forced restraint of movement that costs him something with every step and receives nothing back. The brace nearly coming apart with every step he takes.

None of it touches the look on his face.

The crowd reacts to his appearance with the loudest noise of the night.

John Phillips: "Gunnar Van Patton, injured or not, is right behind them."

Mark Bravo: "He doesn't care, John. Look at him. He does not care about any of that right now."

Avril Selene Kinkade follows slightly behind his right shoulder -- immaculate as always, composed as always, her expression calibrated into something that reads as appropriate concern for a man she represents and whose wellbeing is ostensibly her professional priority.

Hakuryu sees Van Patton.

He looks at him.

And then -- in the precise moment before he turns to go, in the specific sliver of time between registering Van Patton's presence and beginning his exit -- his eyes move.

To Avril.

It is brief.

It is almost nothing.

A glance that lasts less than a second -- passing over her the way a man's eyes pass over something familiar, something expected, something that is exactly where it was supposed to be.

Avril's chin lifts.

A fraction.

Imperceptible to most of the building.

Not imperceptible to anyone paying close attention.

The exchange lasts less than a heartbeat and contains everything and reveals nothing and is gone before it can be named.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu -- and -- did he just --"

Mark Bravo: "John. I don't know what I just saw."

John Phillips: "Neither do I."

Hakuryu steps back from Theron.

Smoothly.

Unhurried.

Not because Theron moved him. Not because the referee moved him. Because Van Patton is coming down that ramp and there is only one person in this building whose presence factors into Hakuryu's decisions tonight, and it is not Theron Tkachuk.

He turns toward the ramp.

"White Dragon's Blade" begins to play.

He descends the ring steps. He and Van Patton meet each other's eyes as the distance between them closes -- the leg brace and the fury on one end, the stillness and the patience on the other. Van Patton does not slow. Avril's hand finds his arm -- light, precise, the minimum contact required to communicate the message -- and Van Patton looks at her hand and then looks back at Hakuryu and keeps moving.

Hakuryu steps to the side.

He lets Van Patton pass.

He watches him go.

Van Patton reaches the ring. He takes the steps -- each one costing something, the leg brace making itself known, the injury that has kept him at eighty percent reminding him of its existence with every point of contact. He grips the ropes. He pushes through them. He is in the ring.

He stands over Arkady.

He looks at him.

At the right arm at the wrong angle.

At the chest barely rising.

At the stillness.

Whatever crosses his face belongs to him alone. It moves through him and he contains it and he straightens and turns.

He faces the ramp.

Hakuryu has not left.

He stands at the top of the entrance ramp -- composed, unhurried, exactly where he intended to be -- and looks down at Van Patton standing in the ring with Arkady motionless on the canvas between them.

He smirks.

Not a performance. Not a taunt executed for the crowd's benefit. The private, arrogant acknowledgment of a man who set something in motion tonight and is watching it arrive at exactly the destination he intended -- a man who has already decided what happens next and finds the waiting faintly, privately amusing.

Sinja stands one step behind him.

Hands clasped.

Face blank.

Van Patton stares up at him.

The rage is not loud. It is not theatrical. It is the quiet, absolute kind that has no ceiling -- the kind that a man carries differently when he has seen real war, when violence is not a performance but a language he was taught by people who meant it.

He does not look away.

Hakuryu does not look away.

The arena holds the image.

Van Patton in the ring, seething. Hakuryu at the top of the ramp, smirking back at him. Arkady motionless on the canvas between them -- the right arm at the wrong angle, the chest barely rising, the grin gone from his face. Torunn working beside him. Theron standing over him, eyes still fixed on the top of the ramp.

Avril Selene Kinkade at ringside.

Her expression giving nothing away.

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It never does.

John Phillips: "Van Patton and Hakuryu. And between them -- Arkady Bogatyr. Who came into this match alone tonight, who fought on one arm, who never stopped moving until the body made the decision for him."

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu came here tonight to send a message, John. And that message is standing right there at the top of that ramp, waiting to be received."

John Phillips: "Van Patton has received it."

The staredown holds.

Neither man breaks.

Neither man blinks.

The weight of what is coming settles over the arena like weather moving in from somewhere cold and inevitable.

The show goes to commercial.

Fighting Championship Qualifier

The camera returns to ringside, where the atmosphere has changed again.

The laughter of the last backstage moment is gone.

The tension is back.

The stakes are higher now.

John Phillips: "We are set for the Fighting Championship qualifier final, and what a matchup this has become. Valentina Blaze, fresh off a hard-fought win earlier tonight, now has to turn right back around and face one of the most dangerous women in all of UTA in Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "And under Fighting Championship rules, that matters even more. No pinfalls. No shortcuts. You win by knockout, submission, or referee stoppage. Which means somebody is gonna have to survive something awful if they want to make it to *Victorious*."

John Phillips: "And let's be very clear about what's on the line here. The winner of this fight advances to *Victorious* to meet the winner of next week's qualifiers, with a Fighting Championship opportunity hanging in the balance."

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Mark Bravo: "That's why this one's scary, John. Valentina's already been through a war tonight. Dahlia just tore Kairo Bey apart until the referee had to save him. One woman is running on heart. The other is walking in like a surgeon with a fresh scalpel."

The lights in the arena dim.

A pulse of fiery orange floods the stage as the opening rumble of Valentina Blaze's music hits, and the crowd instantly comes alive.

Valentina steps through the curtain to a huge ovation.

She is still feeling the damage from earlier. The shoulder is taped heavier now. Her steps aren't quite as loose. But the fire is still there in her eyes, and the second she appears, that familiar intensity surges through the building.

John Phillips: "What a performance we saw earlier from Valentina Blaze, surviving Rosa Delgado and earning this spot in the final."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but surviving Rosa and surviving Dahlia are two very different things. Rosa wants to beat you. Dahlia wants to make sure a piece of you doesn't leave the building."

Valentina stops center stage and throws up her hand.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Valentina nods, points toward the ring, and starts down the ramp with a little less bounce than usual, but every bit as much conviction. She knows what this is. She knows what it could mean. And she knows she may have to reach deeper than she ever has before to get through it.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has built her name on fearless offense, kick combinations, and explosive momentum. But tonight, after everything she already endured, this may be less about speed and more about sheer will."

Mark Bravo: "And that's where I actually like her chances. Because Valentina is crazy enough to believe she can out-heart anybody. Sometimes that's a superpower. Sometimes it gets you hurt. We're about to find out which one tonight is."

Valentina reaches ringside, slaps the apron once, then slides in under the bottom rope. She pops up, throws her arms out toward the crowd, and gets another loud reaction before turning her attention to the stage.

The lights drain out again.

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The warmth disappears.

A colder, uglier hue takes over the building as Dahlia Cross's music slithers through the speakers.

The boos begin immediately.

Dahlia Cross steps out slowly, dragging that violet scarf behind her, her face set in that same cold, cruel calm that made Kairo Bey's night end in disaster.

John Phillips: "And here comes Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "Good luck reading anything on that face. She looks like she's on a stroll. Like she didn't just force the referee to stop a fight twenty minutes ago."

Dahlia pauses on the stage and looks down toward the ring, her expression almost amused now as she studies Valentina. No motion wasted. No emotion offered to the crowd. She just stares like a woman already choosing where to start the damage.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is one of the most calculating competitors in UTA today. She attacks joints, she manipulates openings, and once she finds a weakness, she never lets it go."

Mark Bravo: "And let's not ignore the obvious--Valentina already gave Dahlia the first target when she walked out here taped up. That shoulder is a neon sign."

Dahlia makes her way down the ramp in deliberate steps, sneering at the fans who reach over the barricade. She never once looks away from the ring. Never once looks away from Valentina.

Inside, Valentina bounces in place, trying to keep loose, trying to keep her body warm, trying to ignore the ache from the first fight.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has the crowd. She has momentum. But Dahlia Cross may be the fresher, more methodical fighter in a rule set built for cruelty."

Mark Bravo: "And that's why this is such a great final. It's passion against poison. Fire against venom. Somebody's dream gets closer to *Victorious* tonight, and somebody leaves this ring wondering how much damage it cost them."

Dahlia reaches ringside and slowly walks around the ring once, eyeing Valentina from every angle like she is cataloging the injuries. The shoulder. The ribs. The pace in Valentina's stance. The slight hesitation on one side.

Valentina keeps turning with her, refusing to look intimidated, refusing to give her anything more than what Dahlia can already see.

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Dahlia steps onto the apron and slips through the ropes.

Inside the ring, she walks straight to the center and stops.

Valentina steps out of her corner and meets her there.

The contrast is perfect.

Valentina, all heat and pulse and defiance.

Dahlia, all ice and calculation and malice.

John Phillips: "One of these women moves on to *Victorious*. The other sees the path end here."

Mark Bravo: "And under these rules, there's no stealing it. You don't sneak out with three. You finish the fight or the fight finishes you."

The referee steps between them and begins the final instructions as the crowd buzzes with anticipation.

Dahlia says nothing.

Valentina nods, eyes locked.

The referee stands between them, giving the final instructions one last time as the crowd buzz builds into a steady wall of noise.

Valentina Blaze shifts her weight from foot to foot, keeping herself loose, keeping herself ready, trying not to let the fatigue from earlier show more than it already has.

Dahlia Cross does not move much at all.

She just stares at the taped shoulder.

Then at Valentina's ribs.

Then back into her eyes.

John Phillips: "You can already tell what Dahlia Cross is looking at. She sees damage. She sees opportunity. She sees a woman who already had to survive one brutal fight tonight."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and Valentina sees a fresh predator. That's the problem. She's got heart for days, but

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heart doesn't make bruises disappear."

The referee checks both competitors one last time.

Then calls for the bell.

DING DING DING!

The crowd surges as both women ease forward from their corners.

Valentina circles first, light on her feet, hands active, trying to stay moving.

Dahlia takes the center and turns with her, measured and patient, not chasing yet, just forcing Valentina to work around her.

John Phillips: "Fighting Championship rules here. No pinfalls. The winner advances to *Victorious* to face the winner of next week's qualifiers. Knockout, submission, or referee stoppage only."

Mark Bravo: "And that's why this first minute matters so much. Valentina cannot let Dahlia settle in and start carving her up. She has got to make this messy and fast."

Valentina feints with a step in and out.

Dahlia doesn't react.

Valentina changes levels, flicks a low kick toward the lead leg--

Dahlia turns her shin just enough to check it.

No wasted motion.

No expression.

Mark Bravo: "See? That's the scary part. Dahlia never looks surprised."

Valentina circles again and darts in with a jab and a quick body kick. The jab lands. The kick gets caught partially on Dahlia's elbow. Dahlia immediately steps forward to crowd her, and Valentina slips out to the side before the clinch can form.

John Phillips: "Smart start from Valentina Blaze. Hit and move. Don't let Dahlia latch onto you."

Mark Bravo: "And make Dahlia work. Make her turn. Make her reset. That's how Valentina has to fight this one."

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Valentina springs back in with more urgency now, a quick three-strike burst--left hand, right hand, snapping kick to the thigh. That one lands flush. Dahlia's leg shifts under her just a little, and the crowd pops for it.

Valentina feeds off it immediately.

Valentina Blaze: "COME ON!"

She hits the ropes, rebounds, and comes flying in with a leaping forearm that catches Dahlia high on the cheek and drives her back half a step.

John Phillips: "Good opening burst from Valentina Blaze!"

Mark Bravo: "That's exactly what she needs! Don't let Dahlia start thinking this is gonna be a slow autopsy!"

Valentina presses forward with a high kick--

Dahlia ducks under it.

Valentina spins through--

and Dahlia steps in close, suddenly, violently, driving a short elbow into Valentina's bad shoulder.

Valentina cries out and recoils instantly.

The crowd groans.

John Phillips: "And there it is. Dahlia goes right to the shoulder."

Mark Bravo: "Of course she does. Valentina walked out here with a target painted on her body."

Dahlia follows with a hard kick to the same arm, knocking it against Valentina's side. Valentina backs up, trying to recompose herself, but Dahlia stays in her face now, stepping forward with cold intent. Another short kick to the shoulder. Then a jab to the taped ribs. Then a knee to the body that folds Valentina just enough for Dahlia to wrap on a side headlock and drag her down to the mat.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross slowing this fight down immediately after that opening flurry."

Mark Bravo: "That's the switch. That's what she does. She lets you think you've got rhythm, then she takes your oxygen, your arm, your balance--whatever hurts worst."

On the mat, Dahlia cranks the headlock and uses her body weight to force Valentina flat. Valentina kicks her legs and tries to turn inward, but Dahlia shifts with her, staying heavy and keeping the pressure on. Then, like an afterthought, she drives a knuckle into the taped shoulder while maintaining the hold.

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Valentina winces hard.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is using everything she can under these rules to chip away at Valentina."

Mark Bravo: "And that shoulder is already barking. You can see it. Every time Dahlia touches it, Valentina's whole body reacts."

Valentina fights up to one knee, then to both feet, pushing at Dahlia's hands and trying to break free. Dahlia keeps the hold on one second too long--Valentina lifts and shoves her backward into the ropes. Dahlia rebounds off--

Valentina nails her with a jumping knee flush to the chest and chin.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Huge knee from Valentina Blaze!"

Dahlia stumbles back two steps, more surprised than hurt, and Valentina sees the opening. She charges with a running clothesline--Dahlia ducks--Valentina hits the ropes--rebounds--then launches with a spinning heel kick that clips Dahlia on the side of the head and finally knocks her down to one knee.

Mark Bravo: "Now we're talking! Valentina can smell momentum!"

Valentina points to the crowd and they roar right back at her. She charges again, looking to pile on with another running strike--

but Dahlia rises just enough and catches her with a straight kick to the stomach.

Valentina doubles over.

Dahlia immediately threads her into a front facelock and snaps her down hard with a DDT, spiking her near center ring.

The building gasps as Valentina bounces off the mat and rolls to her side, clutching at the shoulder again.

John Phillips: "DDT by Dahlia Cross!"

Mark Bravo: "And that's what makes her so dangerous! One second Valentina's building steam, the next second she's planted on her head!"

Dahlia gets up slowly, almost casually, and stalks toward Valentina, who is trying to rise near the ropes. Dahlia does not rush. She doesn't need to. She knows exactly where the damage is and exactly how to keep this fight from getting away from her.

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John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze came out hot, but Dahlia Cross has already started dragging this into darker territory."

Mark Bravo: "And if Valentina doesn't find another burst soon, Dahlia's gonna turn this into the kind of fight where surviving becomes the whole story."

Valentina pulls herself up on the ropes, breathing harder now, shoulder hanging just a little lower than before. Dahlia stands a few feet away, waiting, inviting her to try again.

Valentina Blaze pulls herself upright using the ropes, chest heaving, one hand instinctively going to the taped shoulder before she forces it away.

Dahlia Cross stands in the center of the ring, calm and patient, watching her like a vulture that already knows how this ends.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has to be careful here. You can already see the wear from that first fight tonight, and Dahlia Cross is the exact wrong opponent to show weakness against."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, because Dahlia doesn't just notice weakness. She organizes her whole evening around it."

Dahlia steps in.

Valentina fires first with a forearm from the ropes.

Dahlia absorbs it.

Valentina throws another, harder this time, then a third, finally creating enough space to push off the ropes and charge forward with a burst of offense. A right hand. A left. A spinning back kick to the body that lands clean and forces Dahlia back half a step.

The crowd pops.

Valentina doesn't wait. She throws a high roundhouse--

Dahlia ducks.

Valentina turns through the miss and instantly springs into an enzuigiri that catches Dahlia high along the temple.

Dahlia stumbles sideways into the ropes.

John Phillips: "What a combination by Valentina Blaze!"

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Mark Bravo: "That's it! She can't fight Dahlia one speed for too long! She's gotta keep changing the rhythm!"

Valentina feeds off the crowd and runs to the far ropes, rebounding with a running knee aimed at Dahlia's chest near the ropes--

but Dahlia sidesteps at the last possible second.

Valentina catches herself awkwardly on the ropes, and Dahlia immediately pounces with a clubbing forearm across the upper back, followed by a hard kick straight into the taped shoulder.

Valentina cries out and drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "And once again, Dahlia makes her pay!"

Mark Bravo: "That shoulder is becoming a huge problem now!"

Dahlia grabs the bad arm by the wrist and yanks Valentina upright, twisting through into a vicious arm wringer that sends a jolt through Valentina's entire body. Before she can recover, Dahlia slams a knee into the ribs on the same side, then drags her down into a kneeling hammerlock that bends the shoulder up behind her back at an ugly angle.

The referee drops in close.

Referee: "Valentina! Do you want to give it up?"

Valentina Blaze: "NO!"

The crowd roars behind her.

John Phillips: "Submission attempt from Dahlia Cross, and this is exactly where she wants the fight."

Mark Bravo: "And look at the control. No wasted motion. No panic. She's just slowly making that shoulder less and less useful."

Valentina grimaces and fights her way to one knee, then tries to roll her body weight forward to relieve the pressure. Dahlia stays attached, keeping the arm trapped and using her free hand to rake short forearms across the side of Valentina's face and neck to keep her grounded.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze is showing incredible toughness here."

Mark Bravo: "She has to. Because if she lets Dahlia fully settle into this pace, she may not get another real opening."

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Valentina plants one boot, then the other, and powers her way up just enough to throw a backward elbow with her free arm. It catches Dahlia in the cheek. Dahlia keeps the hold. Valentina throws another. That one lands flush. Dahlia's grip loosens.

Valentina spins out--

but the bad shoulder gives her just enough trouble to delay the escape--

and Dahlia slams a short kick into the ribs again before she can fully separate.

Valentina stumbles toward the corner, gasping.

Dahlia follows in with brutal efficiency, pinning her there with a shoulder to the chest before backing up and driving a running knee into the midsection. Valentina folds over the top rope, coughing, and Dahlia immediately hooks the arm over the rope and pulls down on it, using the cable and her own weight to stretch the shoulder.

Referee: "Break it! Break it now!"

John Phillips: "Dahlia is absolutely dissecting Valentina Blaze!"

Mark Bravo: "And every second this goes, Valentina's miracle story from earlier tonight gets harder and harder to repeat!"

Dahlia releases at four and backs off just enough to avoid disqualification, though under these rules that warning feels almost symbolic. Valentina shakes the arm out desperately, trying to get life back into it, but Dahlia rushes right back in with a running elbow to the corner.

Valentina staggers out.

Dahlia hooks her from the side and takes her down with a Russian leg sweep, snapping the back of her head against the mat.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is in complete control right now!"

Valentina rolls onto her side, trying to create space, and Dahlia follows her immediately, stepping over into a grounded crossface variation. She uses Valentina's bad shoulder as leverage, cranking the head and neck back while trapping the damaged arm underneath the angle of the hold.

Valentina screams.

The referee is down again.

Referee: "Valentina! Do you submit?"

Valentina Blaze: "NO!"

The crowd rallies louder, chanting her name.

John Phillips: "Valentina refusing to give in!"

Mark Bravo: "She's got more heart than sense and I mean that as a compliment!"

Valentina digs her boots into the mat and tries to inch toward the ropes, but Dahlia keeps dragging her back toward center, wrenching harder every time Valentina makes progress. The strain is all over Valentina's face now. The shoulder. The ribs. The exhaustion from having already fought once tonight. It is all stacking up.

Still, she refuses.

She finally manages to roll enough to take some pressure off and then kicks backward wildly, catching Dahlia in the side of the head with one boot. Dahlia's grip loosens just enough.

Valentina twists free and crawls away toward the ropes.

The crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze escapes!"

Mark Bravo: "Barely! But that's all she needed!"

Dahlia rises first and charges, looking to stamp out the comeback before it starts, but Valentina suddenly pops up off the ropes and catches her with a desperation superkick that lands flush under the jaw.

Dahlia snaps backward a step.

Then another.

The crowd explodes again as Valentina, hurting and running on fumes, somehow finds one more burst and throws a second kick to the body, then a jumping knee that drives Dahlia back into the corner.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze still has fight left in her!"

Mark Bravo: "I don't know how, but she's still swinging!"

Valentina stumbles as much as she runs, but she charges the corner anyway and blasts Dahlia with a forearm smash, then climbs to the middle rope and rains down shots with her good arm while the crowd

counts along.

Crowd: "ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR! FIVE! SIX! SEVEN!"

Dahlia suddenly hooks the bad arm.

Valentina's eyes widen.

Dahlia yanks her off the ropes and launches her overhead with a modified arm throw, sending Valentina crashing shoulder-first to the mat.

The entire arena groans.

John Phillips: "Oh no! Valentina came down hard on that shoulder!"

Mark Bravo: "That's bad. That's real bad."

Dahlia rises slowly, cold and composed, while Valentina rolls in agony on the mat, clutching the arm and shoulder. The crowd's hope is still there, but now it's mixed with concern again, because Dahlia Cross is back in the driver's seat and the damage is becoming impossible to ignore.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has shown remarkable heart in this final, but Dahlia Cross just keeps finding that shoulder and dragging her right back into danger."

Mark Bravo: "And the scary part is Dahlia isn't even rushing. She doesn't need to. She knows the fight is coming to her now."

Dahlia takes a step toward the fallen Valentina, who is still trying to push herself up despite the pain.

Dahlia Cross closes in slowly, the pace deliberate, almost predatory now.

Valentina Blaze is on one knee near the ropes, one arm wrapped around the bad shoulder, the other pressed flat against the mat as she tries to will herself back upright. Her face is twisted in pain, but her eyes are still alive. Still defiant.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze has given everything she has in this qualifier final, but you can feel the fight slipping into the kind of territory Dahlia Cross loves."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but somehow, some way, Valentina's still here. And as long as she's still here, Dahlia's got a problem."

Dahlia steps in and drives a stiff kick into the ribs.

Valentina folds.

Another kick lands to the shoulder.

Valentina cries out and drops to both knees.

Dahlia reaches down, grabs a handful of hair and the wrist of the damaged arm, and hauls Valentina upward. She twists through, trapping the shoulder again, and steps behind her into a vicious standing hammerlock while driving short forearms into the side of the head.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross right back to the arm and shoulder!"

Mark Bravo: "She wants this finished by damage, John. She wants the referee thinking stoppage. She wants Valentina questioning how much more she can take."

The referee moves in close.

Referee: "Valentina! Talk to me! Do you want to stop?"

Valentina Blaze: "NO!"

The crowd roars their support.

Dahlia yanks harder on the hammerlock, then suddenly shoves Valentina forward into the corner. Valentina hits chest-first, then turns just in time to eat a brutal running knee that drives her back into the buckles. She sags there, hurt badly now, one arm hanging, breathing through her mouth.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze is in trouble!"

Mark Bravo: "But she keeps saying no! She keeps refusing to let this thing die!"

Dahlia backs up a step and studies her.

Then another.

Then charges again--

but Valentina suddenly gets both boots up and blasts Dahlia in the chest.

Dahlia stumbles backward.

Valentina pushes herself off the corner and fires a desperate forearm. Then another. Then a third. Dahlia answers with a slap across the face, trying to halt the rally--but Valentina comes right back with a superkick to

the body that folds Dahlia over at the waist.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze found an opening!"

Mark Bravo: "And she better jump through it before it closes!"

Valentina hits the ropes with one arm tucked close to her side, comes flying back, and snaps Dahlia's head up with a shining wizard that sends Cross stumbling into the ropes. Dahlia hangs there for a split second, dazed.

Valentina sees it.

She runs on pure adrenaline now.

She charges and clotheslines Dahlia over the top rope to the apron--but Dahlia catches herself and lands on her feet, hanging onto the ropes to stay upright.

Valentina turns, sprints to the far side, rebounds, and launches into a baseball slide that drives both boots into Dahlia's midsection and sends her crashing to the floor.

The arena erupts again.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze throwing caution to the wind!"

Mark Bravo: "She doesn't have any other choice! This is all heart right now!"

Dahlia tries to sit up on the floor, but Valentina is already sliding out after her. She grabs Dahlia by the head and slams her face off the apron once--then again--before rolling her back under the bottom rope. Valentina follows, slower this time, clearly hurting, but with the crowd carrying her along.

John Phillips: "Listen to these people! They are trying to drag Valentina Blaze across the finish line!"

Inside the ring, Dahlia gets to all fours and tries to recover. Valentina stalks toward her, limping slightly, one hand still hovering protectively near the bad shoulder. She waits for Dahlia to rise, then nails her with a jumping knee strike to the side of the head that sends Dahlia crashing into the corner.

Mark Bravo: "That landed flush!"

Dahlia is rocked now. Not finished. Not yet. But definitely hurt.

Valentina backs up to the opposite corner and pounds her chest with her good fist, the crowd rising with her.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze is digging deeper than she ever has before!"

She charges corner to corner and drives a running forearm into Dahlia's face. Then she hooks the head and pulls Dahlia out just enough to plant her with a snap bulldog near center ring. Dahlia bounces and rolls, trying to gather herself, but Valentina is already back on her feet, feeding off every decibel in the building.

Mark Bravo: "Now this is dangerous for Dahlia! She's been in control so much of this fight that she may not know how to handle somebody refusing to break!"

Dahlia rises unsteadily.

Valentina swings for another strike--

Dahlia ducks under it.

Hooks the bad arm.

And this time she tries to cinch in *Wilted Bloom*, that twisting, shoulder-wrenching trap she uses to tear people apart and force them to quit.

The crowd gasps.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross looking for the finish!"

Valentina cries out as Dahlia starts to turn her into the hold, but instead of fighting the twist the way Dahlia expects, Valentina throws herself forward with everything she has left. The momentum sends both women tumbling awkwardly to the mat, the hold never getting fully locked.

Dahlia releases to recover--

and that is all Valentina needs.

She pops up first.

Dahlia rises a second later--

and Valentina catches her flush with *Blaze Trigger*, the jumping high-knee strike smashing into Dahlia's jaw and snapping her head back violently.

The building comes unglued.

John Phillips: "BLAZE TRIGGER! BLAZE TRIGGER CONNECTS!"

Mark Bravo: "SHE GOT HER! SHE GOT ALL OF IT!"

Dahlia drops to both knees, stunned, glassy-eyed, still somehow upright only because instinct has not fully abandoned her yet.

Valentina stumbles backward into the ropes, shoulder burning, chest heaving, eyes wide with the realization that this is the moment. This is the opening. This is the fight.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is in deep trouble!"

Mark Bravo: "Valentina has one shot to end this! One shot!"

Valentina takes off.

She hits the far ropes.

Rebounds with every ounce of speed she can still create--

and spins through with *Wildfire*, the spinning heel kick catching Dahlia absolutely flush on the side of the head.

Dahlia's body goes limp as she crashes to the mat.

The sound inside the building is thunder.

John Phillips: "WILDFIRE! WILDFIRE CONNECTS!"

Mark Bravo: "GOOD NIGHT!"

Valentina drops to one knee from the effort, clutching the bad shoulder, barely able to keep herself upright, but her eyes stay locked on Dahlia.

Dahlia does not rise.

The referee is already there, kneeling beside her, checking her condition.

Referee: "Dahlia! Dahlia, can you hear me?"

The crowd is standing, screaming, willing the official to make the call they know is coming.

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Dahlia blinks once.

Tries to push up.

Her arms fail beneath her.

She collapses back to the canvas.

The referee looks at her one more time--

then waves his arms.

Referee: "That's it! Ring the bell!"

DING DING DING!

The arena explodes into a massive ovation.

John Phillips: "SHE DID IT! VALENTINA BLAZE WINS IT!"

Mark Bravo: "I DON'T BELIEVE IT! TWO FIGHTS IN ONE NIGHT! A BAD SHOULDER! A FRESH DAHLIA CROSS! AND VALENTINA BLAZE STILL FOUND A WAY!"

Valentina falls backward to a seated position, overwhelmed, exhausted, hurting, but grinning through the pain as the reality washes over her. The referee helps her up and raises her good arm high in the air.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner by referee stoppage... and advancing to *Victorious*... **VALENTINA BLAZE!**"

The crowd roars even louder.

John Phillips: "An unbelievable performance from Valentina Blaze! She survives Rosa Delgado, then comes right back and somehow outlasts Dahlia Cross to punch her ticket to *Victorious*!"

Mark Bravo: "That wasn't just tough. That was special. That was one of those nights where a wrestler makes you believe they can do anything!"

Valentina pulls away from the referee for a second and turns toward the hard camera, breathing hard, sweat pouring, shoulder hanging, but spirit completely unbroken.

She pounds her chest once and screams out.

Valentina Blaze: "LIGHT IT UP!"

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Crowd: "LIGHT IT UP!"

Medical staff start checking on Dahlia in the background while Valentina stands in the center of the ring, battered but radiant, basking in the biggest win of her night--and maybe one of the biggest wins of her career.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze heads to *Victorious*, where she will face the winner of next week's qualifiers for a Fighting Championship opportunity!"

Mark Bravo: "And after a night like this, whoever wins next week better be ready for a woman who now knows exactly how much she can survive."

The camera lingers on Valentina, still standing, still fighting through the pain, still feeding off the roar of the crowd as the moment settles in.

Maxwell Jett vs Chris Ross

The arena goes dark.

Not fully.

Not naturally.

Intentionally.

Like the whole building has been told to hold its breath for someone important.

Then--

A single gold spotlight ignites at the top of the stage.

It cuts through the darkness like a red-carpet flash, narrow and blinding, isolating the entranceway from everything else in the arena. The crowd reaction is immediate.

Boos.

Loud ones.

The kind that build before a man even steps through the curtain because everybody already knows exactly who's about to demand their attention.

The opening riff of "**Gold Standard**" hits.

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Cocky arena rock collides with heavy trap drums, the beat dripping with self-importance as the spotlight holds steady.

Then Maxwell "Max" Jett steps into it.

And he looks like he was born for this exact frame.

He emerges in a designer robe trimmed in metallic gold, smug grin already in place, chin slightly raised, eyes half-lidded like the building is beneath him but the spotlight finally has the good sense to be exactly where it belongs.

John Phillips: "Here we go. Main event time. UTA Championship on the line. And this man--Maxwell Jett--has done everything in his power to make sure tonight is as personal as possible."

Mark Bravo: "And I hate to admit it, JP, but look at him. He already looks like he thinks the title belongs to him. Like he's just walking out to complete paperwork."

Jett slowly turns in place beneath the spotlight, arms extended just enough to show off the robe, soaking in the hatred from every side of the arena. He mouths something toward the hard camera.

Maxwell Jett: "Keep it coming."

The boos get even louder.

John Phillips: "He has antagonized Chris Ross for weeks, goaded him repeatedly, baited him into this title match, and then earlier tonight took things even further with those comments about Valentina Blaze."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and then we saw Chris Ross backstage absolutely livid over it. Valentina had to talk him down. So if Maxwell Jett wanted to get in the champion's head tonight, mission accomplished."

Jett smirks at the camera again, then points into the crowd at a random fan near ringside as if assigning personal blame for the entire arena's lack of taste. He shakes his head dramatically.

John Phillips: "That arrogance, that camera awareness, that need to turn every moment into his moment--that is Maxwell Jett in a nutshell."

Mark Bravo: "And the worst part is, he can back up a lot of it. He's not just some guy with a mouth. He's sharp. He's technical. He's cruel. He knows exactly when to talk and exactly when to take your head off."

Jett begins his walk to the ring with zero urgency.

Slow.

Measured.

Smug.

He moves like a man who believes the ending is already written and the rest of the show is just the audience catching up. Every few steps he stops just long enough to jaw with a fan, laugh at another, or look directly into a camera lens like it belongs to him.

John Phillips: "You can feel the spotlight following him all the way down the ramp, and to be fair, that's exactly how Maxwell Jett carries himself. Like the world is a stage and he is the only person on it worth filming."

Mark Bravo: "That's because he thinks he's the best in the world. Not one of the best. Not a future best. The best. Period. End of sentence. And every word out of his mouth tonight has been about proving that Chris Ross is just borrowing the spot Max was born for."

Halfway down the ramp, Jett stops dead center and extends both arms again, basking in the hostility. The gold light still tracks him, turning him into the center of the arena whether anyone likes it or not.

He slowly motions for the camera to come closer.

When it does, he leans in with a crooked grin.

Maxwell Jett: "Drink it in."

The crowd rains down boos.

John Phillips: "There is no shortage of confidence here tonight."

Mark Bravo: "Confidence? This is ego with a shoe deal."

Jett laughs to himself and resumes the walk, now patting the front of his robe near the chest like he can already feel championship gold hanging there. He gets to ringside and circles the ring once, dragging out every second of the moment. Inside the ropes, the ring is empty for now--but it doesn't feel empty.

It feels like a target waiting for him.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross is not out here yet, but you know the champion is watching this somewhere, and you know every second of this entrance is gasoline on a fire that is already burning hot."

Mark Bravo: "And that might be Max's biggest weapon tonight. Not the piledriver. Not the armbar. Not the knee strike. It might be the fact that he has Ross coming into this emotional."

Jett reaches the base of the steel steps, then stops and looks out at the crowd one more time. He pulls the robe open slightly, revealing his gear underneath, then looks directly toward the aisle as if imagining Chris Ross already standing there beneath him.

He sneers.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett wanted this. He provoked it. He demanded attention. He made this personal. And now the question is whether he can finish the story he's been writing with his mouth."

Jett climbs the steps slowly, one hand trailing along the top of the post as he reaches the apron. He wipes both boots carefully, arrogantly, making a show of it like the ring itself should be honored he's chosen to enter it.

Then, in a sudden shift of energy, he snaps into motion.

He ducks through the ropes in one fluid movement and pops to his feet in the center of the ring.

The crowd boos louder.

Jett immediately climbs the second rope in the near corner and throws one arm out into the spotlight.

Maxwell Jett: "I'm not here to impress you--"

He gestures dismissively at the audience.

Maxwell Jett: "--I'm here to remind you who's better than you!"

The arena answers with thunderous hatred.

Mark Bravo: "He is such an unbelievable jerk."

John Phillips: "No disagreement here."

Jett hops down from the ropes, pacing now, soaking it all in with that same poisonous confidence. Then he spots what he wants.

A microphone resting near ringside.

His eyes light up.

Of course they do.

He slips back out through the ropes, reaches down, and snatches up the mic from the timekeeper's area

before climbing back onto the apron. He steps through the ropes again, now armed with the one thing he loves almost as much as hearing his own music--hearing his own voice.

John Phillips: "Oh no."

Mark Bravo: "Oh yes. This is gonna be insufferable."

Jett stands in the center of the ring, microphone in one hand, spotlight still catching him, robe still hanging off his shoulders, grin growing wider by the second.

He looks around the arena like a man about to bless the audience with a speech they absolutely do not deserve.

Maxwell "Max" Jett stands in the center of the ring, microphone in one hand, smug grin stretched across his face as the crowd pours boos down on him from every direction.

He does not speak right away.

Of course he doesn't.

He waits.

He lets the noise keep coming.

Lets it swell.

Lets it boil.

Then, slowly, almost theatrically, he raises the microphone to his lips and lowers it again without saying a word, just to antagonize them one more time.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, look at this guy. He's loving every second of this."

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett has always believed the world revolves around him, and right now he's making sure every eye in this arena stays exactly where he wants it."

Jett finally nods once, like the crowd has settled enough to be allowed the privilege of hearing him speak.

Maxwell Jett: "Can you believe it?"

The crowd boos immediately.

Jett smirks and paces a slow half-circle.

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Maxwell Jett: "No, seriously, can you believe it? We just saw Valentina Blaze secure her *Victorious* championship match."

He gives a mockingly impressed nod.

Maxwell Jett: "Come on... let's give it up for her."

He begins clapping.

Slowly.

Patronizingly.

The crowd reacts, some cheering Valentina's name, others booing because they know exactly where this is going, and Maxwell just stands there with that rotten grin, soaking all of it in.

Maxwell Jett: "That's nice. That's really nice."

He lowers the microphone for a second and shakes his head like he's almost emotional.

Maxwell Jett: "And speaking of Valentina..."

His tone changes.

Subtly.

Enough to make the building tense up again.

Maxwell Jett: "Chris' little girlfriend..."

The boos get louder.

John Phillips: "Here we go."

Mark Bravo: "He just cannot help himself."

Jett shrugs and continues like he's the only honest man left in the world.

Maxwell Jett: "I think she's probably the single best thing to ever happen to Chris Ross."

He raises a hand before the audience can drown him out entirely.

Maxwell Jett: "No, no, no, I'm serious. Really."

He points toward the back.

Maxwell Jett: "Look at how she stays by his side. Look at how she tries to be his voice of reason. Look at how she tries to calm him down every time he gets all emotional and puffy-chested and starts pretending he's the toughest guy in the room."

He tilts his head.

Maxwell Jett: "What more could you ask for?"

The crowd rains down boos again.

Maxwell Jett: "But..."

He lets that word hang.

Maxwell Jett: "Chris doesn't appreciate Valentina enough."

The audience reacts with another loud, angry chorus.

Maxwell Jett: "No, really. I mean that. He doesn't."

He starts pacing again, rolling the mic in his hand.

Maxwell Jett: "Because Chris Ross has this problem. He wants to hold onto the past... and he doesn't want to look to the future."

That line draws a different kind of reaction.

Not just boos.

Confusion.

Tension.

At commentary, both men sound thrown.

John Phillips: "What is he talking about?"

Mark Bravo: "I don't know, but I don't like the sound of it."

Jett reaches into the front of his robe and pulls out a photo.

The second he does, the crowd noise shifts again.

The hard camera zooms in.

Jett holds the picture up beside his face, then turns it toward the lens so the audience can see it.

Maxwell Jett: "You see this?"

He holds it higher.

Maxwell Jett: "This photo is a picture of Chris Ross' dead ex, Lauren."

The building erupts in furious boos.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on!"

Mark Bravo: "No. No, no, no. He did not."

Jett keeps talking over the outrage.

Maxwell Jett: "I got this picture from Chris' locker room. That's right. From his locker room. Where he keeps it every single show."

He taps the photo with one finger.

Maxwell Jett: "Staying stuck in the past."

The boos grow even louder now, the crowd fully turning rabid as Jett holds the photo up again, unconcerned, almost delighted by the hatred coming at him.

Maxwell Jett: "And my question is simple."

He shrugs dramatically.

Maxwell Jett: "How is that fair to Valentina?"

The audience nearly drowns him out.

Maxwell Jett: "What?"

He spreads his arms.

Maxwell Jett: "I'm the bad guy for pointing out the obvious?"

John Phillips: "This is absolutely disgusting behavior from Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "This isn't trash talk anymore. This is just rotten."

Jett lowers the picture and stares toward the entrance.

Maxwell Jett: "You know what? I'm gonna help Chris Ross right now."

The crowd continues booing, but Jett powers through it.

Maxwell Jett: "I'm gonna help him forget the past..."

He lifts the photo with both hands.

Maxwell Jett: "And learn to appreciate what he has..."

His face hardens.

Maxwell Jett: "Not what he had."

And with that--

He rips the picture in half.

The crowd erupts with absolute venom.

Jett looks down at the torn pieces, then rips them again.

And again.

And again.

Little scraps flutter to the mat around his boots as the audience unleashes a wall of hatred at him.

John Phillips: "This man has crossed every line imaginable!"

Mark Bravo: "Chris Ross is going to kill him!"

Jett drops the shredded pieces to the canvas and lifts the microphone again, ready to say more--

but he never gets the chance.

BLACK FLAME hits.

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The building detonates.

There is no slow build.

No dramatic pause.

No measured entrance for the champion.

Chris Ross *bursts* through the curtain like a man no longer interested in ceremony, the UTA Championship clutched in one hand and pure hatred written all over his face.

John Phillips: "HERE COMES ROSS!"

Mark Bravo: "OH, HE IS PISSED!"

Ross doesn't stop at the stage.

Doesn't pose.

Doesn't acknowledge the crowd.

He storms straight down the ramp at a near full run, eyes locked entirely on the ring and the man inside it. His jaw is set, nostrils flaring, every stride carrying the kind of violent purpose that tells the whole world Maxwell Jett has finally gotten exactly what he asked for.

Behind him, Valentina Blaze comes flying out from the back, shouting after him, trying to catch up.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris! Chris!"

But Ross never looks back.

John Phillips: "Valentina is chasing after him, but I don't think there is any stopping Chris Ross right now!"

Mark Bravo: "He just watched Maxwell Jett tear up that picture in the middle of the ring! There is no calming this man down now!"

Inside the ring, Maxwell Jett has gone from smug to suddenly alert. The microphone drops from his hand to the mat as he backs up a step, the scraps of the torn photograph still scattered at his feet.

Ross is halfway down the ramp now.

Then three-quarters.

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Then almost there.

The champion never breaks stride.

As he reaches ringside, Ross suddenly cocks his arm back and *launches* the UTA Championship over the top rope into the ring like a weapon.

The belt spins end over end through the air--

and Maxwell Jett has to leap out of the way at the last second as it crashes onto the canvas near him.

John Phillips: "ROSS JUST THREW THE TITLE INTO THE RING!"

Mark Bravo: "HE ALMOST TOOK MAXWELL JETT'S HEAD OFF WITH IT!"

The crowd is thunder.

Ross dives under the bottom rope and slides into the ring like a missile, popping up immediately and charging straight for Jett with murder in his eyes.

John Phillips: "AND NOW ROSS IS GOING FOR HIM!"

But Maxwell Jett, to his credit, reacts instantly.

He drops flat to the mat and slides out under the bottom rope on the far side just before Ross can get his hands on him.

Ross lunges toward the ropes, reaching for him, but Jett hits the floor and stumbles backward, both hands thrown up in outrage.

Maxwell Jett: "HEY! HEY! DO YOUR DAMN JOB!"

He points furiously at the referee from ringside.

Maxwell Jett: "DO YOUR DAMN JOB!"

Mark Bravo: "Oh, now he wants rules! Now he wants order!"

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett lit the match, poured the gasoline, and now he's shocked that Chris Ross wants to set him on fire!"

Ross is pacing inside the ring now like a wild animal, pointing down at Jett and shouting at him to get back in. His chest is heaving, his hands flexing open and shut, every part of him begging for the bell to ring so he

can finally unload.

Valentina reaches ringside and stops near the corner, breathing hard, watching the chaos unfold. She doesn't try to talk Chris down now. Not after what happened. Not after what Jett did.

Inside the ring, the referee steps in front of Ross, trying to get some semblance of control back before this championship match fully erupts before it can officially begin.

Outside, Jett straightens his jacket, slicks his hair back with one hand, and keeps jawing at the official like *he* is the wronged party in all of this.

Maxwell Jett: "Control your champion!"

The crowd buries him in boos.

John Phillips: "This atmosphere is combustible. Chris Ross is ready to explode, Maxwell Jett is trying to slither around the consequences of his own actions, and somehow this UTA Championship match still hasn't officially started!"

Mark Bravo: "Good. Let it breathe. Let Max sit in it for a second. Because once that bell rings, I think Chris Ross is gonna try to tear his soul loose."

Ross wipes sweat from his brow with one hand and stares daggers through the ropes at Jett, who is now slowly circling the outside, buying time, yelling at the referee, and trying his best to turn the champion's rage into a weapon against him.

Valentina Blaze stays at ringside near the corner, one hand resting lightly on the apron, breathing still not fully settled from chasing Chris Ross down the ramp. Her eyes never leave him now.

And there is real concern there.

Not fear of what Maxwell Jett might do.

Fear of what Chris might do if he gives Jett exactly what he wants.

Inside the ring, Chris Ross is pacing like a loaded weapon, every step tight, every breath sharp, eyes locked completely on Maxwell Jett as the challenger circles the floor outside.

John Phillips: "Valentina looks deeply concerned here, and you can understand why. Chris Ross is furious, and Maxwell Jett is still trying to manipulate every second of this situation."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, because Max doesn't have to beat Chris in a fistfight right now. He just has to keep Chris angry enough to beat himself."

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Jett slows his circling as he reaches the side of the ring nearest Valentina.

He sees her.

And a smug little grin spreads across his face.

Valentina sees that look immediately and begins backing away, eyes narrowing, not about to give him a free shot verbally or otherwise.

Maxwell Jett: "Valentina..."

He says her name like an invitation.

Like a dare.

Like he is already proud of himself for whatever comes next.

John Phillips: "Oh no. Now Maxwell Jett's attention turns to Valentina Blaze again."

Mark Bravo: "He just cannot help himself. He keeps poking at the same wound over and over."

Valentina backs another step away from him, keeping distance, clearly not interested in letting this become any more personal than it already has.

Jett tilts his head and crooks his fingers, smug as can be.

Maxwell Jett: "Come on."

He laughs under his breath.

Maxwell Jett: "What, no pep talk for your boy now?"

The crowd showers him with boos.

Inside the ring, Chris Ross sees it.

Sees Jett near Valentina.

Sees the grin.

Sees the gesture.

And that is all it takes.

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Ross suddenly explodes forward, shooting through the ropes to the outside in one violent burst, hitting the floor between Maxwell Jett and Valentina like a missile.

John Phillips: "ROSS TO THE FLOOR!"

Mark Bravo: "HE WASN'T LETTING MAX GET ANY CLOSER TO HER!"

Valentina jumps back at the sudden movement as Ross lands in front of her, eyes blazing, body turned toward Jett like a guard dog finally off the chain.

And Maxwell Jett, seeing exactly what he wanted, reacts instantly.

He spins and scrambles away, diving under the bottom rope and rolling right back into the ring before Ross can reach him.

John Phillips: "And Maxwell Jett runs back into the ring!"

Mark Bravo: "That little snake! He baited Ross right where he wanted him!"

Jett pops up inside the ropes with that same infuriating grin, already gesturing at the referee again like he is somehow the victim.

Maxwell Jett: "Count him out! Count him out! Come on!"

The crowd rains down hatred.

Outside, Chris turns and glares up at the ring, chest heaving, both fists clenched so tightly it looks like he might break his own fingers. Valentina stands just behind him, concern all over her face now because she knows exactly what just happened.

Maxwell Jett got him again.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett is weaponizing every emotion in this building right now. He got near Valentina, knew Chris Ross would react, and used it to buy himself more control over the situation."

Mark Bravo: "And the crazy part is, it's working. Chris wants to fight him so badly that Max keeps finding little ways to stay one step ahead."

The referee leans through the ropes, motioning for Ross to get back inside so the championship match can finally begin, while Jett stands in the center of the ring with his hands spread and that arrogant grin still plastered across his face.

Valentina steps in front of Chris Ross on the outside, both hands up, trying once more to get him to breathe,

to focus, to stop giving Maxwell Jett exactly what he wants.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris. Chris, look at me."

Ross is still glaring at the ring, chest heaving, every muscle in his body tight with rage, but Valentina plants herself there anyway, refusing to let him storm off blind.

Valentina Blaze: "He's baiting you. That's all this is. He wants you like this."

Chris drags a hand over his face, trying and failing to cool down.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze once again trying to talk sense into the champion."

Mark Bravo: "And she's right. She's absolutely right. But man, I don't know how much sense is left in Chris Ross right now after everything Jett has done tonight."

Valentina keeps talking, trying to steady him.

Valentina Blaze: "Beat him in the ring. Not like this. Not on his terms."

Chris finally looks at her for a split second--

and that is when Valentina's eyes drift past him toward the ring.

Her expression changes immediately.

Inside the ropes, Maxwell Jett is standing there with the most smug, rotten grin imaginable. He sees Valentina looking his way and raises one hand in a little wave.

Then--

He blows her a kiss.

The crowd erupts in furious boos.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on!"

Mark Bravo: "He just cannot stop! He cannot stop!"

Valentina's face hardens instantly.

Chris sees it.

Sees where she's looking.

Turns.

And completely comes unglued.

Chris Ross: "YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Ross breaks around Valentina and dives under the bottom rope back into the ring in one violent motion, sliding across the canvas with bad intentions written all over him.

John Phillips: "ROSS IS LOSING IT AGAIN!"

Mark Bravo: "AND MAX KNEW EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS DOING!"

But Maxwell Jett is already moving.

The second Ross comes in, Jett drops flat, slips under the bottom rope on the opposite side, and rolls right back out to the floor, drawing a deafening chorus of boos from the crowd.

John Phillips: "And once again Maxwell Jett bails out!"

Mark Bravo: "That slimy little genius! He keeps pulling Ross out of position over and over!"

Ross pops back to his feet in the ring and storms toward the ropes, shouting down at Jett, who is already backing away on the floor with both hands up and a huge grin on his face like he just won another round without ever taking a punch.

Maxwell Jett: "What?! What?!"

He points at the referee again, acting outraged.

Maxwell Jett: "Control him! Do your job!"

The crowd drowns him in boos.

Valentina stands outside the ring now, frustrated, concerned, and fully aware that Jett is driving this entire opening sequence exactly where he wants it. Inside, Chris is pacing again, snarling through the ropes, while Jett circles the floor with the confidence of a man who still hasn't had to actually stand and fight yet.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett continues to manipulate this situation masterfully, but he is also playing with fire. Every time he slips away, Chris Ross gets angrier. Every time he pushes another button, this becomes more dangerous."

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Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and eventually one of those little games is gonna run out of room. When that happens, Max better pray he can wrestle as good as he talks."

Maxwell Jett keeps circling the floor on the outside, one hand running back through his hair, the other thrown out in disgust as the crowd hammers him with boos from all directions.

Maxwell Jett: "Get him back!"

He points wildly at Chris Ross in the ring.

Maxwell Jett: "Come on! Get him back! I'm trying to have a damn title match here!"

The audience drowns him in hatred.

John Phillips: "That is rich coming from Maxwell Jett, who has spent the last several minutes doing everything possible to avoid actually starting this championship match."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but technically he's got a point. Ross is so amped up right now that Max doesn't even have to wrestle him--he just has to keep him from getting his hands on him."

Inside the ring, Chris Ross is stalking near the ropes like a predator pacing the fence, shouting down at Jett to get back in and fight. Every time Jett gestures at Valentina, every time he mouths something smug, Ross takes another step forward.

The referee finally moves in and plants both hands against the champion's chest, shoving him back as hard as he can.

Referee: "Back up! Back up, Chris! Let me do my job!"

Ross resists for a moment, still staring through the ropes at Jett, but the official keeps pushing, forcing him backward toward the center of the ring inch by inch.

John Phillips: "The referee is trying everything he can to create enough space for this match to finally begin."

Mark Bravo: "And good luck with that, because Chris Ross looks like he wants the first move in this title defense to be homicide."

Outside, Jett nods like he's finally satisfied.

He wipes his boots on the apron with exaggerated care, glancing up through the ropes to make sure Ross is still being held back.

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Then he reaches for the middle rope and starts to climb onto the apron.

The crowd buzzes, sensing they may finally be getting somewhere.

John Phillips: "It looks like Maxwell Jett may finally be ready to step back into the ring--"

But the second Jett starts to thread himself through the ropes, Chris Ross explodes again.

He shoves past the referee with a violent burst, nearly knocking the official sideways, and charges the ropes with murder in his eyes.

John Phillips: "ROSS BREAKS LOOSE AGAIN!"

Mark Bravo: "OH, HERE WE GO!"

Jett sees it instantly and drops right back off the apron to the floor before Ross can reach him.

The crowd unleashes another tidal wave of boos.

Mark Bravo: "And Max drops back down! Again!"

Ross grabs the top rope and leans through, shouting down at him, one arm extended as if he might try to snatch him up from the floor itself. Jett backs away, palms out, yelling at the referee again like he's the aggrieved party.

Maxwell Jett: "Are you kidding me?! Control your champion!"

The referee immediately turns on Ross now, pointing a stern finger right in his face.

Referee: "Chris! That's enough! I am warning you right now!"

Ross turns on the official, still seething, still breathing fire, but the warning lands enough to pause him for a moment.

Referee: "You want this match? Then let me start this match! One more time and you're gonna leave me no choice!"

John Phillips: "A very direct warning to Chris Ross from the referee."

Mark Bravo: "And that's fair. I get why Ross is furious, but at some point he has got to channel it. Because right now Max is winning the opening moments without ever taking a punch."

Ross stands there near the ropes, chest heaving, eyes locked on Jett with an intensity that could melt steel.

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On the outside, Jett adjusts his wrist tape and smirks up at him, completely aware that every second this takes only digs deeper under the champion's skin.

At ringside, Valentina watches with visible concern, knowing the next decision Chris makes may set the tone for the entire main event.

Maxwell Jett begins circling around the ring once more, taking his time, milking every ounce of control he can out of the moment as the crowd rains hatred down on him from every angle.

Inside the ropes, Chris Ross paces like a man on the edge of snapping completely, jaw tight, shoulders rising and falling with every heated breath. The referee stays between him and the ropes as best he can, one hand out toward the champion, eyes never leaving the situation.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett continuing to dictate the pace before this match even starts, and Chris Ross is barely holding himself together right now."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and that's the scary part. Chris doesn't just want to beat him. He wants to tear him in half."

Jett reaches the steel steps and begins climbing them slowly, eyes locked on Ross the whole way up.

He gets to the top step and pauses.

Then steps onto the apron.

The second he does, he looks through the ropes into the ring, takes one hand off the top cable, and starts waving Ross backward like he's shooing away some wild animal.

Maxwell Jett: "Back him up."

He points at the referee.

Maxwell Jett: "Come on, keep him back. Do your job."

The crowd boos him loudly.

John Phillips: "Still directing traffic, still talking, still doing everything possible to keep this match on his terms."

Mark Bravo: "And the worst part is he hasn't been wrong yet. Every little delay, every little gesture, every little smirk has gotten another rise out of Ross."

Inside the ring, Chris keeps pacing, unable to stand still, unable to fully calm down. He looks like he is

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physically restraining himself from charging the ropes again. His hands open and close at his sides, his stare never leaving Jett for even a heartbeat.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross wants to explode here. You can see it all over him."

Mark Bravo: "Wants to? He's been trying to explode for the last five minutes. The only thing holding him together right now is that warning from the referee."

The official turns and motions for Ross to stay back one more time. Ross doesn't like it, but he does give a step. Then another. Not much. Just enough.

Jett nods like that's exactly what should be happening.

Then, finally, Maxwell Jett steps through the ropes.

The crowd roars.

Not because they like him.

Because at long last, the fight feels close.

Jett comes in cautiously, eyes flicking from Ross to the referee and back again, posture guarded enough to show he knows the danger he's stepping into. But the bravado never leaves him. Not for a second. Even now, with the champion staring holes through him, Jett carries himself like he still believes the ring belongs to him.

John Phillips: "And Maxwell Jett is finally in the ring."

Mark Bravo: "Cautious, yeah. But look at him. He's still got that swagger. He still believes he's the smartest guy in the building."

Jett slowly backs into his corner, never fully turning away from Ross, one hand on the top rope, the other adjusting his wrist tape. He flashes that same smug little grin, a look that says he knows exactly what he's done to the champion tonight and that he has zero regrets.

Across from him, Chris Ross stands in his corner only in the loosest possible sense. He's not settling in. He's not resetting. He's just waiting for permission.

Waiting for the bell.

Waiting to finally put hands on the man who pushed him too far.

John Phillips: "There is an incredible amount of bad blood in the air right now. The disrespect from last

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week. The insults tonight. The comments about Valentina Blaze. The torn photograph. All of it has brought us here."

Mark Bravo: "And now there's nowhere left to run. Max got in the ring. Ross is standing across from him. The title's on the line. The games stop the second that bell rings."

The referee looks from one man to the other, understanding full well the kind of powder keg he is standing between.

Ross never blinks.

Jett rolls his shoulders, still smirking, still confident, still acting like he has this under control.

The referee takes one last look at both men and then moves toward the center of the ring, trying to impose some final order on a situation that has been hanging by a thread for the last several minutes.

Maxwell Jett remains in his corner, one arm draped lazily over the top rope, smirk still in place, though his eyes are much sharper now. The bravado is still there, but so is the caution. He knows exactly how dangerous Chris Ross is at this moment.

Across the ring, Ross stands like a coiled spring, chest rising and falling, every muscle in his body tense, every ounce of his focus fixed on the challenger.

John Phillips: "This has been one of the most combustible title match buildups we have seen in a long time, and now we are finally seconds away from the UTA Championship main event."

Mark Bravo: "And the crazy thing is, after all the talk, all the disrespect, all the games, Maxwell Jett still has that look in his eyes like he thinks he's already won."

The ring announcer steps forward, microphone in hand, while the crowd keeps buzzing with anticipation.

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen... the following contest is scheduled for one fall..."

The crowd reacts loudly.

Ring Announcer: "And it is for the **UTA CHAMPIONSHIP!**"

The arena swells.

Jett subtly straightens his posture in his corner, chin lifting just a little higher as though even hearing the title announced gives him fresh energy.

Ross does not move.

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Ring Announcer: "Introducing first... the challenger..."

The boos start before the name is even said.

Ring Announcer: "From Los Angeles, California... weighing in at 219 pounds... he is Maxwell... 'Max'... Jett!"

Jett steps out of the corner just enough to throw one arm out, soaking in the hatred with a smug grin, then points at himself and mouths *best in the world* toward the hard camera.

Mark Bravo: "He really believes all of this. Every word. Every pose. Every second."

John Phillips: "Belief has never been Maxwell Jett's problem. Tonight, proving it against Chris Ross is the issue."

Jett eases back into the corner as the announcer turns toward the champion's side. The crowd volume rises even more.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent..."

The roar grows.

Ring Announcer: "From Philadelphia, Pennsylvania... weighing in at 238 pounds... he is the reigning... defending... **UTA CHAMPION...**"

Ross steps forward now, the title already in the referee's hands, his stare still fixed on Jett like the introduction is a formality he would rather skip.

Ring Announcer: "CHRIS... ROSS!"

The arena erupts.

Ross does not raise his arms. Does not play to the crowd. Does not posture.

He just stands there.

Boiling.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross is all business tonight, and that business is violence."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but it's gotta be controlled violence. That's the whole thing. Max has spent the entire night trying to turn Ross into a man fighting stupid."

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The referee lifts the UTA Championship high in the center of the ring, turning once so every side of the arena can see it.

The crowd roars again.

Then he hands the belt off and turns back to both men.

Referee: "I want a clean fight. Obey my commands at all times. You understand me?"

Ross says nothing.

He just nods once.

Jett half-smirks and raises both hands as if he has been the picture of professionalism all evening.

Maxwell Jett: "As long as he can control himself."

The crowd boos immediately.

Ross takes a step forward.

The referee quickly puts a hand up.

Referee: "Back it up! Back it up!"

John Phillips: "One last little jab there from Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "Because of course. Because why stop being a pest now?"

Ross backs into his corner by half a step, barely containing himself. Jett rolls his neck once, bouncing lightly, suddenly looking much more like a man preparing to wrestle than a man preparing to talk.

The referee checks both men one last time.

Then looks to the timekeeper.

Then calls for the bell.

DING DING DING!

The crowd explodes.

And Chris Ross immediately charges out of the corner like a man shot from a cannon.

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John Phillips: "ROSS RIGHT OUT OF THE GATE!"

Jett reacts fast, ducking low and retreating to the side just before Ross can flatten him with the first lunge. Ross turns sharply and comes after him again, backing Jett into the ropes before the challenger quickly covers up and slips sideways along the cables.

Mark Bravo: "Chris is wasting absolutely no time!"

Ross throws a huge right hand--

Jett narrowly ducks under it.

Ross spins through--

and Jett immediately bails through the ropes to the apron, drawing another round of boos from the crowd.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett already trying to create distance!"

Mark Bravo: "He survived the opening blast, but barely!"

Ross storms toward him again, but the referee jumps in, forcing the champion to halt long enough for Jett to hop back down to the floor for a moment and regroup. Jett points at his own head from ringside, mocking the idea that Ross is too emotional to finish the job.

John Phillips: "The challenger survives the first storm, but you can see how dangerous this is already."

Mark Bravo: "Max got cute before the bell. Now he's gotta actually deal with the man he provoked."

Inside the ring, Ross paces once, twice, glaring down at Jett with the kind of fury that says the next time the challenger steps through those ropes, there may not be another escape.

Maxwell Jett lands on the floor and immediately starts backing away from the ring again, one hand raised toward the referee, the other tapping the side of his own head as if to remind everyone that he is still the smartest man in the building.

Inside, Chris Ross stalks toward the ropes, breathing hard, eyes burning straight through him.

John Phillips: "And Maxwell Jett is continuing the cat-and-mouse game here in the opening moments of this title match."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, because Ross wants a fight, but Max wants a marathon. He wants the champion angry, sloppy, and tired before they ever get to a real exchange."

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Jett circles around the outside, never stopping, never giving Ross a clean angle. Every few steps he looks up into the ring and throws out another little smirk, another little shrug, another little expression that says *what are you gonna do about it?*

Ross snarls and paces with him from inside, tracking every movement like he's trying to will the ropes out of existence.

John Phillips: "You can already see what this is doing to Chris Ross. He is burning energy. He is staying heated. And he is being denied the one thing he wants most right now, which is to get his hands on Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the whole point. Max doesn't need to win the first minute with offense. He just needs to make Ross waste it."

Jett comes around the far side of the ring and slows just long enough to wave mockingly toward Valentina Blaze at ringside before continuing on.

Valentina glares at him, arms folded, clearly seeing exactly what he is doing.

Ross sees it too.

And that only tightens the fury in his face.

John Phillips: "Every movement from Jett is calculated. Even where he chooses to walk, even where he chooses to look."

Mark Bravo: "He's not just making Ross chase. He's making Ross think about everything except wrestling."

The referee leans through the ropes and starts the count.

Referee: "One! Two!"

Jett throws both hands up like he's being deeply inconvenienced by the entire process, then casually climbs back onto the apron. He steps one leg through the ropes--

Ross lunges at him again.

Jett yanks the leg right back out and drops to the floor with another grin as the crowd showers him with boos.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, come on!"

John Phillips: "And again Jett teases coming back in only to pull away at the last instant!"

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Ross slams both hands against the top rope and shouts at him to get in the ring. The veins in his neck are standing out now. He is no longer pacing with purpose. He is pacing with agitation.

John Phillips: "This is exactly the kind of thing Maxwell Jett wanted. The champion is not thinking clearly."

Mark Bravo: "Nope. Ross is chasing emotions, not openings. And that is dangerous against a guy like Jett."

Jett begins walking again, this time a little faster, drawing Ross with him one more lap around the ring from the inside. Ross follows, step for step, glaring down through the ropes, practically vibrating with frustration.

Valentina can be seen at ringside shaking her head, clearly urging Chris to slow down, even if he isn't looking at her now.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze can see it. She knows what this is costing Chris Ross right now."

Mark Bravo: "And the crazy thing is, Max hasn't even had to touch him yet. Ross is doing the work for him."

Jett finally stops near the corner, wipes his boots on the apron again with exaggerated care, and climbs back up. This time he ducks through one rope, then another, moving carefully, eyes always on Ross, who is now crouched and ready to spring from mid-ring.

The crowd rises, sensing maybe--finally--they are about to get contact.

Jett gets one foot inside.

Then both.

He backs into the ropes immediately, palms up, telling the referee to hold Ross back.

Maxwell Jett: "Easy! Easy! He's out of control!"

The referee again steps between them.

Ross takes a step left, trying to peer around him.

Jett mirrors it. Still smirking. Still talking.

Maxwell Jett: "What's wrong, champ? Little tired already?"

The crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "And now the verbal jabs continue."

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Mark Bravo: "Because Max can see it. Ross is breathing heavier. Ross is frustrated. Ross is swinging at ghosts right now."

Ross twitches forward--

the referee has to brace again--

and Jett slips sideways out through the ropes one more time, dropping safely back to the apron and then to the floor before Ross can reach him.

The boos get even louder.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett is stretching this opening to the breaking point!"

Mark Bravo: "And Ross is letting him! That's the part that matters! Every second Chris spends angry is another second Max gets closer to the match he wants!"

Ross turns in a tight circle in the ring, runs both hands over his head, and pounds the top turnbuckle once in disgust. He is not calm. He is not composed. He is being dragged exactly where Jett wants him--deeper into the emotion, farther away from the title match itself.

Outside, Jett smiles to himself and starts another slow walk around the ring, knowing the champion is following.

Maxwell Jett continues his slow prowl around ringside, basking in the venom from the crowd and never once looking rattled by it. If anything, the hatred seems to sharpen him.

Inside the ring, Chris Ross keeps stalking along the ropes, eyes locked on him, shoulders pumping with every breath. He looks like he wants to tear the ring apart just to remove the barriers between them.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett is still playing with fire here, and sooner or later he may find himself with nowhere left to run."

Mark Bravo: "He's getting awful brave again. That usually means he thinks he sees another opening."

Jett turns the corner on the outside--

and once again starts heading toward Valentina Blaze.

The crowd reacts immediately, sensing exactly what he is doing and absolutely hating him for it.

Valentina sees him coming this time and doesn't wait.

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She starts yelling at him the second he gets within earshot, one hand pointing, the other still hovering protectively near the shoulder that has already been through a war tonight.

Valentina Blaze: "You're a piece of trash, Max!"

Jett keeps coming.

Smiling.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Valentina keeps backing away as she shouts at him, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of getting too close but not about to let him talk his way around what he's done either.

Valentina Blaze: "You think you're clever? You think this makes you tough? You're pathetic!"

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze unloading on Maxwell Jett, and rightfully so after everything he has said and done tonight!"

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but she's still backing away, because she knows this guy doesn't walk up to people unless he thinks it helps him somehow."

Jett lifts both hands, all mock innocence, but his grin says the exact opposite.

Maxwell Jett: "Whoa, whoa, whoa... I'm just trying to talk."

The crowd buries him in boos.

Inside the ring, Chris Ross sees every second of it.

He stops pacing.

His whole body changes.

Then he surges forward.

Ross throws his upper body through the ropes from the apron side, reaching out with everything he has--

and finally gets a hand full of Maxwell Jett's hair.

The crowd absolutely explodes.

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John Phillips: "ROSS GOT HIM! ROSS FINALLY GOT A HOLD OF HIM!"

Mark Bravo: "OH, NOW MAX IS IN TROUBLE!"

Jett's smugness vanishes in an instant.

He jerks backward, eyes wide, both hands flying up as Chris keeps a death grip on his hair and yanks him violently toward the apron.

Maxwell Jett: "AH! HEY! HEY! LET GO! LET GO!"

Jett starts kicking frantically, legs flailing, trying to twist free as Ross hauls him in closer one brutal inch at a time. The challenger's whole body language flips from arrogant control to genuine panic now that the champion has finally, finally gotten his hands on him.

John Phillips: "After all the running, all the baiting, all the mind games, Chris Ross has finally gotten hold of Maxwell Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Max! All that big talk just turned into flailing and screaming!"

Ross snarls through the ropes, one fist buried in Jett's hair, dragging him closer toward the apron as Jett keeps yelling and kicking, boots scraping wildly against the floor.

The referee rushes over, shouting for a break, but for the first time all match, Chris Ross is no longer chasing Maxwell Jett.

He has him.

And the entire arena can feel the violence about to erupt.

Chris Ross keeps that fist knotted in Maxwell Jett's hair and yanks him forward again, dragging a shriek out of the challenger as the crowd comes unglued.

Maxwell Jett: "AH! REF! REF! COME ON!"

Jett's boots scrape helplessly against the floor as he tries to twist away, both hands clawing at Ross's wrist, but Chris is beyond hearing any of it now. His face is twisted with rage, teeth bared, every ounce of the night's humiliation and grief and fury finally having a place to go.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross has finally, finally caught him!"

Mark Bravo: "And Max has nobody to blame but himself! He kept poking, kept running, kept needling, and now the bill is due!"

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The referee is on the spot immediately, shouting over the noise.

Referee: "Chris! Let go! Let him in the ring! Chris, break it!"

Ross does not break it.

Instead, he jerks Jett forward one more time--

and blasts him with a clubbing forearm across the upper back and neck.

The crowd roars.

Jett lets out a yelp and nearly folds in half.

John Phillips: "There's the first real shot from the champion!"

Mark Bravo: "And he hit him like he was trying to cave him in!"

Ross drags Jett up toward the apron, still by the hair, and hammers him again--this time with a right hand to the side of the head that snaps Jett sideways against the ring edge.

Maxwell Jett: "AHH! STOP! REF!"

John Phillips: "Chris Ross unloading on Maxwell Jett at ringside!"

The referee keeps warning him, leaning over the ropes, but the crowd is drowning it all out now. Valentina Blaze has stepped farther back, hands over her mouth for a moment, not because she feels bad for Jett but because she knows there is absolutely no stopping Chris now.

Ross grabs a handful of Jett's tights and the back of his neck and finally hauls him up onto the apron, where Max flops awkwardly under the bottom rope trying to escape.

He almost makes it.

Almost.

But Ross slides back into the ring and catches him before he can slither all the way through, stomping him hard across the shoulder blades as Jett's chest hits the canvas.

John Phillips: "And Ross is not giving him a second to breathe!"

Mark Bravo: "This is what Chris wanted from the opening bell! He wanted one clean chance to get his hands on him, and now Max is drowning!"

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Jett scrambles on all fours, trying to crawl toward the far side of the ring, but Ross is on him like a storm. He grabs the waistband, jerks Jett backward, turns him over, and rains down right hands.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five vicious punches, each one drawing a louder reaction from the crowd than the last.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross hammering away!"

Mark Bravo: "And every one of those has a week's worth of anger behind it! Maybe two!"

Jett covers up desperately, rolling his shoulders and forearms over his face, but Ross just switches angles and drives a knee into the ribs, then another, before dragging him up by the head and sending him hard into the corner.

Jett slams back-first into the buckles and staggers forward--

right into a huge lariat from Ross that flips him inside out.

The building erupts.

John Phillips: "What a clothesline by the champion!"

Mark Bravo: "Max just got turned inside out! That's what happens when the games stop and the fight starts!"

Jett crashes to the mat and immediately tries to roll out again, instinct taking over, but Ross grabs his ankle before he can get there and drags him back toward center ring like dead weight.

Jett claws at the mat, panicked now, no smugness left, only survival.

Maxwell Jett: "No! No! Get off me!"

Ross yanks him up and buries a headbutt into his face.

Jett crumples back into the ropes, stunned.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross is overwhelming Maxwell Jett!"

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Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but watch the gas tank, JP! This is exactly what Max wanted too! He wanted Ross furious and burning fuel!"

That note hangs in the air for a reason.

Ross is dominating, yes.

But he is also not pacing himself.

He is throwing everything with bad intentions and very little thought.

He whips Jett across the ring with violent force. Max hits the buckles hard and stumbles out.

Ross charges in again--

but this time Jett drops low at the last instant and sends Ross shoulder-first into the ring post.

The crowd gasps.

John Phillips: "Jett moved!"

Mark Bravo: "There it is! That's the opening Max was waiting for!"

Ross hits the post with a sickening clang and recoils backward, clutching at his shoulder for just a moment. It is not enough to stop him completely, but it is enough to slow him. Enough to interrupt the storm.

And Maxwell Jett, ever the opportunist, wastes no time.

He pops up from the mat, still dazed, still hurting, but suddenly very much back in the fight. He rushes forward and drives a chop block into the back of Ross's knee, dropping the champion to one leg.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett cuts Ross down!"

Mark Bravo: "And now the gears turn. The cat-and-mouse paid off. Ross got his hands on him, but he spent a lot doing it!"

Jett grabs the top rope to steady himself, sucks air into his lungs, and then stomps the back of Ross's leg again. And again. And then a sharp kick to the side of the shoulder that just hit the post.

Boos rain down immediately.

John Phillips: "Now Jett goes to work on the damage!"

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Mark Bravo: "Because that's what smart wrestlers do. Ross fought angry. Jett fought dirty and patient. And now the match finally starts looking like one instead of a mugging."

Ross pushes up to one knee, glaring through the pain, and Jett responds by grabbing a side headlock and snapping him over into a takeover, squeezing tight, forcing the champion to work from underneath for the first time all night.

The crowd boos hard, but Jett just grins through his exhaustion, face flushed, hair a mess, finally looking like a man who escaped the fire and found water.

Maxwell Jett: "Breathe, champ. Breathe."

John Phillips: "Listen to him. Still taunting. Still talking."

Mark Bravo: "Because now he's got what he wanted: Ross angry, Ross off balance, and Ross having to fight his way back under Max's pace."

Ross plants a hand on the canvas and starts to rise, muscles straining, the crowd rallying behind him as Jett squeezes tighter and tries to grind the champion down before he can rebuild momentum.

Maxwell Jett keeps the side headlock clamped on tight, cheek pressed against the side of Chris Ross's head, body angled just right to make the champion carry all of the weight while the crowd rains boos down on him.

Ross is on one knee, then both, one hand on Jett's wrist, the other pressed into the canvas, trying to build a base and fight through the squeeze.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett survived the storm and now he is doing exactly what he set out to do--making Chris Ross work, making Chris Ross carry him, and trying to drain whatever the opening explosion didn't already take out of the champion."

Mark Bravo: "And don't forget that shoulder into the post and that chop block to the knee. Max isn't just slowing him down. He's picking spots now."

Jett cranks the hold tighter and yanks Ross back down to a hip, grinding the side of his jaw against Ross's temple just to be a little uglier about it. Ross snarls and tries to shove him off, but Jett leans his weight lower and tighter, forcing Ross to carry him again.

Maxwell Jett: "What happened, champ? I thought you were gonna kill me."

The crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "Still talking. Still needling. That has been Maxwell Jett's entire strategy tonight."

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Mark Bravo: "And right now it's working. He's got Ross fighting mad and fighting tired."

Ross plants one boot.

Then the other.

The crowd rises with him as he powers up to his feet with Jett still hanging on the side of his head. Ross throws a heavy elbow into Jett's ribs. Then another. Jett grimaces but keeps the hold. Ross fires a third elbow and this one knocks Jett's grip loose just enough.

Ross shoves him off toward the ropes.

Jett rebounds--

and Ross swings for a huge lariat.

Jett ducks under it.

Ross turns--

and Jett clips the bad knee with a low dropkick from the side.

Ross buckles and drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "Jett right back to the leg!"

Mark Bravo: "Because he knows if he takes away the base, he takes away the power."

Jett pops up fast and hits the ropes, coming back with a running kick to the shoulder that slammed into the post. Ross recoils and grabs at it instinctively, which is exactly what Jett wanted. Max immediately snatches the wrist and drags the arm across the top rope, dropping his weight down on it and wrenching the shoulder backward.

Referee: "Break it! Come on, Max! Break!"

Jett holds until four, then releases with a smirk and puts both hands up like he's the most compliant man on earth.

Mark Bravo: "That's the stuff that drives you crazy. He knows exactly how far he can push it."

Ross steps out of the ropes and swings a right hand, but Jett is already gone, slipping behind him and smashing a forearm into the back of the shoulder. Ross staggers forward. Jett hooks the arm, twists through, and drops into a sharp arm wringer that yanks Ross down to the mat.

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John Phillips: "Now Maxwell Jett is really zeroing in on that shoulder."

Mark Bravo: "He's got the knee softened, the shoulder softened, and that means every comeback from Ross gets a little harder to build."

Jett stands over Ross and stomps the shoulder once.

Then the knee.

Then the shoulder again.

He drags Ross up by the arm and whips him into the corner. Ross hits hard and steps out unsteadily. Jett charges in with a running uppercut that snaps Ross's head back, then quickly climbs to the second rope and rains down punches while the crowd counts along more out of habit than enthusiasm.

Crowd: "ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR! FIVE!"

Ross suddenly catches him around the hips.

The crowd roars.

Jett's eyes widen.

Mark Bravo: "Uh oh!"

Ross walks him out of the corner--

but the bad knee buckles just enough.

Just enough.

Jett slips free behind him, shoves Ross shoulder-first into the turnbuckles again, then rolls him up from behind for a quick count.

Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Ross powers out.

John Phillips: "First near-fall of the match!"

Mark Bravo: "And that's what all the setup gets you. Max is making Chris vulnerable to anything now."

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Ross sits up fast, furious, but Jett is already on the attack again. He hits the ropes and drives a knee strike into the side of Ross's head, then floats into another cover.

Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Ross kicks out again, this time with more force, shoving Jett a half-step off him.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross still has plenty left, but Maxwell Jett is piling on here."

Mark Bravo: "He has to. He knows Ross can change a match with one big burst. The whole trick is making sure that burst never comes clean."

Jett drags Ross to his feet and talks right in his face.

Maxwell Jett: "This is your champion?"

Boos everywhere.

He slaps Ross across the head.

Ross's face turns.

Then slowly turns back.

The crowd senses it instantly.

John Phillips: "Uh oh."

Jett slaps him again.

Maxwell Jett: "Come on, Chris. Think about the picture."

That does it.

Ross lunges forward and blasts Jett with a headbutt that stops the challenger cold.

The building erupts.

Mark Bravo: "There it is!"

Jett stumbles backward holding his face. Ross rises, limping slightly but surging now, and unloads with right

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hands. One. Two. Three. A fourth sends Jett reeling into the ropes. Ross whips him across--Jett reverses--Ross rebounds--

and runs through him with a shoulder block that turns Jett inside out again.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross just ran him over!"

The crowd comes alive as Ross keeps moving, pain and rage mixing into momentum. Jett scrambles up in the corner, dazed, and Ross charges in with a clothesline, then hoists him up onto the top turnbuckle. The audience rises, sensing a huge shift.

Mark Bravo: "Here comes that burst we were talking about!"

Ross climbs to the second rope and starts hammering Jett with punches as the crowd counts again.

Crowd: "ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR! FIVE! SIX! SEVEN!"

Jett grabs the bad shoulder.

Eight--

He yanks it down hard against the top rope.

Ross winces.

Nine--

Jett headbutts him in the ribs.

Ten never comes.

Jett shoves Ross off the ropes to the mat.

Ross lands on his feet but stumbles on the knee.

Jett immediately leaps from the second rope and catches him with a missile dropkick to the shoulder and chest that sends the champion crashing backward.

John Phillips: "Missile dropkick by Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "Every single time Ross starts to build, Max finds the weak point and cuts it off!"

Jett crawls into another cover, hooking the damaged leg this time.

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Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Ross kicks out again.

Jett sits up and exhales, frustration flashing across his face for the first time. He had that one. Or thought he did.

John Phillips: "Another near-fall for the challenger, but Chris Ross will not stay down."

Mark Bravo: "No, but he's taking damage all over the place now. The longer this goes, the more Max's plan starts making sense."

Jett rises and immediately begins pulling Ross up by the wrist again, looking to stay one step ahead, but Ross jerks him in and buries a short right hand into the body. Jett doubles slightly. Ross follows with another. Then a third. The crowd starts to rally again as Ross tries to push back upright and reclaim the center of the ring.

Both men are hurting now.

Both men are thinking faster.

And the title is still hanging right there over all of it.

Maxwell Jett folds slightly from the body shots, trying to back away and reset, but Chris Ross does not let him breathe. The champion steps forward through the pain in the knee, through the ache in the shoulder, and clubs Jett across the jaw with a right hand that snaps his head sideways.

The crowd surges.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross digging down again!"

Mark Bravo: "And this is where Ross is terrifying. You can beat on him, you can frustrate him, you can slow him down, but if he gets a little opening he starts walking through walls."

Ross fires another right hand.

Then a left.

Then a short headbutt that rocks Jett backward into the ropes. Maxwell clutches at the top cable, trying to keep his balance, but Ross is already on him, grabbing him by the wrist and shooting him across the ring with a hard Irish whip.

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Jett hits the far ropes and rebounds--

Ross lowers his shoulder for a back body drop--

but Jett sees it just in time and drives a sharp kick into the champion's face instead.

Ross stumbles upright.

Jett leaps and snaps him down with a swinging neckbreaker.

The crowd groans.

John Phillips: "Quick adjustment by Maxwell Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes him dangerous. He can get mauled for thirty seconds and still find the exact right answer."

Jett scrambles into another cover, hooking the leg again.

Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Ross throws him off.

Jett rolls through quickly and pops back to his feet, frustration flickering across his face again before he buries it beneath another sneer.

Maxwell Jett: "Stay down, Chris. You're embarrassing yourself."

The crowd boos loudly.

Ross sits up with a glare that says the words landed somewhere between annoying and fatal. Jett rushes in, looking to stay on him, but Ross catches him with a sudden right hand to the midsection from one knee. Jett doubles. Ross rises and hammers him across the back. Then again. Then grabs the back of his head and runs him face-first into the top turnbuckle.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross muscling the challenger around now!"

Mark Bravo: "And that's where Max does not want this match to live. If Ross turns this into a brawl in close quarters, Jett's mouth starts cashing checks his body can't handle."

Ross drags Jett out of the corner and plants him with a short-arm lariat that nearly folds him in half. Jett

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crumples to the mat and instinctively tries to roll away, but Ross follows, grabs him by the hair and waistband, and yanks him right back up to his feet.

The crowd roars as Ross scoops him and drives him down with a hard powerslam near center ring.

John Phillips: "Powerslam by the champion!"

Ross stays on top for the cover.

Referee: "ONE!"

Referee: "TWO!"

Jett kicks out.

Mark Bravo: "That one was close! Max is getting launched around now!"

Ross pushes up and rolls the bad shoulder once, trying to shake life back into it, then grabs Jett again before he can get away. He pulls him upright and traps him in a front facelock, teasing a suplex. The crowd comes up, sensing something big--

but Jett blocks it.

One leg out.

Then the other.

Ross tries again, fighting through the hurt shoulder to muscle him up--

and Jett twists free just enough to hammer three short punches into the injured shoulder.

Ross winces.

Jett drives an elbow into the same arm.

Then another.

Then suddenly drops low and yanks Ross shoulder-first across the top rope.

The champion stumbles backward, clutching at it immediately.

John Phillips: "Right back to the shoulder!"

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Mark Bravo: "Every single time! Ross gets rolling and Jett knows exactly where to cut the wire!"

Jett hits the ropes and comes back with a running knee lift that catches Ross in the jaw and shoulder together, knocking him down to one knee for a split second. Ross tries to rise--Jett spins behind him and chop blocks the bad leg again, dropping him flat to the mat.

The crowd groans as Jett wastes no time, grabbing the arm and rolling through into a grounded Fujiwara armbar.

John Phillips: "Submission attempt by Maxwell Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at the target! The shoulder! He's not trying to make Ross tap right away--he's trying to make the whole rest of the match miserable!"

Jett sits deep and cranks back, face twisted now with effort and a little panic too, like he knows this is his best chance to put a real wall in front of the champion's comeback. Ross grits his teeth, trying to keep his chest off the mat, trying to drag himself forward with one arm and one leg while the other side of his body is getting torn apart.

Referee: "Chris! Do you give?"

Chris Ross: "NO!"

The crowd roars in approval.

Ross claws toward the ropes. Jett pulls back harder. Ross gets a hand to the bottom rope--Jett sees it and shifts his weight, rolling Ross back toward center by the arm before Chris can really secure it.

John Phillips: "Incredible ring awareness from Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "That's a guy who knows exactly where he is at all times!"

Ross fights up to a hip and throws a desperate kick with the good leg into Jett's side. One shot. Then another. The second one lands flush enough to force Jett to loosen the hold for half a beat. Ross uses that moment to surge forward and grab the rope with his free hand.

Referee: "Break! Break it, Max!"

Jett hangs on until four, then releases with a smirk and stands over Ross, clapping slowly in his face.

Maxwell Jett: "That all you got, champ?"

The boos come down hard.

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Ross drags himself up using the ropes, glaring at him, but now the damage is really starting to show. He is breathing harder. The knee is slowing him. The shoulder is dragging.

Jett rushes him again and whips him toward the corner. Ross reverses--Jett hits the buckles and comes stumbling out--Ross swings for another clothesline--

Jett ducks under, grabs the arm, and snaps Ross down into a modified shoulderbreaker that drives the point of the injured shoulder hard into the mat.

The crowd gasps.

John Phillips: "What a counter by Maxwell Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "And that one landed exactly where he wanted it!"

Ross rolls away instantly, grabbing at the shoulder with a grimace, but Jett is already stalking in behind him. He lines up the shot and drives a sharp penalty kick into Ross's upper back, forcing the champion up onto both knees near center ring.

Ross stays there for a second.

Kneeling.

One hand on the mat.

The other wrapped tightly around that shoulder.

His face is twisted with pain and fury.

Jett stands a few steps away, breathing hard but smiling again now, seeing exactly the picture he wanted to create.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross is hurting."

Mark Bravo: "And Maxwell Jett knows it. Knee compromised. Shoulder compromised. The champion is on his knees, and for the first time tonight it really feels like Max sees the whole match opening up in front of him."

Jett slowly starts forward again, measuring Ross, already thinking about what he wants to do next while the crowd tries to rally the champion back into this thing.

Valentina Blaze can't stay still anymore.

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With Chris Ross still down on both knees near center ring, one hand braced on the canvas and the other wrapped around his shoulder, she steps up onto the apron on the near side and leans over the top rope, concern written all over her face.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris! Chris!"

The crowd buzzes, sensing the shift immediately.

John Phillips: "Valentina Blaze is up on the apron now, trying to check on Chris Ross."

Mark Bravo: "Because she can see it. He is hurt. That shoulder has been picked apart, the knee's been clipped, and right now I think she's more worried about him than the match."

Valentina leans farther over the ropes, eyes locked on him, voice urgent.

Valentina Blaze: "Chris, listen to me! Are you okay?"

Ross hears her.

He waves her off without even turning around.

Just a frustrated flick of the hand as he starts to rise, his back still to her, his entire focus still centered on Maxwell Jett.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross never even sees that she's on the apron."

Mark Bravo: "No. His whole world is Maxwell Jett right now."

Ross gets to his feet and immediately explodes forward, charging straight at Jett with whatever power he has left, shoulder screaming, rage carrying him more than his body is.

John Phillips: "Ross with a burst!"

But Jett sees it coming.

Of course he does.

He slides out of the line of attack at the last second, pivoting around and drifting back toward the side of the ring where Valentina is still on the apron.

Ross hits the ropes with thunderous force.

The whole ring shudders.

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He rebounds out of them hard, charging back toward center, eyes locked on Jett again--

and Maxwell jumps out of the way.

Chris cannot stop.

Cannot redirect.

Cannot see what is there until it is far, far too late.

He crashes directly into Valentina Blaze with horrifying force.

She is knocked clean off the apron.

Her body whips violently off the side of the ring and **CRASHES** to the floor below.

John Phillips: "OH MY GOD!"

Mark Bravo: "NO! NO, NO, NO!"

The entire building gasps in collective shock.

Ross grabs the top rope and freezes.

Then slowly looks down to the floor.

And the look on his face is instant.

Total fear.

Total disbelief.

Total horror.

He doesn't look like a champion anymore.

He doesn't look angry anymore.

He looks like a man who just watched his worst possible mistake happen in real time and cannot process it fast enough.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross just collided with Valentina Blaze! She hit the floor hard! Oh no..."

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Mark Bravo: "He never saw her! He never saw her there!"

Ross leans over the ropes, staring down at her, mouth open, panic setting in. The match is gone from his mind. Completely gone. The title. Jett. The crowd. None of it matters in that second.

All he can see is Valentina on the floor.

At ringside, officials and the referee's attention start to shift toward the fall, but Maxwell Jett has not stopped thinking about the match for even one second.

He rushes in from behind.

Hooks Chris Ross from the back in a simple schoolboy roll-up.

And for good measure, he grabs a fistful of Ross's pants behind the referee's view for leverage.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute--JETT FROM BEHIND!"

Mark Bravo: "NO! NOT LIKE THIS!"

The referee drops immediately into position.

Referee: "ONE!"

Ross is still looking toward the floor.

Referee: "TWO!"

Only then does he realize what is happening.

He starts to kick--

Referee: "THREE!"

DING DING DING!

The arena explodes into stunned chaos.

John Phillips: "HE GOT HIM! HE GOT HIM!"

Mark Bravo: "MAXWELL JETT STOLE IT! MAXWELL JETT STOLE THE TITLE!"

Ross kicks free a fraction too late and spins around on the mat, eyes wide, face pale with disbelief as the bell

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keeps ringing.

Jett rolls away and pops up to his knees with the kind of stunned, greedy grin of a man who knows he just got away with the theft of a lifetime.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and **NEW UTA CHAMPION**... Maxwell... 'Max'... Jett!"

The boos are deafening.

Absolute venom pours out of the crowd.

John Phillips: "This is sickening! Chris Ross was completely distracted after colliding with Valentina Blaze, and Maxwell Jett took the lowest road possible to seize the UTA Championship!"

Mark Bravo: "And he held the tights! He held the damn pants! But Chris didn't even know where he was! He was looking at Valentina!"

Ross doesn't even look at Jett.

He doesn't argue with the referee.

He doesn't protest the count.

He rolls out of the ring immediately and drops to the floor beside Valentina, panic all over his face as he kneels next to her and reaches for her, terrified of what damage he may have caused.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross doesn't care about the championship right now. He doesn't care about Maxwell Jett. He only cares about Valentina Blaze."

Inside the ring, the referee is handed the UTA Championship and reluctantly presents it to Maxwell Jett, who snatches it away and clutches it to his chest like stolen treasure. He backs into the corner, exhausted, smug, and overwhelmed all at once.

Mark Bravo: "He wanted to get inside Ross's head all night. He wanted chaos. He wanted emotion. And in the end, that's exactly how he won the biggest match of his life."

At ringside, Ross is talking frantically to Valentina now, brushing hair from her face, trying to get a response, officials rushing in around him.

In the ring, Maxwell Jett stands with the championship.

Outside it, Chris Ross kneels beside the woman he accidentally sent crashing to the floor.

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The visual says everything.

John Phillips: "A heartbreaking ending to *Victory*. Maxwell Jett is the new UTA Champion, but the far bigger concern right now is Valentina Blaze and what kind of condition she is in after that horrific collision."

Mark Bravo: "This is one of those nights nobody is gonna forget. Not for the title change... and not for how it happened."

The camera holds on the chaos: the new champion in the ring, hated beyond belief, and the former champion at ringside, shattered and terrified, with all focus on Valentina Blaze as the show fades.

Show Credits

Segment: "Introduction" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Rosa Delgado vs. Valentina Blaze" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Burn Bright, Fight Hard" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Ahead of Yourself" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "United States Implications" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Kairo Bey vs. Dahlia Cross" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Contracted" - Written by Ben, chris.

Segment: "The Quiet Hand That Moves the Board" - Written by tony.

Segment: "Now He Gets Me" - Written by Ben, chris.

Match: "Vance Stone vs. Samuel Scythe" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Wide Load" - Written by Ben, justin.

Segment: "Pain is Honest" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Arkady Bogatyr vs Hakuryu" - Written by tony.

Match: "Fighting Championship Qualifer" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Maxwell Jett vs Chris Ross" - Written by Ben.

Results Compiled by the eFed Management Suite