

World Tour: France '26

May 15, 2026 | Zénith de Strasbourg - Strasbourg, France

Beneath Him

The scene opens not with a pyro burst or a crowd shot, but with a door. A heavy office door, already in frame, already closed. The backstage corridor hum is the only sound. A production assistant scurries out of frame. Then the door opens.

Hakuryu enters first. Sinja is a half-step behind. There is no ceremony here -- the door is pushed with the weight of a man who has been moving toward this room since the moment he woke up. The ritual calm Hakuryu wears in the ring is present, but thin tonight. It reads less like serenity and more like a lid on something that has been simmering since last week. The facepaint is immaculate. The robes are pressed. Everything about him is composed and controlled -- except the eyes. The eyes are burning.

Scott Stevens is behind his desk. He looks up when the door opens but does not rise. He sets down whatever he was holding and leans back in his chair with the practiced patience of a man who has been expecting this visit and has already decided how it ends.

Avril Selene Kinkade is already in the room. She is positioned off to the side -- standing, not seated -- one hand resting at the edge of the credenza, her slim briefcase already set down beside her. She was here first. She anticipated this visit. She watches Hakuryu enter without moving a single muscle of her face. Her emerald eyes track him from the door to the center of the room and settle there.

Hakuryu does not sit. He stands in the center of the room and speaks.

Hakuryu: ?????????????????????????????????

Sinja: "Last week was a desecration. Those animals put their hands in his match."

Hakuryu: ?????????????????????????????????

Sinja: "That ring belongs to him. That match belonged to him. No one had the right to touch it."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "As champion, he brings value to this company. And what does he receive in return? A match despoiled by a pack of animals?"

Hakuryu: ?????????????????????????????????

Sinja: "It is an insult. An insult to him, and an insult to this title."

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Hakuryu: ??????????????????????????????

Sinja: "Van Patton and his wolves must be punished. Now."

The last line lands like a gavel. Hakuryu holds his gaze on Stevens -- not on Avril, on Stevens, because Stevens is the authority in this room and Hakuryu does not deal through intermediaries. The silence that follows is not an uncomfortable one for Hakuryu. He is content to let it sit. He has said what he came to say and he is waiting for an answer.

Stevens lets the heat sit for exactly one second. Then he exhales through his nose -- not dismissively, but with the energy of a man recalibrating from whatever he was doing before this door opened -- and leans forward.

Scott Stevens: "Are you about done? Good. Sit down -- actually, don't. I really don't give a rat's ass."

He folds his hands on the desk.

Scott Stevens: "Here's what's happening. Van Patton, Tkachuk, and the rest of that brigade are not scheduled to be here tonight. None of them are booked and Bogatyr is off getting his arm looked at. Security has already been informed -- they do not come through the talent entrance, they do not come through the back, they do not come through any door that belongs to this company. I made those calls this morning. That's not something I'm getting around to. That's done."

He lets that land, then continues.

Scott Stevens: "Avril has the legal end locked down on her side. I have the administrative end locked down on mine. And between the two of us, there is not a crack in this building that Van Patton can squeeze through tonight. You have my word on that."

He holds Hakuryu's gaze for a moment -- steady, unbothered -- then leans back and points at the door.

Scott Stevens: "So here is what I need from you. Walk out there tonight, get in that ring, and do what you do better than anyone I've ever put a contract in front of. Hurt somebody. Tyger II is a big boy -- he can take it. You go out there and you remind every single person in that building exactly why that title hasn't moved an inch since you took it. That's your job tonight and quit acting like I don't know how to do mine."

He sits back. Conversation over, as far as he is concerned. He reaches for whatever he set down when they walked in.

Avril does not wait for an invitation. She steps forward -- one measured step, then another -- and positions herself squarely in Hakuryu's eyeline. She does not look at Stevens when she speaks. She does not look at Sinja. She looks at Hakuryu, and only at Hakuryu, with the focused attention of a woman delivering a legal document directly into the hands of its recipient.

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Avril Selene Kinkade: "I want to be rather more precise than the General Manager has been, if you will permit me."

She removes her glasses with one hand, folds them, and holds them at her side. The gesture is deliberate -- this is for clarity, not formality.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Van Patton, Tkachuk, and that warpainted pagan harlot are formally barred from the talent areas, the backstage corridors, the production compound, and every entrance this company controls this evening. I drafted the language myself this morning. It is airtight. Any attempt to breach those parameters will be met with immediate physical removal, a formal breach of conduct filing, and injunctive proceedings that will render last week's unpleasantness a rather quaint memory by comparison."

A pause. She tilts her head by a fraction of a degree.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "They will not be coming through that curtain this evening. They will not appear on this programme. They shall not be within arm's reach of you, of Sinja, or of that title. I have seen to it personally. That is, as ever, precisely what I do."

She replaces her glasses. Smooth, unhurried.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "You have the General Manager's word. You have mine. And I would gently suggest that of the two, mine carries the rather more enforceable consequences."

The faintest trace of something crosses her face -- not quite a smile. Something colder than a smile.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Tonight is yours. Go and conduct yourself accordingly."

A silence.

Hakuryu holds his gaze on Stevens for a long moment -- not because he doubts Avril, but because Stevens is the one whose authority is on the line if the promise breaks. Stevens meets it without flinching. He doesn't look away, doesn't fidget -- he simply looks back, calm and unhurried, the way a man looks at something he has already decided is not his problem.

Then Hakuryu exhales -- just slightly -- and the temperature in the room drops back to something manageable. The anger does not leave. It recedes. He turns, deliberately, and walks out without another word. No bow. No acknowledgment. The door is not slammed -- it is simply closed, which somehow feels more final.

Sinja lingers one beat. He glances briefly at Avril -- something between assessment and quiet gratitude -- then turns and follows.

The door closes.

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Stevens watches it for a moment.

Scott Stevens: "I'm getting really tired of dealing with all these primadonnas... He's lucky we need him."

Stevens picks up whatever he was doing before they walked in.

Avril does not respond. She is already back at the credenza. She reaches for the slim leather briefcase, sets it neatly on the surface, and unclasps it with both hands. The camera catches just a glimpse of what is inside before cutting away. Documents. Several of them. Tabbed, indexed, already prepared.

Stevens is treating tonight like sport. Avril is treating it like a chess game she is still playing.

The distinction matters.

Prove It

The shot opens backstage.

Not the locker room.

Not catering.

Not even one of the nicer hallways where the sponsors get their logos in the background and everyone pretends the building does not smell faintly like disinfectant, sweat, and electrical tape.

No.

We are tucked into one of the less glamorous arteries of the arena. A narrow concrete corridor. Painted cinderblock walls. Exposed piping overhead. A stack of production crates pushed against one side. Somewhere nearby, a generator hums with the low, constant irritation of a bad idea refusing to die.

And standing in the middle of it all, somehow still managing to look like he expects a red carpet to appear beneath his boots, is Eric Dane Jr.

The Hardcore Championship rests over his shoulder.

Not carried.

Displayed.

There is a difference.

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Junior is dressed for television in the way only Junior dresses for television. Too polished for the hallway. Too expensive for the building. Too satisfied with himself for anyone else's comfort. He adjusts the title on his shoulder with two fingers, making sure the faceplate catches the light just right.

Behind him, slightly off to the side, stands Bobby Dean.

Bobby is trying.

That is immediately obvious.

His shirt is tucked in.

Mostly.

His hair has been combed with purpose, if not success. His hands are folded in front of him like a man waiting for instructions at a job he is not technically qualified to have. There is no horn. No scooter. No frantic thumbs-up. No big, booming declaration of family business.

Just Bobby.

Standing there.

Trying very hard to look useful.

Junior does not look at him.

Not at first.

Instead, he looks at the Hardcore Championship.

Like the belt is the only thing in the hallway worth acknowledging.

Finally, Dane speaks.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Tonight, I defend this."

He pats the Hardcore Championship once.

Not lovingly.

Possessively.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Against Clovis Black."

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Bobby nods quickly.

Too quickly.

Bobby Dean: "Right. Clovis Black. Big fella. Mean lookin'. Kinda got that... old cemetery energy."

Junior slowly turns his head.

Bobby immediately shuts his mouth.

Dane lets the silence sit there for a second. Long enough for Bobby to shrink inside it.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do you know what I should be doing right now, Bobby?"

Bobby blinks.

This is already a test.

He knows it.

He does not know the answer.

Bobby Dean: "Stretching?"

Junior stares.

Bobby Dean: "Hydrating?"

Nothing.

Bobby Dean: "Thinking champion thoughts?"

Junior's expression does not change.

Bobby winces.

Bobby Dean: "I can stop guessing."

Eric Dane Jr.: "I should be preparing."

Junior steps closer.

Bobby nods.

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Bobby Dean: "Yes, sir."

Junior's eyes narrow just enough.

Not at the words.

At how easily Bobby says them.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I should be thinking about Clovis Black. I should be thinking about retaining the Hardcore Championship. I should be thinking about how, for the second time in a row, someone in this company has decided they deserve to stand across from me because this belt makes people stupid."

He lifts the title slightly off his shoulder, just enough to emphasize it.

Eric Dane Jr.: "But instead, Bobby..."

Junior finally turns fully toward him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I have to think about you."

Bobby's face softens immediately.

Not because he understands the danger.

Because he hears his name and mistakes attention for affection.

Bobby Dean: "Oh."

A tiny smile starts to form.

Junior kills it before it can live.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Don't look happy about that."

The smile dies.

Bobby Dean: "Nope. Not happy. Serious. Real serious. Like a doctor with bad news. Or a buffet with a two-plate limit."

Junior inhales through his nose.

The kind of inhale that suggests he has chosen, heroically, not to commit a felony.

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Eric Dane Jr.: "Mexico."

Bobby freezes.

One word is enough.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You remember Mexico?"

Bobby swallows.

Bobby Dean: "Yes."

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do you?"

Bobby nods.

Bobby Dean: "I remember."

Junior steps closer.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Because I remember you standing at ringside. I remember you guarding Maxx Mayhem's little grocery cart of garbage like it was the Ark of the Covenant. I remember reaching for something that could have helped me, and I remember you slapping my hand like I was a child reaching for a hot stove."

Bobby's eyes drop.

Bobby Dean: "Maxx trusted me."

The words come out automatically.

Too honest.

Too Bobby.

Junior's jaw tightens.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And there it is."

Bobby looks back up.

Eric Dane Jr.: "What did I tell you in Italy?"

Bobby hesitates.

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Eric Dane Jr.: "No, go ahead. Say it. I want to hear what parts made it through."

Bobby's hands fidget together.

Bobby Dean: "You said... this wasn't like before."

Junior nods once.

Sharp.

Bobby Dean: "You said I shouldn't keep actin' like things with you were the same as things with your dad."

Another nod.

Bobby Dean: "You said I needed to open my eyes and ears."

Junior waits.

Bobby's voice gets smaller.

Bobby Dean: "And shut my fat mouth."

Junior smiles.

There is nothing warm in it.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Good. So you can listen."

Bobby nods.

Bobby Dean: "I can listen."

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then listen carefully."

Junior adjusts the championship on his shoulder again.

The title gleams.

Bobby's eyes flick to it.

Then back to Junior.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You have been following me around for weeks trying to prove something. You want to prove

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you still matter. You want to prove you are not some washed-up punchline dragging a fake championship and twenty years of secondhand nostalgia behind you. You want to prove you belong somewhere."

Bobby absorbs every word.

Some of them hurt.

Some of them sound like opportunity.

That is the problem.

Eric Dane Jr.: "So tonight, I am giving you exactly what you want."

Bobby's head lifts.

Bobby Dean: "You are?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Yes, Bobby. I am."

Junior leans in.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I am giving you a chance."

Bobby's eyes begin to shine with something dangerously close to gratitude.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You want to belong?"

Bobby nods.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You want to be useful?"

Another nod.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You want me to stop looking at you like every room gets worse when you enter it?"

Bobby opens his mouth.

Nothing comes out.

Junior does not wait for it.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then tonight, you beat Maxx Mayhem."

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That lands.

Bobby blinks.

Once.

Twice.

Bobby Dean: "Maxx?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Maxx."

Bobby's brow furrows.

Not fear exactly.

Recognition.

Confusion.

A little leftover guilt.

Bobby Dean: "You want me to fight Maxx?"

Junior gives him a look.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No, Bobby. I want you to take him antiquing. Yes, I want you to fight Maxx."

Bobby nods fast.

Bobby Dean: "Right. Yeah. Of course. Fight Maxx. Beat Maxx. That's... yeah. That's a thing I can do."

Junior watches him.

The way a man watches a vending machine after it has eaten his money.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You can?"

Bobby straightens.

Too much.

Too suddenly.

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Bobby Dean: "I can."

Junior steps around him slowly, circling just enough to make Bobby feel inspected.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Because Maxx Mayhem is the reason this is messy."

Bobby turns his head to follow him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "He wandered into my business in Mexico. He got a title shot he did not earn. He made my championship defense about shopping carts and trash lids and whatever infection lives under his fingernails."

Junior stops in front of Bobby again.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And you helped him."

Bobby flinches.

Bobby Dean: "I didn't mean to help him against you."

Eric Dane Jr.: "But you did."

Bobby nods.

Reluctantly.

Eric Dane Jr.: "So fix it."

Silence.

Bobby looks at Junior.

Junior looks at Bobby.

The championship sits between them without physically being between them at all.

Bobby Dean: "If I beat him..."

Bobby pauses.

The question starts to form.

Not fully.

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Not yet.

Just the first shape of it.

Bobby Dean: "If I beat Maxx, then..."

Junior cuts him off before the thought can grow legs.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then you prove Mexico was a mistake."

Bobby nods.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You prove Maxx got lucky crawling into my orbit."

Another nod.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You prove you can follow simple instructions without turning my career into community theater."

Bobby nods again.

Less confidently.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And you prove, maybe..."

Junior lets the word hang.

Bobby leans toward it.

Just a little.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Maybe."

Bobby waits.

Junior almost smiles.

Eric Dane Jr.: "That there is still a place for you."

There it is.

The hook goes in clean.

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Bobby's face changes.

Hope, immediate and unprotected, breaks through every bruise Junior just left behind.

Bobby Dean: "There is?"

Junior shrugs.

Cruel in its casualness.

Eric Dane Jr.: "There could be."

Bobby breathes in.

Like that is enough.

Like "could be" is a contract.

Like maybe is mercy.

Bobby Dean: "I'll do it."

Junior studies him.

Bobby Dean: "I'll beat Maxx."

A beat.

Then, with more feeling:

Bobby Dean: "I'll prove it."

Junior nods.

Satisfied.

Not proud.

Satisfied.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Good."

He starts to turn away, then stops.

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One more thing.

Of course there is one more thing.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And Bobby?"

Bobby perks up.

Bobby Dean: "Yeah?"

Junior points a finger at him.

Not quite in his face.

Close enough.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do not make this weird."

Bobby nods solemnly.

Bobby Dean: "I will make it very normal."

Junior stares at him.

Bobby immediately corrects.

Bobby Dean: "Regular normal."

Still staring.

Bobby Dean: "Quiet normal."

Junior lowers his hand.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Useful, Bobby."

Bobby nods again.

This time, slower.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Be useful."

Junior walks out of frame, the Hardcore Championship leaving with him.

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Bobby remains in the hallway.

Alone.

For a few seconds, he stands there with his hands still folded in front of him.

Then he nods to himself.

Once.

Then again.

Trying to convince the hallway.

Trying to convince the camera.

Trying to convince the part of himself that heard the word "maybe" and decided it was a promise.

Bobby Dean: "Useful."

He swallows.

Straightens his shirt.

Mostly.

Bobby Dean: "Beat Maxx."

Another nod.

Bobby Dean: "Prove I belong."

Bobby turns and walks in the opposite direction.

The camera lingers on the now-empty stretch of concrete hallway for half a second longer than it needs to.

Then we cut away.

Introduction

A sweeping aerial shot glides over Strasbourg, France, capturing the glow of the city as the sun begins to sink behind the rooftops. The camera passes over historic streets, cathedral spires, and the packed roads

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surrounding the Zénith de Strasbourg, where fans are already gathered outside in UTA shirts, waving signs, chanting names, and waiting for another stop on the World Tour to begin.

The shot cuts inside the arena.

A massive roar erupts from the French crowd as lights sweep across the building. Red, white, and blue beams cut through the haze while the UTA logo explodes across the video screens. Fans rise to their feet, signs bouncing in every direction.

The camera catches several signs in the crowd.

"THE EMPIRE STOPS IN FRANCE!"

"HAKURYU IS HIM!"

"BOBBY DEAN, PLEASE SURVIVE!"

"TYGER II WANTS HIS GOLD BACK!"

"ALL OR NOTHING IS COMING!"

The music pounds through the arena as pyro blasts from the stage, raining sparks down from above the entranceway. The fans in Strasbourg respond with a deafening wave of noise, giving UTA one of the loudest welcomes of the entire World Tour so far.

The camera finally cuts to ringside, where John Phillips and Mark Bravo are seated at the commentary desk. Behind them, the French crowd continues to chant and wave as the broadcast officially begins.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to World Tour: France! We are live from the Zénith de Strasbourg in Strasbourg, France, and Mark, listen to this crowd!"

Phillips pauses as the crowd noise swells again.

Mark Bravo: "I can barely hear myself think, John, and that might be a blessing for everybody watching at home! Strasbourg is loud, UTA is hot, and tonight, we have gold on the line, grudges boiling over, and people fighting for momentum before International Affair!"

John Phillips: "International Affair is getting closer by the week, and with the All or Nothing match looming large, every win matters. Every loss hurts. Every mistake can change the road ahead. Tonight, several UTA stars are looking to prove they belong in that conversation."

Mark Bravo: "And some of them are looking to prove they can even survive the night. I mean, Bobby Dean has been told by Eric Dane Junior that he needs to prove himself, and apparently that means getting thrown

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in there with Maxx Mayhem. That is not a test. That is a punishment."

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean versus Maxx Mayhem tonight in singles action, and you are right, Mark. Eric Dane Junior has made it clear that Bobby needs to show something. But against a man as unpredictable and dangerous as Maxx Mayhem, proving yourself may simply mean walking out under your own power."

Mark Bravo: "Bobby Dean might want to prove himself from a very safe distance. Maybe from catering. Maybe from the hotel. Maybe from another country entirely."

John Phillips: "Also tonight, Bianca Page goes one-on-one with Emily Hightower. Emily is coming off a recent win and looking to build momentum, while Bianca Page is coming off a loss and has been in no mood to let anyone forget that she believes she was robbed of what should have been hers."

Mark Bravo: "Bianca Page is angry, John. Angry Bianca is dangerous Bianca. But Emily Hightower is starting to stack confidence at exactly the right time. International Affair is coming. All or Nothing is coming. You do not want to stumble now."

John Phillips: "And speaking of championship stakes, the WrestleZone Championship will be defended tonight as Hakuryu puts the title on the line against former champion Tyger II."

The crowd cheers loudly at the mention of the championship match.

Mark Bravo: "That one is going to be special. Tyger II knows what it feels like to hold that championship. He knows what it means. But Hakuryu has been operating on another level. The man from Japan has turned back every challenge, and tonight Tyger II has to ask himself one question. Does he still have enough magic in that mask to reclaim the gold?"

John Phillips: "Tyger II has pride, history, and championship experience on his side. Hakuryu has momentum, discipline, and the title itself. That match could steal the entire show."

Mark Bravo: "And somehow, that is not even the only championship match tonight."

John Phillips: "That is right, because in tonight's main event, Eric Dane Junior defends the UTA Hardcore Championship against Clovis Black of The Empire in a Hardcore Match."

The crowd gives a mixed, thunderous reaction. Some fans cheer the promise of violence while others boo at the mention of The Empire.

Mark Bravo: "Eric Dane Junior has survived a lot in UTA, but forced into a Hardcore Championship defense against Clovis Black? That is not a match, John. That is a trap with a bell."

John Phillips: "The Empire has been looking to tighten its grip on UTA, and tonight Clovis Black has a chance to bring more gold back to Amy Harrison's ranks. But Eric Dane Junior has built his name on

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violence, survival, and refusing to go quietly. If The Empire wants the Hardcore Championship, they will have to pry it from him in the kind of match where almost anything can happen."

Mark Bravo: "Almost anything? John, it is a Hardcore Match. In France. With Eric Dane Junior and Clovis Black. I am keeping my headset on, my chair loose, and my exit route memorized."

John Phillips: "Tonight, the World Tour rolls into France. Championship gold is at stake. International Affair is on the horizon. All or Nothing draws closer. And every competitor tonight knows that one victory can change everything."

The camera pans across the roaring Strasbourg crowd one more time as the lights pulse through the arena.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is UTA World Tour: France.."

Mark Bravo: "Strap in, France!"

John Phillips: "And we are starting right now!"

The camera cuts toward the entrance stage as the crowd rises, ready for the opening contest.

Too Many Owners

The shot opens backstage.

Not in the cleaner hallways near the dressing rooms.

Not near gorilla, where the lights are brighter and everyone pretends they know where they are supposed to be.

No.

This is one of those strange backstage pockets that only seems to exist inside wrestling arenas. A half-lit loading corridor. A rolling laundry bin against one wall. A cracked door marked STORAGE. A few folded chairs stacked in a sad little tower beneath an old exit sign that buzzes like it is trying to remember the words.

And there is Bobby Dean.

Alone.

Pacing.

Not fast.

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Bobby does not really do fast.

But he is moving with purpose. Back and forth. Hands clasped. Eyes down. Lips moving.

Practicing.

Preparing.

Trying very hard to make something true by repeating it enough times.

Bobby Dean: "Beat Maxx."

He turns.

Bobby Dean: "Prove I belong."

Turn.

Bobby Dean: "Be useful."

Turn.

Bobby Dean: "Beat Maxx. Prove I belong. Be useful."

He stops.

Nods.

That sounded right.

So he says it again.

Bobby Dean: "Beat Maxx. Prove I belong. Be useful."

From somewhere off-camera, a voice answers.

Maxx Mayhem: "That sounds like a grocery list written by a hostage."

Bobby freezes.

Slowly, carefully, he turns his head.

The camera pans.

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Maxx Mayhem is sitting inside the rolling laundry bin.

Naturally.

Not leaning on it.

Not standing near it.

In it.

Legs folded awkwardly. Arms resting over the rim. Chin perched on his forearms like this is the most reasonable place in the building for a grown man to be waiting.

He is staring at Bobby with wide, curious eyes.

Bobby blinks.

Then blinks again.

Bobby Dean: "Maxx?"

Maxx lifts one hand.

Barely.

Maxx Mayhem: "Bobby."

Bobby looks around.

As if there might be a second, more explainable Maxx nearby.

There is not.

Bobby Dean: "Why are you in a laundry bin?"

Maxx looks down at the bin.

Then back to Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "Tactical softness."

Bobby waits.

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Maxx waits.

The explanation does not improve.

Bobby Dean: "That ain't an answer."

Maxx Mayhem: "It is if you respect fabric."

Bobby rubs both hands over his face.

Bobby Dean: "I don't have time for this. I got a match."

Maxx perks up slightly inside the bin.

Maxx Mayhem: "Against me."

Bobby Dean: "Against you."

Maxx Mayhem: "You excited?"

Bobby straightens, like he has been waiting for a normal question.

Bobby Dean: "I'm focused."

Maxx studies him.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's not the same thing."

Bobby Dean: "It is tonight."

Maxx leans forward in the laundry bin, which creaks under the shift in weight.

Maxx Mayhem: "You keep saying 'prove I belong.'"

Bobby's expression tightens.

Bobby Dean: "Because I do."

Maxx Mayhem: "Belong where?"

Bobby opens his mouth.

For a second, the answer is supposed to come easy.

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It does not.

Bobby Dean: "With Eric."

Maxx nods slowly, as if Bobby has just shown him a suspicious object and asked whether it might be edible.

Maxx Mayhem: "Right."

Bobby points at him.

Bobby Dean: "Don't do that."

Maxx Mayhem: "Do what?"

Bobby Dean: "That look."

Maxx Mayhem: "This is my face."

Bobby Dean: "Then fix it."

Maxx considers this seriously for half a second, then stretches his face into an even stranger expression.

Maxx Mayhem: "Better?"

Bobby Dean: "Worse."

Maxx relaxes his face again.

Maxx Mayhem: "You are nervous."

Bobby Dean: "I am not nervous."

Maxx looks at Bobby's hands.

They are clasped tight enough to turn the knuckles pale.

Bobby notices and immediately separates them.

Bobby Dean: "I'm prepared."

Maxx Mayhem: "Prepared people do not usually chant at walls."

Bobby glances at the wall.

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Bobby Dean: "It was listening."

Maxx Mayhem: "Good wall."

A beat.

Bobby exhales, trying to reset himself.

Bobby Dean: "Look, I don't know what you're tryin' to do here, but it ain't gonna work."

Maxx Mayhem: "What am I trying to do?"

Bobby Dean: "Get in my head."

Maxx's eyes brighten.

Maxx Mayhem: "Is it working?"

Bobby hesitates.

Too long.

Bobby Dean: "No."

Maxx nods, satisfied.

Maxx Mayhem: "Then open a window. It is stuffy in there."

Bobby turns away from him and takes two steps down the hall.

Then stops.

Because Bobby Dean cannot help himself.

Bobby Dean: "I need this, Maxx."

That quiets the joke for a second.

Maxx's expression does not become fully serious.

Nothing about Maxx ever does.

But something in the air shifts.

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Maxx Mayhem: "Need what?"

Bobby Dean: "The win."

Maxx Mayhem: "Why?"

Bobby Dean: "Because then maybe..."

Bobby trails off.

He looks down the corridor, toward where the noise of the arena is faintly rumbling through the walls.

Bobby Dean: "Maybe things go back where they're supposed to be."

Maxx watches him for a moment.

Maxx Mayhem: "Things do not go back, Bobby."

Bobby looks at him.

Maxx gives the edge of the laundry bin a small pat.

Maxx Mayhem: "They roll weird."

Bobby looks at the bin.

Then at Maxx.

Bobby Dean: "That supposed to mean something?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Maybe."

A beat.

Maxx Mayhem: "Probably not."

Bobby shakes his head and straightens his shirt.

Again.

Mostly.

Bobby Dean: "I'm gonna beat you."

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Maxx nods once.

Maxx Mayhem: "Maybe."

Bobby Dean: "I'm gonna prove I belong."

Maxx tilts his head.

Maxx Mayhem: "Maybe."

Bobby Dean: "I'm gonna be useful."

Maxx's eyes settle on him.

The word hangs there.

Useful.

Maxx does not make a joke this time.

Not right away.

Maxx Mayhem: "Careful with that one."

Bobby frowns.

Bobby Dean: "With what?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Useful."

Maxx climbs awkwardly out of the laundry bin.

It is not graceful.

One leg over. A wobble. A brief fight with gravity. A clatter as the bin rolls six inches backward and bumps the wall.

Then Maxx is standing.

Closer to Bobby now.

Not too close.

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Close enough.

Maxx Mayhem: "Useful things get picked up."

He glances toward the sad little tower of folded chairs.

Maxx Mayhem: "Used."

Then to the rolling bin.

Maxx Mayhem: "Pushed."

Then back to Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "Dropped somewhere when people are done with them."

Bobby does not answer.

He does not like that.

He really does not like that.

Bobby Dean: "I'm not a chair."

Maxx looks at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "No."

A small smile.

Maxx Mayhem: "Chair's faster."

Bobby rolls his eyes despite himself.

It helps.

A little.

Bobby Dean: "You're impossible."

Maxx Mayhem: "Frequently."

Maxx backs toward the laundry bin again, then puts one hand on its rim.

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Maxx Mayhem: "See you in the proving place."

He climbs back into the laundry bin.

Again.

Because apparently that is how this conversation ends.

He kicks one foot against the floor and the bin rolls backward, slowly, unevenly, down the corridor.

Bobby watches him go.

For a long moment, he says nothing.

Then, quietly:

Bobby Dean: "Beat Maxx."

A pause.

Bobby Dean: "Prove I belong."

Another pause.

This one is longer.

Bobby looks down at his hands.

Bobby Dean: "Be useful."

It comes out different now.

Not weaker.

Not exactly.

Just less certain.

Like the words have picked up static.

Bobby swallows, turns, and walks toward the ring.

The camera stays behind.

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At the far end of the corridor, the laundry bin bumps gently into a closed door.

Maxx Mayhem: "Wrong turn."

Cut.

Took Your Advice

A narrow concrete hallway runs alongside gorilla position inside the arena. Black production crates are stacked against the walls beside tangled cables taped to the floor. Stagehands move through the corridor carrying headsets and clipboards while the muffled roar of the crowd bleeds through the building every time the curtain shifts nearby.

David Hightower stands near the wall with his arms crossed, watching the monitor hanging overhead. Buck leans against a road case a few feet away, restless energy rolling off him while Dakota scrolls through her phone before glancing back toward the others every few seconds.

Further down the hallway near another monitor, Sol Azteca stands off to the side wrapping fresh tape around one wrist. Black cargo pants. Dark hoodie. Mask on, as always. She is not part of the conversation, barely even looking toward it at first while the arena feed plays overhead.

Then Emily rounds the corner.

Blue jeans. Black tank top. Wrist tape already on.

Focused.

She stops in front of them.

Emily Hightower: "Before we do this tonight, we need to get somethin' straight."

Buck already looks annoyed.

Buck Hightower: "Oh hell, here we go."

Emily ignores him completely, eyes staying on David.

Emily Hightower: "No interference tonight."

Silence.

Emily Hightower: "No apron spots. No jumpin' people after the bell. No 'protectin' me.' None of it."

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Buck pushes himself off the wall immediately.

Buck Hightower: "So we just stand there while people screw you over again?"

Emily Hightower: "If that happens, then I handle it."

Buck Hightower: "Yeah and how's that been workin' out so far?"

Emily finally snaps her eyes toward him.

Emily Hightower: "Better than lookin' like I need three other people fightin' my battles for me."

That lands hard enough to quiet the hallway for a second.

Dakota exhales softly under her breath.

Dakota Hightower: "Emily..."

But Emily cuts her off too.

Emily Hightower: "No. I'm serious."

She looks back at David.

Emily Hightower: "If I win tonight, I wanna know it was me."

A pause.

Emily Hightower: "And if I lose, that's on me too."

Further down the hallway, Sol finally glances up from taping her wrist.

David studies Emily quietly for a few seconds.

No anger.

No yelling.

Honestly, that almost makes it worse.

David Hightower: "Fine."

Buck turns immediately.

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Buck Hightower: "Dad, come on--"

David lifts a hand slightly without taking his eyes off Emily.

That alone shuts Buck up.

David Hightower: "You want your own fight?"

A small nod from Emily.

David nods once back.

David Hightower: "Then have it."

Another pause.

David Hightower: "Let's see how far respect gets you in this business."

Emily's jaw tightens slightly, but she holds eye contact.

Emily Hightower: "Good."

She turns and starts walking toward gorilla before nearly bumping into Sol standing near the corner of the hallway.

Emily slows for a second.

The frustration in her face eases just a little.

Emily Hightower: "Hey."

Sol nods once back toward her.

Sol Azteca: "Hey."

Emily motions vaguely back toward her family with her thumb.

Emily Hightower: "Took your advice."

Sol glances briefly past her toward the Hightowers still standing down the hallway.

Emily Hightower: "Dad said they ain't gettin' involved tonight."

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For the first time all segment, Emily almost sounds relieved.

Sol studies her for a second before giving a small nod.

Sol Azteca: "I hope it goes the way you want."

Emily lets out a short breath through her nose, somewhere between nervous and hopeful.

Emily Hightower: "Yeah... me too."

She gives Sol a small slap on the shoulder as she passes before heading toward gorilla position.

Sol watches her go for a second.

Then her eyes drift past Emily toward David standing further down the hallway.

David is already watching her back.

The camera lingers on that quiet stare between David Hightower and Sol Azteca for one more moment before cutting away.

Bobby Dean vs. Maxx Mayhem

The camera returns to ringside inside the Zénith de Strasbourg, where the French crowd is still buzzing after the opening of the broadcast. The lights sweep across the arena, catching signs, waving arms, and fans packed tightly against the barricade as the first match of the night is set to begin.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are ready for our opening contest here at World Tour: France Twenty-Six, and Mark, this one comes with a very unusual amount of pressure on one man in particular."

Mark Bravo: "Bobby Dean."

John Phillips: "Exactly. Last week, Eric Dane Junior told Bobby Dean that if he wanted to prove he was not a problem, he had to step into the ring tonight against Maxx Mayhem."

Mark Bravo: "That is a horrible performance review. Most people get written up. Bobby Dean gets Maxx Mayhem."

John Phillips: "And Maxx Mayhem is not the kind of opponent anyone wants when they are trying to get their footing, emotionally or physically. He is unpredictable, dangerous, and even when there are rules, he treats them more like loose suggestions."

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Mark Bravo: "Maxx Mayhem wakes up every morning and chooses property damage. Bobby Dean wakes up and wonders if the breakfast buffet is still open. These are not compatible lifestyles."

The house lights suddenly cut lower.

A harsh burst of static rips across the video screen.

The fans look toward the stage as the screen flickers again, jumping between distorted images of warning signs, broken test patterns, trash can lids, and the word MAYHEM flashing in jagged white letters.

Then the sirens hit.

Loud. Piercing. Chaotic.

The arena lights pulse red and white as the opening blast of "Holiday" by Green Day crashes through the speakers.

The French crowd erupts as Maxx Mayhem bursts through the curtain like somebody fired him out of a cannon and forgot to aim.

He comes out wild-eyed and grinning, arms thrown wide, bouncing from foot to foot as the music pounds behind him. In one hand, he swings a battered trash can lid like a shield. In the other, he grips a dented road sign that absolutely did not come from anywhere approved by UTA production.

John Phillips: "And here comes Maxx Mayhem!"

Mark Bravo: "Hide the furniture, hide the announce table, and for the love of all things holy, hide anything with wheels!"

Maxx takes two steps forward, stops suddenly, and stares directly into the nearest camera.

His grin spreads wider.

Maxx Mayhem: "FRANCE!"

The crowd roars back at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "LET'S MAKE SOME MAYHEM!"

He slams the trash can lid against the road sign with a loud metallic CLANG that echoes through the entrance area. The crowd cheers louder.

Maxx starts down the ramp, not so much walking as lurching forward with manic purpose. He slaps the trash

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can lid against the barricade. CLANG. CLANG. CLANG. Fans jump back, laugh, cheer, and reach out toward him all at once.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem has made a career out of being impossible to predict. He is loud, he is reckless, and he is dangerous in a way that can shift from funny to violent in the blink of an eye."

Mark Bravo: "That is what makes him terrifying. You laugh, and then suddenly you're waking up under a chair with a referee asking if you know what year it is."

Maxx stops halfway down the ramp and looks around suspiciously, as if he has just realized something is missing.

He drops the road sign flat on the ramp, steps onto it with both feet, and tries to slide forward like a snowboarder.

It moves maybe three inches.

Maxx looks down at it, offended.

Maxx Mayhem: "Coward."

He kicks the sign aside, throws both arms into the air, and continues toward the ring while the Strasbourg crowd laughs and chants along with the music.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem seems to be in a good mood tonight, which may actually be worse for Bobby Dean."

Mark Bravo: "A happy Maxx is dangerous. An angry Maxx is dangerous. A confused Maxx is dangerous. Honestly, every setting on Maxx Mayhem is dangerous."

At ringside, Maxx circles the ring once, dragging the trash can lid along the apron with a scraping metallic sound that makes the referee visibly uneasy before the match has even started.

Maxx stops near the commentary desk and leans over it, breathing hard, eyes wide.

Maxx Mayhem: "John. Mark."

Mark Bravo: "Maxx."

Maxx Mayhem: "You boys got anything I can borrow?"

John Phillips: "No."

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Mark Bravo: "Define borrow."

Maxx slowly reaches toward Mark's headset.

Mark Bravo: "Nope. Absolutely not. I need that."

Maxx grins, then suddenly slaps the trash can lid on top of the announce table with another CLANG.

Maxx Mayhem: "Warm it up for me."

He leaves the lid there and slides under the bottom rope into the ring.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem entering the ring now, and thankfully he appears to have left the trash can lid with us."

Mark Bravo: "Thankfully? John, he said warm it up. I do not like being part of a long-term Maxx Mayhem plan."

Inside the ring, Maxx pops up to his feet, sprints to the nearest corner, and climbs to the middle rope. He throws his arms wide, soaking in the noise from the French crowd.

Maxx Mayhem: "ORDER IS FOR COWARDS!"

The fans roar as Maxx drops down from the corner, then suddenly presses his face close to the hard camera on the apron.

He smiles.

Too close.

Then he licks the lens.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on."

Mark Bravo: "That camera has a family."

The shot immediately cuts to a wider angle as Maxx backs into his corner, laughing to himself, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and rolling his shoulders like he is ready to explode the second the bell rings.

The referee approaches him cautiously, pointing toward the apron and then toward the trash can lid sitting on the announce table.

Referee: "No weapons, Maxx. Leave it out here."

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Maxx looks deeply offended.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's my emotional support lid."

Referee: "It stays out here."

Maxx slowly raises both hands, backing into the corner with exaggerated innocence.

Maxx Mayhem: "Fine. Personal growth. Everybody clap."

A section of the crowd actually claps. Maxx points toward them proudly.

Maxx Mayhem: "They get it."

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem may not have the weapons in hand right now, but that does not mean Bobby Dean is safe."

Mark Bravo: "Bobby Dean is walking into this because Eric Dane Junior told him to prove himself. That means this is less about winning a match and more about surviving an assignment from someone who may not care if Bobby survives it."

Maxx crouches low in the corner, eyes locked on the entrance stage now, his grin twitching at the edges as he waits.

The music fades down.

The crowd buzzes.

Maxx Mayhem remains coiled in the corner, smiling like he already knows something terrible is coming and cannot wait to be part of it.

The camera holds on Maxx Mayhem in the corner.

He is still crouched low, fingers twitching against the middle rope, grin stretched wide across his face as he stares toward the entrance stage. Whatever chaos he expected to arrive next, he appears ready for it.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem waiting now for Beautiful Bobby Dean, and Mark, this is not just an opening match. This is Bobby Dean being put in a very uncomfortable position by Eric Dane Junior."

Mark Bravo: "Uncomfortable? Bobby Dean is about to fight Maxx Mayhem because Eric Dane Junior decided he was a problem that needed solving. That is not uncomfortable. That is being thrown into traffic with a smiley face sticker on your forehead."

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The lights settle.

For one brief second, the arena waits.

Then the opening of "The Best Around" hits the speakers.

The Zénith de Strasbourg erupts into a reaction that is equal parts cheers, laughter, disbelief, and immediate recognition.

Maxx Mayhem's grin fades.

Not into fear.

Into wonder.

He slowly rises from his crouch, head tilting as the camera cuts to the stage.

There, rolling through the curtain with all the ceremony of a man who believes he is leading the final parade before the world ends, is Beautiful Bobby Dean.

On his mobility scooter.

The scooter emerges first, rattling faintly beneath him, its front panel patched and scuffed, one side looking like it has survived at least two parking lot incidents and one deeply personal argument with a curb. A small UTA sticker has been slapped crookedly on the front. A cup holder hangs from the side, currently holding nothing but hope.

Bobby Dean sits proudly atop it, one hand on the handlebars and the other raised to the fans. He is smiling wide, nodding along to the music, soaking in the moment as if he is riding into Strasbourg on a golden chariot instead of a machine that sounds like it may need last rites by the end of the ramp.

John Phillips: "And here comes Beautiful Bobby Dean."

Mark Bravo: "Majestic."

John Phillips: "That is one word for it."

Mark Bravo: "No, John. Look at him. Look at the posture. Look at the confidence. Look at the vehicle. That is a man who has figured out cardio."

Bobby begins the slow journey down the ramp.

Very slow.

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The music swells around him as he waves to the crowd like a beloved local mayor returning from exile. Fans lean over the barricade, some cheering, some laughing, some singing along, and a few looking genuinely unsure if this is part of the match or a transportation emergency.

In the ring, Maxx Mayhem steps toward the ropes, eyes locked on the scooter.

His mouth opens slightly.

He points at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "What... is... THAT?"

The referee glances over, already exhausted.

Referee: "That's Bobby Dean."

Maxx shakes his head, still staring.

Maxx Mayhem: "No, not him. I know what Bobby Dean is. I mean the battle chair."

Mark Bravo: "Battle chair!"

John Phillips: "It is a mobility scooter."

Mark Bravo: "Not anymore. Maxx Mayhem just named it, and honestly, battle chair is better."

Bobby continues down the ramp, lifting one hand higher as he hears the reaction building.

He attempts to nod to the beat.

The scooter hits a tiny bump.

Bobby jolts forward slightly, catches himself, then immediately turns it into a wave.

The crowd laughs and cheers.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean, trying to prove something tonight. Trying to prove to Eric Dane Junior that he belongs, that he can be useful, that he is not, in Dane's words, a problem."

Mark Bravo: "And nothing says 'not a problem' like entering a wrestling match at three miles an hour while your opponent contemplates stealing your ride."

Maxx Mayhem is now leaning over the top rope, fully captivated.

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Maxx Mayhem: "Where do you get one of those?"

Bobby, still halfway down the ramp, cups one hand to his ear.

Bobby Dean: "What?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Where do you get one of those?"

Bobby beams, delighted by the question.

Bobby Dean: "You like her?"

Maxx points at the scooter with both hands now.

Maxx Mayhem: "I LOVE HER."

The crowd roars.

Bobby Dean: "She's custom!"

Maxx's eyes widen.

Maxx Mayhem: "Does she come in black?"

Bobby Dean: "Buddy, she comes in whatever color duct tape you can find."

Maxx looks like he has just heard gospel.

Maxx Mayhem: "I need one."

Mark Bravo: "No. Absolutely not. Maxx Mayhem cannot have wheels."

John Phillips: "I agree with you completely."

Mark Bravo: "That is not a sentence I expected from either of us, but the world is not ready for motorized Maxx Mayhem."

Bobby reaches the bottom of the ramp, then takes a wide, careful turn around ringside.

The scooter whirs.

It clunks.

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It emits one tiny, accidental horn chirp.

SFX: honk.

Bobby freezes.

The crowd cheers.

Maxx gasps from inside the ring.

Maxx Mayhem: "IT HONKS?"

Bobby nods proudly.

Bobby Dean: "Safety feature."

Maxx Mayhem: "Weapon feature."

Referee: "Do not encourage him."

Maxx turns toward the referee with genuine offense.

Maxx Mayhem: "I am being inspired."

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem seems less concerned with Bobby Dean as an opponent and more fascinated by Bobby Dean's method of transportation."

Mark Bravo: "That is probably the safest Bobby has been all week. Maxx is not looking at him like prey. He is looking at him like a dealership."

Bobby continues circling ringside, waving to the front row while "The Best Around" continues to play. He passes the commentary desk and gives John and Mark a bright smile.

Bobby Dean: "Evening, gentlemen."

John Phillips: "Bobby."

Mark Bravo: "You got cup holders on that thing?"

Bobby Dean: "One and a half."

Bobby parks near the ring steps.

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Then comes the hard part.

Getting off.

Bobby takes one hand off the controls and places it on the armrest. He shifts his weight. The scooter rocks slightly. Bobby stops immediately and raises one finger, asking the entire arena for patience without saying a word.

The crowd begins clapping rhythmically.

Maxx Mayhem leans over the ropes, watching with the focus of a man studying ancient machinery.

Maxx Mayhem: "Does it have reverse?"

Bobby Dean: "When she feels like it."

Maxx Mayhem: "Can it jump?"

Bobby Dean: "Once."

Maxx nods slowly, impressed.

Maxx Mayhem: "I respect that."

Bobby finally plants both feet on the floor and pushes himself upright with a dramatic exhale. He stands beside the scooter for a moment, steadying himself, then pats the handlebar affectionately.

Bobby Dean: "Stay."

The scooter does not move.

Maxx Mayhem: "She listens better than most people."

Bobby turns toward the ring and climbs the steps slowly. He pauses halfway up, looks out to the crowd, and raises both arms as "Simply The Best" reaches another swell.

The fans react warmly, and for a brief moment, Bobby Dean allows himself to enjoy it.

John Phillips: "For all the comedy around Bobby Dean, there is a real weight to this match. Bobby has been humiliated, dismissed, and ordered into this contest by Eric Dane Junior. Tonight may tell us a lot about where Bobby's head is."

Mark Bravo: "And where his spine is after Maxx Mayhem gets done with him."

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Bobby steps through the ropes carefully, one leg at a time. The referee moves closer, not helping exactly, but ready in case gravity tries to get involved.

Maxx backs away from the ropes and stands in the center of the ring, still staring past Bobby at the scooter.

Maxx Mayhem: "Can I take it for one lap?"

Bobby turns around quickly.

Bobby Dean: "Absolutely not."

Maxx places a hand over his heart, wounded.

Maxx Mayhem: "I thought we had something."

Bobby Dean: "We have a match."

Maxx looks at him.

Then at the scooter.

Then back at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "Winner gets the scooter?"

Bobby Dean: "No."

Maxx Mayhem: "Loser gets the scooter?"

Bobby Dean: "Also no."

Maxx Mayhem: "Can the scooter be guest referee?"

Referee: "No."

Maxx turns to the official.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're afraid of her power."

The crowd laughs again as Bobby moves into his corner, trying to look focused, trying to look ready, trying to look like a man who has not just been asked to gamble his transportation in a wrestling match.

Maxx backs into the opposite corner, but his eyes keep drifting to ringside.

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The scooter sits there quietly.

Waiting.

Mark Bravo: "John, I am telling you right now, that scooter is going to become important."

John Phillips: "I certainly hope not."

Mark Bravo: "You can hope. I can read the room. Maxx Mayhem has fallen in love, and Bobby Dean brought the dowry."

Bobby exhales in his corner and looks across the ring at Maxx.

Maxx smiles back at him.

Then Maxx leans slightly to one side, peering around Bobby to get one more look at the scooter.

Maxx Mayhem: "Seriously, though. After the match, send me the link."

Bobby sighs.

Bobby Dean: "We'll talk."

The music fades out as the referee steps between both men, trying to restore some kind of order before the opening bell.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean. Maxx Mayhem. Our opening contest from Strasbourg, France, is about to begin."

Mark Bravo: "And somewhere, somehow, a mobility scooter has just become the emotional center of this match."

The camera cuts between Bobby Dean, breathing carefully in his corner, Maxx Mayhem grinning with dangerous curiosity, and the scooter parked innocently at ringside.

The referee looks from Bobby Dean to Maxx Mayhem, then toward the timekeeper.

Bobby Dean stands in his corner, breathing carefully, hands half-raised in front of him in something that might be a fighting stance if someone described one to him from memory.

Across the ring, Maxx Mayhem is not looking at Bobby.

He is looking past Bobby.

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At ringside.

At the mobility scooter.

His eyes are narrowed. His head is tilted. His mouth is slightly open, like he is trying to solve a puzzle that has wheels, a horn, and at least one cup holder.

John Phillips: "The bell is about to sound here, and Maxx Mayhem still seems completely distracted by Bobby Dean's scooter."

Mark Bravo: "That scooter has presence, John. I'm not saying it should be ranked, but I'm not not saying it."

The referee checks both men again.

Bobby nods.

Maxx does not.

He is still staring.

The referee sighs and calls for the bell anyway.

DING DING DING!

The bell echoes through the Zénith de Strasbourg.

And then...

Nothing happens.

Bobby Dean does not charge.

Maxx Mayhem does not charge.

The referee takes one step backward, waiting for the first move.

There is no first move.

Bobby remains standing in his corner, eyes shifting from Maxx to the referee, then back to Maxx, like he is waiting for someone else to explain the next step.

Maxx slowly leans to one side, trying to get a cleaner look around Bobby at the scooter.

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John Phillips: "The match is officially underway."

Mark Bravo: "Is it?"

John Phillips: "The bell has rung."

Mark Bravo: "That does not answer my question."

The crowd starts to buzz, then chuckle, then clap unevenly as the silence stretches.

Bobby shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

Maxx scratches the side of his head.

He looks at the scooter again.

Then at Bobby.

Then back at the scooter.

His expression changes from wonderment to genuine confusion.

Maxx Mayhem: "Huh."

Maxx slowly walks out of his corner.

Not aggressively.

Not in a stalking way.

More like a man approaching someone in a grocery store because he is pretty sure they know where the good cereal is.

Bobby sees Maxx coming and lifts his hands a little higher.

Then he realizes Maxx does not look like he is attacking.

So Bobby lowers his hands slightly.

Then raises them again.

Then lowers them.

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The referee watches all of this with increasing concern.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem approaching Bobby Dean here, but I do not know that Bobby is sensing any immediate danger."

Mark Bravo: "That is one of Bobby's gifts. Sometimes he senses danger. Sometimes danger has to send him a written notice."

Maxx stops near the center of the ring.

Bobby, somehow encouraged by the lack of violence, steps forward to meet him.

The crowd murmurs louder, unsure whether they are watching the beginning of a wrestling match or a very strange customer service interaction.

Maxx points toward ringside.

Maxx Mayhem: "So."

Bobby nods.

Bobby Dean: "Yeah."

Maxx keeps pointing.

Maxx Mayhem: "The scooter."

Bobby immediately brightens, relieved to be on familiar ground.

Bobby Dean: "Okay, okay, I'll send you the link to buy one."

Maxx waves him off quickly.

Maxx Mayhem: "No, bruv, not that."

He pauses.

Then looks past Bobby at the scooter again.

Maxx Mayhem: "Although I do want that."

Bobby gives a proud little nod, as if that is fair.

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Maxx turns back to him, his face more serious now. Still strange. Still Maxx. But genuinely puzzled.

Maxx Mayhem: "More importantly..."

He gestures between them.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why are we here?"

Bobby blinks.

That question clearly lands somewhere he was not prepared to go.

Bobby Dean: "Here?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Here."

Maxx points down at the ring.

Maxx Mayhem: "In the ring."

He points at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "You."

He points at himself.

Maxx Mayhem: "Me."

He looks around at the crowd.

Maxx Mayhem: "France."

The crowd cheers at the mention of France.

Maxx nods like that confirms at least one part of the equation.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why?"

Bobby's face tightens in thought.

He looks up at the ceiling.

Then down at the mat.

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Then toward the scooter, as if she may have the answer.

She does not.

Bobby Dean: "I..."

Bobby stops.

He thinks harder.

Bobby Dean: "I don't know."

Maxx stares at him.

Bobby shrugs, almost apologetic.

Bobby Dean: "I guess because Eric told me to be."

The crowd reacts with a low, uncomfortable buzz. The comedy of the moment is still there, but something underneath it shifts.

John Phillips: "There it is. That is why Bobby Dean is here. Because Eric Dane Junior told him he had to prove himself."

Mark Bravo: "That answer sounded sadder out loud than I wanted it to."

Maxx looks genuinely bothered by this.

He glances toward the entrance ramp, then back at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "Eric Dane Junior made this match?"

Bobby nods slowly.

Bobby Dean: "Yeah."

Maxx's brow furrows.

Maxx Mayhem: "I mean..."

He looks at the referee.

The referee says nothing.

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Maxx looks back at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "Can he even do that?"

Bobby gives another shrug.

Bobby Dean: "I dunno."

Maxx turns slightly, pacing two slow steps away while scratching his head again.

He looks down at the mat like the answer may be written somewhere between the canvas seams.

Then he turns back to Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "He ain't the boss, is he?"

Bobby hesitates.

Bobby Dean: "No."

Maxx squints.

Maxx Mayhem: "He sign your checks?"

Bobby looks unsure.

Bobby Dean: "I don't think so."

Maxx Mayhem: "He got a little office? Little nameplate? Little bowl of mints?"

Bobby shakes his head.

Bobby Dean: "No."

Maxx folds his arms, contemplating this like a philosopher who once suplexed a man through catering.

Maxx Mayhem: "Then why're we listening to him?"

Bobby does not have an answer.

The crowd quiets just a bit more, sensing the moment underneath the absurdity.

Bobby shifts his feet.

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Bobby Dean: "I just..."

He trails off.

Bobby Dean: "I'm trying to do what I'm supposed to do."

Maxx looks at him for a long second.

The grin is gone now.

Not angry.

Just thoughtful.

Maxx Mayhem: "Right."

He nods once to himself.

Maxx Mayhem: "Well, I don't wanna fight ya."

Bobby's head lifts.

Bobby Dean: "You don't?"

Maxx shakes his head.

Maxx Mayhem: "Nah."

He gives Bobby a quick once-over.

Maxx Mayhem: "No fun in it."

Bobby's face shifts immediately.

Offended.

Deeply.

Bobby Dean: "Hey now."

Maxx raises both hands.

Maxx Mayhem: "I'm not saying it mean."

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Bobby Dean: "I'm fun."

Maxx tilts his head.

Bobby Dean: "I am."

Bobby gestures to himself with both hands, growing slightly more animated.

Bobby Dean: "I'm very fun."

Maxx says nothing.

Bobby points toward ringside.

Bobby Dean: "I came out here on a scooter."

Maxx glances toward the scooter again.

Maxx Mayhem: "That was fun."

Bobby nods firmly.

Bobby Dean: "See?"

Maxx looks back at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "The scooter was fun."

Bobby's mouth opens.

Then closes.

The crowd laughs as Bobby points at Maxx, trying to find the right objection.

Bobby Dean: "I was on it."

Maxx Mayhem: "You were."

Bobby Dean: "So by... association..."

Maxx considers this.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's legally interesting."

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Mark Bravo: "I don't know how this became a hearing, but I am invested."

John Phillips: "What started as a match has turned into Maxx Mayhem questioning the entire reason Bobby Dean is standing across from him."

Bobby stands a little taller now, still wounded by the accusation that he is not fun.

Bobby Dean: "I'll have you know, people have enjoyed me for years."

Maxx leans in slightly.

Maxx Mayhem: "Doing what?"

Bobby freezes.

He thinks.

Maybe too long.

Bobby Dean: "Different things."

Maxx Mayhem: "Name three."

Bobby looks toward the referee.

Bobby Dean: "Do I have to?"

The referee has no idea how to answer that.

Referee: "This is supposed to be a match."

Maxx points at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "Allegedly."

The crowd laughs again as Bobby looks from the referee to Maxx, still visibly unsure whether he has been spared, insulted, or both.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem says he does not want to fight Bobby Dean because there is no fun in it, and I do not know whether that is mercy or another kind of cruelty."

Mark Bravo: "With Maxx, it might be both. But Bobby Dean looks more offended by being called not fun than he would have been by being hit with a chair."

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Maxx takes one more glance toward the scooter at ringside.

Then back to Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're weird, Bobby."

Bobby points at him immediately.

Bobby Dean: "So are you."

Maxx smiles faintly.

Maxx Mayhem: "Yeah, but I'm weird with intent."

Bobby considers that.

He has no rebuttal.

The two men stand there in the center of the ring, the match technically underway, the referee completely lost, and the crowd in Strasbourg now fully invested in whatever this has become.

Maxx Mayhem keeps studying Bobby Dean, arms folded now, head tilted slightly, the usual manic spark in his eyes dimmed into something closer to uncomfortable curiosity.

Bobby stands in front of him, still trying to piece together whether he has been insulted, complimented, rescued, or rejected.

Maybe all four.

Maxx Mayhem: "Look, bruv, I like chaos."

Maxx gestures vaguely around himself, as if chaos is not only a concept but a close personal friend standing somewhere nearby.

Maxx Mayhem: "I love chaos."

He points toward the announce table where his emotional support trash can lid still rests.

Maxx Mayhem: "Big fan of chaos."

Then he turns back to Bobby, and his face shifts again.

Maxx Mayhem: "But this?"

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He gestures between himself and Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "This ain't it."

The crowd reacts with a low murmur, some laughing, some listening more closely now.

Maxx Mayhem: "This is just..."

Maxx searches for the word, squinting slightly as if the vocabulary itself is trying to escape him.

Maxx Mayhem: "Sad and weird."

Bobby blinks.

That one gets through.

Bobby Dean: "Sad and weird?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Yeah."

Maxx nods, certain now.

Maxx Mayhem: "Ain't no reason for it."

Bobby's face tightens in thought. He looks down. Then back up. Then toward the referee. Then toward the ramp. It is clear he is trying to put every piece of what Maxx is saying together, but the pieces are not shaped like anything familiar.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem is saying out loud what a lot of people may have been thinking. This match was made because Eric Dane Junior wanted Bobby Dean to prove something to him."

Mark Bravo: "And somehow Maxx Mayhem, of all people, is the one looking at this and saying, 'No, this is too strange even for me.'"

Bobby finally looks at Maxx again.

Bobby Dean: "So... we're not fighting?"

Maxx shrugs.

Maxx Mayhem: "Could."

Bobby's eyes widen a little.

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Maxx Mayhem: "But I don't wanna."

He leans slightly closer.

Maxx Mayhem: "How 'bout this instead?"

Maxx points toward ringside.

Maxx Mayhem: "We take the battle chair for a spin..."

Bobby immediately turns his head toward the scooter, concerned but intrigued.

Maxx Mayhem: "...get a drink..."

Maxx pauses.

Maxx Mayhem: "...then go find Eric Dane."

Bobby turns back quickly.

Bobby Dean: "Find Eric?"

Maxx nods.

Bobby Dean: "Why?"

Maxx smiles.

Not the wild smile from earlier.

A smaller one.

The kind that says the answer is simple, but probably not safe.

Maxx Mayhem: "Think I wanna have a talk with him, that's all."

Bobby looks uneasy at that.

Bobby Dean: "A talk?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Just a talk."

Maxx holds up both hands, innocent.

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Too innocent.

Maxx Mayhem: "You like to drink, Bobby?"

Bobby's concern softens immediately into something more thoughtful.

Bobby Dean: "Got any chocolate milk?"

Maxx stares at him.

For one beat, he looks completely caught off guard.

Then Maxx starts laughing.

Not cackling.

Actually laughing.

Maxx Mayhem: "Sure, Bobby."

He claps Bobby once on the shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "Sure."

Bobby nods, satisfied enough with that answer to consider this plan acceptable.

The referee steps forward, finally trying to regain control of the match that has not actually become a match.

Referee: "Hey. No. You two need to wrestle. The bell rang."

Maxx turns to him.

Maxx Mayhem: "We're taking a field trip."

Referee: "This is not a field trip."

Maxx Mayhem: "Then why's there transportation?"

Maxx points toward the scooter.

The referee opens his mouth.

Nothing comes out.

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Mark Bravo: "That is legally airtight."

John Phillips: "No, it is not."

Mark Bravo: "It stopped the referee, didn't it?"

Bobby and Maxx begin to move toward the ropes.

The crowd starts cheering, buzzing louder as they realize the match may be leaving the ring before anyone has thrown a single strike.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem are leaving the ring. The opening contest has started, and I do not think we have seen so much as a collar-and-elbow tie-up."

Mark Bravo: "We saw emotional growth. We saw transportation envy. We saw chocolate milk negotiations. This is a complete athletic presentation."

Maxx sits on the middle rope and pushes the top rope up, creating space for Bobby.

Bobby looks at him, surprised.

Bobby Dean: "Thank you."

Maxx Mayhem: "Don't make it weird."

Bobby carefully steps through the ropes and onto the apron. The referee follows them, gesturing helplessly.

Referee: "Get back in the ring! Both of you!"

Maxx slips through after Bobby, drops to the floor, then turns and throws both arms out to the French crowd.

Maxx Mayhem: "WHO WANTS CHOCOLATE MILK?"

The crowd explodes in a mix of cheers and laughter.

John Phillips: "I have no idea what is happening."

Mark Bravo: "Neither does Bobby, neither does the referee, and honestly, that might be why this works."

Bobby reaches the scooter and pauses beside it, giving it a gentle pat on the handlebar.

Bobby Dean: "You hear that? We're goin' for a ride."

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Maxx walks around the scooter with reverence, inspecting it like a man who has just discovered a sacred artifact.

Maxx Mayhem: "Look at the engineering."

Bobby Dean: "She's delicate."

Maxx Mayhem: "She's beautiful."

Bobby Dean: "She's also temperamental."

Maxx Mayhem: "Same."

Bobby lowers himself carefully onto the scooter seat. The machine rocks slightly beneath him, then settles with a familiar plastic rattle.

Maxx stands beside it, looking at Bobby.

Then at the little platform behind the seat.

Then at Bobby again.

Maxx Mayhem: "So..."

Bobby looks over his shoulder.

He sees what Maxx is looking at.

He hesitates.

For one second, it looks like he might say no.

Then Bobby exhales and nods toward the back of the scooter.

Bobby Dean: "Go ahead."

Maxx's face lights up.

Maxx Mayhem: "No way."

Bobby Dean: "But don't jump on it."

Maxx Mayhem: "I would never."

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A beat.

Bobby Dean: "Don't lie to me."

Maxx Mayhem: "I might."

Maxx steps carefully onto the back of the scooter, placing both feet on the small platform behind Bobby's seat. He puts both hands on Bobby Dean's shoulders for balance.

Bobby stiffens immediately.

Bobby Dean: "Gentle."

Maxx Mayhem: "I'm being gentle."

Bobby Dean: "Your gentle has elbows."

The scooter dips slightly under the combined weight.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Bobby taps the controls.

The scooter gives a small, uncertain whirr.

Then a clunk.

Then one proud little horn chirp.

SFX: honk.

Maxx gasps with delight.

Maxx Mayhem: "She sings."

Bobby Dean: "Sometimes."

Bobby nudges the throttle forward.

The scooter begins moving.

Slowly.

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Very slowly.

Maxx stands behind Bobby, hands still planted on his shoulders, grinning like he is riding a motorcycle through fire instead of traveling up the ramp at the approximate speed of a nervous shopping cart.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem are now leaving ringside together on Bobby Dean's mobility scooter."

Mark Bravo: "Two grown men. One battle chair. A dream."

John Phillips: "The match is still technically underway."

Mark Bravo: "No, John. The journey is underway."

The referee follows behind them from ringside, shouting toward both men.

Referee: "Get back here! You're going to be counted out!"

Maxx looks back over his shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "Count slower!"

Bobby glances up at Maxx.

Bobby Dean: "He usually only goes to ten."

Maxx Mayhem: "We'll negotiate."

The referee looks completely lost as Bobby and Maxx continue their very slow descent up the ramp, the crowd cheering, laughing, and clapping along with every rattling inch.

Maxx leans forward slightly over Bobby's shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "So where's catering?"

Bobby Dean: "Left at the curtain, past production, then if you smell chicken, you've gone too far."

Maxx Mayhem: "What if I smell chocolate milk?"

Bobby Dean: "Then we're exactly where we need to be."

Maxx nods solemnly.

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Maxx Mayhem: "Wisdom."

The scooter continues upward.

Whirr.

Clunk.

Whirr.

Clunk.

Bobby keeps both hands on the handlebars, focused like a pilot guiding a wounded aircraft home.

Maxx stands behind him, arms braced on Bobby's shoulders, occasionally turning his head to wave at the fans.

John Phillips: "I genuinely do not know what to say."

Mark Bravo: "That has never stopped us before."

John Phillips: "This was supposed to be Bobby Dean proving himself to Eric Dane Junior."

Mark Bravo: "Maybe he is. He made a friend, protected the scooter, and secured a chocolate milk run. That is leadership."

The camera follows them from behind as they continue toward the entrance curtain, the entire arena now locked onto the absurd visual of Beautiful Bobby Dean driving the scooter while Maxx Mayhem rides on the back like a chaotic gargoyle.

At the top of the ramp, Maxx points ahead.

Maxx Mayhem: "To Eric Dane!"

Bobby pauses.

Bobby Dean: "And chocolate milk."

Maxx nods.

Maxx Mayhem: "And chocolate milk."

The scooter disappears through the curtain with one final, tiny honk.

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SFX: honk.

The referee stands at ringside, arms out, baffled.

The crowd in Strasbourg roars with laughter and applause as the camera cuts back to John Phillips and Mark Bravo at commentary.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem have just left the match to go find Eric Dane Junior."

Mark Bravo: "And refreshments."

John Phillips: "The referee is still trying to determine what happens here."

Mark Bravo: "I think what happens here is Eric Dane Junior is about to have a much stranger night than he planned."

The camera cuts back to the empty ring, then to the referee, then toward the entranceway where Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem vanished moments ago.

The opening contest, somehow, has become something else entirely.

Punishment

The camera cuts backstage.

Inside The Empire locker room, the atmosphere is colder than the noise of the arena outside.

The room is spacious, but it feels smaller with everyone inside it. Black gear bags sit along the walls. A monitor mounted in the corner plays the live arena feed with the volume low. The Empire's presence fills the room like a storm waiting to break.

Amy Harrison stands near the center of it all, the UTA International Championship close enough to remind everyone exactly who believes she is in control. Her arms are folded, her expression sharp, her eyes locked on Marie Van Claudio.

Valkyrie Knoxx sits nearby, relaxed in a way that makes her look even more dangerous, watching the exchange with quiet amusement. Trey Mack leans against a locker with his arms crossed, while Clovis Black stands off to the side, silent and imposing, his presence heavy without needing a word.

Marie Van Claudio stands across from Amy.

Strasbourg should have meant something different.

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France should have meant something different.

Her father, Jacques, made his living wrestling in Paris. The French wrestling scene was part of her family's history, part of the story that eventually led Marie into this business. But tonight, instead of carrying that legacy with pride, she is standing inside The Empire's locker room being stared down like a criminal waiting for sentencing.

Amy Harrison: "You embarrassed me last week."

Marie's face tightens slightly.

Marie Van Claudio: "Amy, I didn't--"

Amy Harrison: "Do not."

Amy's voice slices through the room fast enough to stop Marie before she can finish.

Valkyrie's smile grows just a little.

Amy Harrison: "Do not stand there and act like I'm stupid. Do not stand there and act like I didn't see exactly what happened."

Marie swallows, choosing her words carefully.

Marie Van Claudio: "I didn't mess up on purpose."

Amy lets out a short, ugly laugh.

Amy Harrison: "No?"

She takes a step closer.

Amy Harrison: "Because from where I was standing, it looked like Marie Van Claudio forgot who she belongs to for just long enough to cost The Empire control of the night."

Marie Van Claudio: "That's not true."

Amy's eyes narrow.

Amy Harrison: "Isn't it?"

Marie looks around the room for half a second, not looking for help exactly, but maybe looking for any sign that this is not already decided.

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There is none.

Marie Van Claudio: "I swear to you, I was not trying to sabotage anything."

Amy Harrison: "I don't care what you swear."

Amy steps closer again, her voice dropping lower, meaner.

Amy Harrison: "You had a job. You failed."

Marie's jaw tightens.

Amy Harrison: "And when people fail me, there are consequences."

That word hangs in the room.

Consequences.

Marie goes still.

Marie Van Claudio: "Amy..."

Amy Harrison: "No. You don't get to beg yet."

Amy glances toward Valkyrie Knoxx, then back to Marie.

Amy Harrison: "You must be punished."

Valkyrie shifts forward slightly in her seat, clearly more interested now.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Now we're getting somewhere."

Marie looks toward Valkyrie, then back at Amy, a quiet dread beginning to form behind her eyes.

Before Amy can continue, there is a knock at the door.

The room turns toward it.

Amy Harrison: "Finally."

Trey Mack pushes away from the locker and opens the door.

But it is not Scott Stevens.

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Avril Selene Kinkade steps into the room with absolute control, dressed in a tailored charcoal suit with a high-collar silk blouse beneath it, dark auburn hair immaculate, ultra-thin black glasses resting perfectly in place. Her presence changes the temperature of the room. Cool. Elegant. Precise. The sort of quiet that makes people lower their voices without knowing why.

She carries a slim leather briefcase in one gloved hand.

Her emerald eyes move across the room once, taking inventory of everyone inside it before settling on Amy Harrison.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Miss Harrison."

Amy's expression flickers with irritation.

Amy Harrison: "I wanted Scott Stevens."

Avril's mouth curves into the faintest possible smile.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Mr. Stevens is presently indisposed."

She takes another calm step into the room.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "However, pursuant to the authority vested in my office by UTA executive operations, I possess all requisite discretion necessary to adjudicate the matter before us."

Trey Mack glances toward Clovis Black, then back at Avril.

Trey Mack: "So that means yes?"

Avril turns her eyes toward him slowly.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "It means I advise you to listen more carefully when adults are speaking."

Trey's expression hardens, but he says nothing.

Amy cuts back in, impatient.

Amy Harrison: "Fine. If you have the authority, then I need a match made tonight."

Marie's eyes move immediately to Amy.

Amy Harrison: "Valkyrie Knoxx needs a fighting championship defense."

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Valkyrie stands now, her smile spreading as the meaning becomes clear.

Amy Harrison: "And Marie needs to learn what happens when she fails The Empire."

Marie's face falls.

Marie Van Claudio: "Amy, please don't do this."

Amy snaps her head toward Marie.

Amy Harrison: "Shut up."

The words are vicious enough to make the room go still again.

Marie takes the hit without moving, but the hurt shows anyway. It flashes across her face before she can bury it.

Amy Harrison: "You don't get to ask me for mercy. You lost that privilege when you made me look like a fool."

Marie Van Claudio: "I didn't mean to."

Amy Harrison: "I said shut up."

Amy turns back to Avril, all business again.

Amy Harrison: "Tonight. Valkyrie Knoxx defending against Marie Van Claudio."

Avril studies Amy for a moment, then looks toward Valkyrie.

Valkyrie does not hide her delight.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "I like it."

Then Avril looks to Marie.

Marie meets her eyes, but only for a second.

There is a long, uncomfortable pause.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Miss Van Claudio is medically cleared, contractually active, and currently recognised as an eligible competitor."

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Avril turns back to Amy.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Miss Knoxx is the defending champion and has not exhausted her mandatory defence allotment for this tour cycle."

She removes one glove with a slow, deliberate motion, then opens her briefcase and retrieves a slim folder.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Therefore, absent any procedural impediment, the proposed contest is prima facie permissible."

Marie's voice comes quieter now.

Marie Van Claudio: "Please."

Avril does not look at her immediately.

That somehow makes it worse.

She slides a document from the folder, glances over it, then produces a pen.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "The match is official."

Marie closes her eyes for half a second.

Valkyrie Knoxx steps closer, looking Marie over like a target placed directly in front of her.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "You hear that?"

Marie opens her eyes.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Tonight, I get to put you back in your place."

Valkyrie's smile turns colder.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "And I am going to enjoy every second of it."

Marie says nothing.

Amy steps back into Marie's space, forcing her attention away from Valkyrie.

Amy Harrison: "Listen to me very carefully."

Marie looks at her.

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Amy Harrison: "You are not walking into this match tonight to be brave. You are not walking into this match tonight to prove something. You are not walking into this match tonight because France means something to your family, or because your father made his name in Paris, or because you think this is some beautiful full-circle moment for Marie Van Claudio."

Marie's expression cracks slightly at the mention of her father.

Amy sees it and smiles.

Amy Harrison: "You are walking into this match because I said so."

Amy leans in closer.

Amy Harrison: "And if you mess this up..."

A pause.

Amy Harrison: "If you somehow beat Valkyrie tonight..."

The room tightens around those words.

Valkyrie's smile fades just enough to show the threat underneath it.

Amy Harrison: "There will be more than hell to pay."

Marie holds Amy's stare, but there is no defiance in it.

Not yet.

Only the pressure of being trapped between punishment if she loses and punishment if she wins.

Avril closes the folder with a soft, final sound.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Then we are concluded."

She slips the folder back into her briefcase and turns toward the door.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Do try to keep the carnage within the parameters of broadcast necessity. Excessive liability is so terribly inelegant."

Avril exits without waiting for a response.

The door closes behind her.

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Inside the room, Amy's eyes remain on Marie.

Valkyrie Knox is still smiling.

Trey Mack and Clovis Black say nothing, but their silence only makes the walls feel tighter.

Marie Van Claudio stands alone in the middle of The Empire, the weight of France, family, humiliation, and survival all pressing down at once.

Amy lifts her chin slightly.

Amy Harrison: "Get ready."

The camera lingers on Marie's face for one final moment.

Then it cuts away.

Bianca Page vs Emily Hightower

The camera returns to ringside inside the Zénith de Strasbourg, where the crowd is still buzzing from the strange non-match between Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem earlier in the night.

The ring has been reset. The referee steps through the ropes and checks with the timekeeper as the lights sweep across the French crowd. Signs rise around the building, several aimed toward International Affair and the looming All or Nothing match.

John Phillips: "Welcome back to World Tour: France Twenty-Six, and after what we witnessed earlier between Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem, I am not sure any of us know where this night is heading."

Mark Bravo: "Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem left on a mobility scooter to get chocolate milk and find Eric Dane Junior. That is a sentence I never prepared for in broadcasting school."

John Phillips: "But right now, we turn our attention to singles competition, and this one has major implications as we continue the road toward International Affair. Bianca Page goes one-on-one with Emily Hightower."

Mark Bravo: "Both of these women need this one, John. Emily Hightower is coming off a recent win and trying to build momentum. Bianca Page is coming off a loss, and you know that has been eating at her every second since it happened."

John Phillips: "And with the All or Nothing match on the horizon, every win matters. Every bit of momentum matters. But there is another story here tonight. Emily Hightower has made it clear she wants to do this on

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her own."

Mark Bravo: "That is the big question. Can Emily Hightower be Emily Hightower without the rest of the Hightowers getting involved? She says she can. Her family says they will stay back. But saying that and actually watching her struggle are two very different things."

The lights begin to dim.

The stage goes black.

Then a single white spotlight blooms at the top of the entrance ramp.

Gold light follows, moving in slow, elegant arcs across the stage as the entrance screen fills with sweeping script.

CLASSY

The opening notes of "Wildest Dreams" by Taylor Swift begin to play.

The boos rise immediately.

Bianca Page steps through the curtain like the arena has been waiting for permission to look at her.

She stops at the top of the ramp, chin lifted, posture perfect, one hand resting at her hip. Her entrance robe glitters white and gold beneath the spotlight, draped over her shoulders with just enough theatrical excess to make every movement look deliberate.

Behind her, Ace Andrews steps into view.

Immaculate suit. Controlled expression. Hands folded calmly in front of him. He looks less like a manager and more like a man overseeing an investment that he expects to pay dividends.

John Phillips: "Here comes 'Classy' Bianca Page, accompanied by Ace Andrews."

Mark Bravo: "Bianca Page does not enter an arena, John. She takes possession of it."

John Phillips: "Bianca Page, Naples, Florida by way of New York City, has no shortage of confidence. But tonight she is looking to rebound after a recent loss, and she has Ace Andrews at her side once again."

Mark Bravo: "Ace Andrews is exactly the kind of man Bianca wants around her. Rich, calculating, connected, and always looking for the shortcut that turns into profit."

Bianca slowly extends both arms, allowing the robe to fall open just enough to catch the light. She turns her

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head slightly, letting the camera capture the profile, the smile, the arrogance.

The French crowd boos louder.

Bianca smiles wider.

Bianca Page: "You're welcome."

Ace steps beside her and leans in, murmuring something quietly. Bianca nods without looking at him, then begins her walk down the ramp.

She does not hurry. She does not reach for the fans. She does not acknowledge the hands extended toward her except to look mildly offended that they were offered in the first place.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page has made it very clear that she believes UTA should revolve around her. She sees International Affair as an opportunity. She sees All or Nothing as a stage that she belongs on."

Mark Bravo: "And that is the thing about Bianca. She is arrogant, but she is not empty. She can go in that ring. She can wrestle. She can strike. She can cheat if she has to. And with Ace Andrews out here, she has a second brain at ringside that is almost certainly thinking of things the referee should be worried about."

Bianca reaches ringside and stops near the steps.

She turns once, slowly, giving the crowd a slight twirl as her robe trails behind her. Ace remains at floor level, eyes already moving between the referee, the ring, and the entrance ramp where Emily Hightower will soon appear.

Bianca climbs the steps and pauses on the apron. She looks toward the referee and motions sharply for him to open the ropes.

The referee hesitates for half a second, then does it.

Bianca steps through with a smug little smile, walking to the center of the ring before raising both arms out to the side.

The boos pour down.

Ace Andrews applauds from ringside, slow and measured, like he is the only person in the building who understands true value.

Mark Bravo: "Look at Ace. That is not applause. That is portfolio management."

John Phillips: "Bianca Page is in the ring, and now we wait for Emily Hightower."

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"Wildest Dreams" fades beneath the crowd noise.

Bianca removes her robe carefully and hands it through the ropes to Ace Andrews, who takes it like it is a priceless artifact. Bianca rolls her shoulders and stretches one arm across her chest, her eyes already locked on the entrance stage.

Then the mood shifts.

The lights warm.

The rough-edged opening of "The Outsiders" by Eric Church hits the speakers.

The crowd reaction changes fast, a louder, more rugged wave of cheers rolling through the Zénith de Strasbourg.

At the top of the stage, headlights flare.

Emily Hightower steps through the curtain first.

She is all grit and focus, jaw set, shoulders squared, wrist tape tight. She does not smile. She does not play to the crowd right away. Tonight, she looks like someone trying to prove something to herself before she proves it to anybody else.

A few steps behind her, David Hightower emerges.

Then Buck.

Then Dakota.

The reaction grows louder as the Hightowers fill the stage behind Emily, but something is different immediately.

They do not follow her down the ramp.

David stops at the top of the stage and folds his arms.

Buck paces a step to one side, visibly restless already, but stays beside him.

Dakota hangs back slightly, eyes scanning the ring, Ace Andrews, and the space around ringside.

Emily glances back once.

David gives her the smallest nod.

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Then Emily turns forward.

John Phillips: "And there is Emily Hightower, but Mark, take note of what we are seeing. David, Buck, and Dakota Hightower are stopping on the stage."

Mark Bravo: "That is not an accident. Earlier, Emily made it clear. No interference. No apron spots. No protecting her. If she wins tonight, she wants it to be because of her. If she loses, she wants that on her too."

John Phillips: "The Hightowers are here, but they are not coming to ringside. For the first time in weeks, we may get to see Emily Hightower truly on her own."

Emily starts down the ramp alone.

There is no truck tonight. No family walking beside her. No chaos surrounding her every step.

Just Emily.

She slaps a few hands along the barricade, but her attention keeps snapping back to the ring. Bianca watches from inside with a faint smirk, saying something to Ace without taking her eyes off Emily.

Mark Bravo: "Look at Bianca. She sees it too. Emily is coming down here alone, and Bianca Page is going to test that. She is going to find out how committed the Hightowers are to staying put."

John Phillips: "And Ace Andrews at ringside may become a major factor. The Hightowers have promised not to get involved, but Ace Andrews has made no such promise."

Emily reaches the bottom of the ramp and stops for a second.

She looks back over her shoulder.

David, Buck, and Dakota remain on the stage.

Watching.

Not moving.

Emily exhales through her nose, then turns back to the ring.

Ace Andrews gives her a polite little smile from ringside.

Ace Andrews: "Brave choice."

Emily looks at him as she passes.

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Emily Hightower: "Keep talkin'."

Ace's smile does not move.

Ace Andrews: "I usually do."

Emily climbs onto the apron and steps through the ropes.

Bianca takes a slow step back, still smiling, still composed, as though Emily's anger is something she can already use.

Emily walks to her corner and grabs the top rope with both hands, rolling her shoulders forward. She bounces once on her heels, then turns and looks up the ramp again.

The Hightowers have not moved.

Buck is already pacing behind David, but he stays there. Dakota watches carefully. David stands motionless, arms crossed, eyes fixed on his daughter.

John Phillips: "That image may tell the entire story tonight. Emily Hightower in the ring by herself. Her family watching from the stage. Bianca Page with Ace Andrews at ringside."

Mark Bravo: "Emily asked for this. Now she has to live inside it."

The referee steps toward the center of the ring and looks first at Bianca, then at Emily.

Bianca adjusts her wrist tape with slow, deliberate elegance.

Emily cracks her neck once, eyes narrowed.

At ringside, Ace Andrews folds Bianca's robe over one arm and takes his place near her corner, calm and watchful.

On the stage, David Hightower does not blink.

The bell is next.

The referee checks both competitors one final time.

Bianca Page gives him an impatient look, then flicks her eyes toward Emily Hightower like she has already decided how this is going to end.

Emily says nothing.

World Tour: France '26

She stands in her corner with both hands resting on the top rope, shoulders loose, eyes clear. For once, there is no one beside her on the apron. No Buck barking from ringside. No Dakota circling the floor. No David looming close enough to step in.

Only the stage.

Only distance.

Only Emily.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower asked for this. She wanted a match where she could stand on her own, where whatever happened would happen because of her and her alone."

Mark Bravo: "And that sounds noble until you remember Bianca Page has Ace Andrews standing about eight feet away in an expensive suit, probably already committing several misdemeanors in his head."

The referee points to the timekeeper.

DING DING DING!

The bell sounds.

Bianca steps out of her corner slowly, one hand lifting as if to invite a proper lockup.

Emily steps forward too, cautious but not hesitant.

They circle once.

Bianca's expression is all confidence, a polished little smirk sitting on her face as she measures Emily from head to toe.

Bianca Page: "No family to hold your hand tonight?"

Emily does not bite.

She keeps circling.

Emily Hightower: "Just wrestle."

Bianca's smirk tightens.

World Tour: France '26

They come together in a collar-and-elbow tie-up near center ring. Bianca tries to shift immediately into a side headlock, but Emily plants her boots and powers her backward a half-step before turning the grip into a wrist control.

Bianca winces as Emily twists the arm and steps through, controlling the wrist cleanly.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower with the early wrist control, and already, Mark, she looks composed."

Mark Bravo: "That is the cleanest start we have seen from Emily in a while. No wild swing. No immediate brawl. She is actually slowing herself down and wrestling."

Bianca tries to roll through, but Emily follows the motion and keeps the pressure on the arm. Bianca rises to one knee, reaches for Emily's hair, then thinks better of it when the referee steps closer.

Emily shifts behind her into a hammerlock.

Bianca grimaces, then ducks low and reaches backward for a snapmare. Emily floats with it, landing on her feet instead of going over, then switches into a waistlock.

The crowd gives an appreciative reaction as Bianca's eyes widen with irritation.

John Phillips: "Nice transition by Emily. She anticipated the counter and stayed with Bianca."

Mark Bravo: "That is not just strength. That is ring awareness. Emily looks like she cleared the noise out of her head."

Bianca drives an elbow backward, but Emily leans away just enough for it to miss. She tightens the waistlock and lifts Bianca off the mat, not throwing her yet, just making the point that she can.

Bianca reaches down and hooks one of Emily's hands, prying at the grip. Emily shifts with her, steps around, and takes Bianca down with a clean amateur-style trip.

Bianca hits the canvas chest-first and immediately pushes up, humiliated more than hurt.

Emily rides the position for a second, then backs off cleanly when Bianca reaches the ropes.

The referee calls for the break.

Emily gives it instantly.

The crowd cheers.

John Phillips: "Clean break from Emily Hightower."

World Tour: France '26

Mark Bravo: "And look at Bianca's face. She did not expect Emily to come in here and out-wrestle her early."

Bianca pulls herself up by the ropes, glaring across the ring.

At ringside, Ace Andrews claps once, softly, more to settle Bianca than praise Emily.

Ace Andrews: "Patience. Let her feel good about herself."

Emily hears it, but again, she does not react.

On the stage, Buck Hightower shifts his weight and leans forward slightly.

David does not move.

Dakota glances at Buck, then back to the ring.

John Phillips: "The Hightowers still at the top of the stage, still keeping their word so far."

Mark Bravo: "Buck already looks like he wants to walk down here and breathe aggressively at somebody."

Bianca steps away from the ropes and circles again, this time with less pageantry.

Emily meets her near the center.

Bianca feints high, then shoots in low for Emily's leg, trying to surprise her. Emily sprawls just enough to stuff the attempt, then snaps Bianca down into a front facelock.

The crowd reacts again as Bianca slaps a hand against Emily's ribs, trying to create space.

Emily rotates smoothly, slips behind, and pulls Bianca into another waistlock before taking her over with a basic but sharp mat return.

Bianca hits the canvas and rolls quickly toward the ropes again.

Emily does not chase.

She stands.

She breathes.

She waits.

World Tour: France '26

John Phillips: "This is the first time in a while the audience has really gotten to see Emily Hightower completely on her own, and she looks sharper because of it."

Mark Bravo: "No doubt. The irony is, Emily might have been right. Without everyone yelling, interfering, reacting, and crowding the moment, she actually looks calmer."

Bianca slides under the bottom rope to the floor, holding up one hand toward the referee.

The crowd boos immediately.

Ace Andrews steps toward her, leaning in close.

Bianca keeps her eyes on Emily while Ace speaks quietly in her ear.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page taking a breather on the outside, and here comes Ace Andrews with some advice."

Mark Bravo: "Translation? Bianca got out-wrestled twice, and Ace is making sure she does not get out-wrestled a third time."

Emily watches from inside the ring.

She looks briefly toward the stage.

David is still standing with his arms folded.

Buck's jaw is tight.

Dakota remains silent.

Emily nods to herself and turns back toward Bianca.

Emily Hightower: "You gonna wrestle or talk business all night?"

Bianca slowly turns her head toward her.

Bianca Page: "Careful. You might not like it when I stop being polite."

Emily steps closer to the ropes.

Emily Hightower: "You started?"

The crowd cheers that one.

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Ace's expression remains calm, but Bianca's smile disappears for half a second.

Mark Bravo: "There it is. Emily can wrestle clean and still have a mouth on her."

John Phillips: "Bianca Page did not enjoy that response."

The referee begins his count.

Referee: "One!"

Bianca paces on the floor.

Referee: "Two!"

Ace adjusts the sleeve of his suit and takes one step away, giving Bianca room to re-enter.

Ace Andrews: "Make her reach. She wants pride. Pride overextends."

Bianca nods once.

At three, she climbs onto the apron.

Emily backs up, giving her space to enter.

Bianca sees that too and smiles faintly.

Bianca Page: "How respectful."

She steps through the ropes, then suddenly rushes forward with a slap aimed for Emily's face.

Emily catches the wrist.

The crowd pops.

Bianca's eyes widen.

Emily twists the arm, pulls Bianca in, and sends her over with a clean arm drag.

Bianca rolls through to her knees and charges back up, angry now.

Emily catches her with a second arm drag.

Bianca scrambles up again, this time swinging a clothesline.

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Emily ducks beneath it, hooks Bianca around the waist, and takes her over with a release German suplex that sends Bianca skidding across the canvas.

The French crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Release German by Emily Hightower!"

Mark Bravo: "That one had some Hightower behind it!"

Bianca rolls toward the corner, stunned. Emily pushes up to one knee and looks toward the stage again.

Buck has both fists clenched now, nodding sharply despite himself.

Dakota allows the smallest smile.

David remains still, but his eyes do not leave Emily.

Emily stands and moves in, not rushing, not losing herself. She grabs Bianca by the wrist and pulls her away from the corner before whipping her across the ring.

Bianca hits the opposite turnbuckles back-first.

Emily charges after her and lands a heavy corner splash, crushing the air out of Bianca's chest.

Bianca staggers forward.

Emily hits the ropes and comes back with a big boot that drops Bianca flat.

John Phillips: "Hit And Run from Emily Hightower! The splash into the big boot!"

Mark Bravo: "Bianca Page came in with the attitude. Emily Hightower brought the truck stop collision."

Emily covers.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Bianca kicks out.

Ace Andrews exhales slowly at ringside, his eyes narrowing now.

Emily sits up, not frustrated, not shocked. She nods once, accepting the count, then gets back to her feet.

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John Phillips: "Bianca Page kicks out, but Emily Hightower has controlled almost every meaningful exchange in this match so far."

Mark Bravo: "And she has done it clean. No biting. No shortcuts. No family. No chaos. This is Emily at her best right now."

Emily reaches down to pull Bianca up again.

Bianca suddenly grabs the front of Emily's gear and pulls her forward, sending Emily throat-first into the middle rope.

Emily snaps backward, coughing, one hand shooting to her throat.

The crowd boos hard.

John Phillips: "And there is Bianca's opening! She used the middle rope to catch Emily across the throat!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not pretty, but it was effective. And that is Bianca Page."

The referee warns Bianca immediately.

Referee: "Watch the ropes, Bianca!"

Bianca sits up, holding both hands out innocently.

Bianca Page: "She fell."

Ace nods from ringside as if this is a perfectly reasonable legal position.

Ace Andrews: "Gravity is not against the rules."

Mark Bravo: "I hate how quickly he had that ready."

John Phillips: "Ace Andrews providing the kind of defense only Ace Andrews would offer."

Emily rolls to one side, still coughing, trying to get air back.

Bianca rises slowly now, brushing her hair away from her face. The elegance is still there, but the smile has changed.

It is sharper now.

Meaner.

World Tour: France '26

She walks toward Emily and drives the heel of her boot down between Emily's shoulder blades.

Emily grunts and reaches for the ropes.

Bianca grabs her by the hair and pulls her halfway up.

Referee: "Hair, Bianca! Let go!"

Bianca releases at four, then immediately drives a knee into Emily's ribs.

Emily doubles over.

Bianca follows with a sharp snap DDT, planting Emily near center ring.

The crowd boos as Bianca rolls her over and hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out.

On the stage, Buck takes one step forward.

David's hand comes out immediately.

Not grabbing him.

Not shoving him back.

Just enough.

Buck stops.

Dakota looks between them, then back to the ring.

John Phillips: "Buck Hightower almost moved right there."

Mark Bravo: "And David stopped him with one hand. They are keeping their word, but you can see how much it is costing them already."

Bianca notices the movement on the stage.

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She smiles.

Then she turns back to Emily, who is pushing up slowly on one forearm.

Bianca Page: "Look at that. They can be trained."

Emily's eyes lift.

There is a flash of anger.

But she swallows it down.

Bianca sees that too.

And smiles wider.

Bianca Page: "Good girl."

Emily lunges up from the mat, grabbing Bianca around the waist and driving her backward into the corner with raw force.

The crowd erupts as Bianca's back hits the buckles.

Emily buries a shoulder into Bianca's midsection once.

Then again.

Then a third time.

Referee: "Emily! Out of the corner!"

Emily backs off at three, breathing hard, jaw tight.

The clean composure is still there, but it is starting to strain.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page is trying to get under Emily's skin now."

Mark Bravo: "And that might be the smartest thing Bianca can do. Emily was calm early. Focused. If Bianca can turn this into anger, she can turn Emily into openings."

Emily steps back in, but Bianca quickly hooks her by the front of the gear and pulls her face-first into the middle turnbuckle.

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Emily's head snaps off the padding.

Bianca follows with a quick roll-up, grabbing a handful of tights out of the referee's line of sight.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out hard, sending Bianca forward onto her hands and knees.

The crowd boos the attempted shortcut.

Emily sits up, pointing toward Bianca.

Emily Hightower: "She had the tights!"

The referee shakes his head, already moving between them.

Referee: "I didn't see it."

Bianca rises behind him with both hands out again, innocence painted perfectly across her face.

Bianca Page: "I would never."

Ace Andrews applauds softly.

Ace Andrews: "Excellent restraint."

John Phillips: "Excellent restraint? She grabbed the tights!"

Mark Bravo: "The referee did not see it, John. And in the Ace Andrews school of ethics, that means it never happened."

Emily gets to her feet, frustration now clearly building.

She looks toward the stage again.

The Hightowers are still there.

Watching.

Not moving.

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Emily turns back toward Bianca, her breathing heavier now.

Bianca circles slowly, the tide beginning to change.

And Ace Andrews smiles at ringside like the match is finally becoming the exact kind of business he understands.

Emily Hightower circles toward the center again, but the rhythm is different now.

Earlier, she moved with control.

Measured.

Patient.

Now there is an edge to every step. The anger is starting to leak through the clean technique, and Bianca Page can see it.

Bianca backs away just enough to make Emily follow.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page has changed the tone of this match. She could not out-wrestle Emily early, so now she is doing everything she can to frustrate her."

Mark Bravo: "And it is working. Emily was calm at the start. Now she is chasing. That is exactly what Ace Andrews told Bianca not to do. Make Emily reach. Make pride overextend."

Bianca feints a lockup, then ducks under Emily's arms and slips behind her. Emily turns quickly, but Bianca steps away with a smug little smile, tapping one finger against her temple.

Bianca Page: "Think, sweetheart."

Emily's jaw tightens.

She lunges in again, this time catching Bianca by the wrist. Bianca immediately drops low, slipping to one knee and yanking Emily forward by the arm, sending her shoulder-first into the middle turnbuckle.

Emily grunts as she hits, and Bianca is on her instantly.

Bianca drives a boot into Emily's ribs.

Then another.

Then she presses the sole of her boot against Emily's throat and leans back into the ropes for leverage.

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Referee: "Bianca! Off the throat!"

Bianca holds until the count begins.

Referee: "One! Two! Three! Four!"

Bianca breaks at four, stepping away with both hands raised.

Bianca Page: "She keeps falling into things."

The crowd boos loudly.

On the stage, Buck Hightower takes another step forward, anger all over his face.

Buck Hightower: "Come on!"

David Hightower does not even look at him this time.

He simply speaks, low and firm.

David Hightower: "Stay."

Buck stops, but every bit of him looks like he hates it.

Dakota's eyes remain locked on Ace Andrews at ringside.

John Phillips: "The Hightowers are still on that stage. Buck wants to move. Dakota is watching Ace. David is keeping them in place."

Mark Bravo: "Emily wanted to know what this felt like. Well, this is it. No help. No rescue. No family storming the ring. Just her and whatever Bianca Page decides to get away with."

Bianca pulls Emily up by the wrist and whips her toward the ropes.

Emily rebounds, still favoring her throat and ribs.

Bianca steps in and snaps off a superkick.

Swanky connects flush against Emily's jaw.

Emily drops to one knee, stunned but not down.

The crowd reacts as Emily plants one hand on the mat, refusing to fully collapse.

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John Phillips: "Swanky by Bianca Page! That superkick landed clean!"

Mark Bravo: "And Emily is still trying to get up. That is the Hightower in her. Sometimes that is courage. Sometimes that is a bad idea with boots."

Bianca sees Emily still rising and rolls her eyes.

Bianca Page: "Stay down."

Emily pushes to both feet anyway.

Bianca rushes forward with a discus clothesline, but Emily ducks under it at the last second.

Bianca spins through.

Emily catches her around the waist from behind.

The crowd rises.

Emily lifts.

Bianca throws her weight downward, blocking the German suplex. She reaches backward, grabs at Emily's hair, and pulls just enough to force Emily to loosen the grip.

Referee: "Hair! Bianca, I saw that!"

Bianca releases immediately, turning with a sharp elbow to Emily's cheek.

Emily staggers back.

Bianca follows with a facebuster, driving Emily down hard into the mat.

She rolls Emily over and hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out.

Bianca sits up, annoyed now, then looks toward the referee with open disbelief.

Bianca Page: "That was three."

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Referee: "Two."

Bianca Page: "You counted like you were bored."

At ringside, Ace Andrews leans closer to the apron.

Ace Andrews: "Do not argue too long. Keep the pressure."

Bianca exhales sharply, then grabs Emily by the hair again before switching to the wrist as the referee moves in.

She drags Emily toward the ropes and presses her throat across the middle strand, pushing down with one knee between Emily's shoulder blades.

The referee immediately starts another count.

Referee: "One! Two! Three! Four!"

Bianca breaks clean at four, then turns her back to the referee for half a second.

That half-second is all Ace Andrews needs.

With the referee's attention on Bianca, Ace reaches up from the floor and grabs the middle rope, pulling it downward against Emily's throat from the outside.

Emily's eyes widen as the pressure cuts her air.

The crowd boos furiously.

John Phillips: "Come on! Ace Andrews!"

Mark Bravo: "The referee does not see it!"

Dakota Hightower sees it.

On the stage, she takes one step forward.

Then she stops herself.

Her hands curl at her sides.

Buck turns toward David, furious.

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Buck Hightower: "He's choking her!"

David keeps his eyes on the ring.

David Hightower: "She said stay out."

Buck Hightower: "Dad--"

David Hightower: "She said stay out."

Buck looks back toward the ring, breathing hard, but he does not move.

Ace releases the rope the moment the referee turns back.

Emily falls away from the strand, coughing and clutching at her throat.

Bianca moves in immediately, grabbing Emily by the head and pulling her up into a front facelock.

John Phillips: "Ace Andrews got involved right in front of the entire arena, but not in front of the official."

Mark Bravo: "And the Hightowers are still staying put. That is the most important part. Every dirty trick Bianca and Ace get away with makes staying there harder."

Bianca snaps Emily over with a quick suplex, then floats into another cover.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out again.

The crowd cheers, trying to pull her back into the match.

Bianca rises faster now, frustration replacing elegance.

She looks toward Ace.

Ace gives the smallest nod.

Bianca drags Emily up and hooks both arms, looking for a double underhook position, but Emily suddenly drops her weight and drives forward.

Bianca is shoved backward into the ropes.

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Emily swings a short forearm into Bianca's ribs.

Then another.

Bianca swings back with a knee, but Emily catches her leg.

The crowd rises.

Emily lifts Bianca and dumps her with a rough capture-style suplex, both women crashing hard to the canvas.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower found an opening!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not pretty. That was pure survival strength. She caught the leg and just threw Bianca because that was the only answer she had left."

Both women are down.

The referee checks on them, then begins the count.

Referee: "One!"

Emily rolls onto her stomach, still breathing hard through the damage to her throat.

Referee: "Two!"

Bianca clutches at her lower back, wincing as she turns toward the ropes.

Referee: "Three!"

The camera cuts to the stage.

Dakota is watching Emily closely now, concern visible despite her stillness.

Buck paces behind David, barely holding himself together.

David stands like stone.

John Phillips: "This is the moment where, in recent weeks, the Hightowers would be closer. They would be shouting from ringside. They would be making their presence known. Tonight, Emily is having to dig out of this by herself."

Mark Bravo: "And that sounds empowering until you are the one getting choked on the ropes by Ace

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Andrews while your family watches from a football field away."

Referee: "Four!"

Emily pushes to one knee.

Referee: "Five!"

Bianca pulls herself up using the ropes.

Emily reaches her feet first.

The crowd cheers.

Bianca turns around, and Emily meets her with a heavy right hand.

Bianca staggers.

Emily lands another.

And another.

The clean wrestling is gone now, replaced by the Hightower brawl underneath it, but this time it feels earned. Not uncontrolled. Not reckless. A comeback dragged out of pain.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower firing back!"

Mark Bravo: "There is the scrap yard in her!"

Emily backs Bianca into the ropes with short, heavy shots, then whips her across the ring.

Bianca rebounds.

Emily lowers her head too early.

Bianca sees it and kicks her hard in the chest.

Emily snaps upright.

Bianca hits the ropes again, looking for a clothesline.

Emily catches her coming in and powers her up onto her shoulders.

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The building erupts.

John Phillips: "Emily caught her! Emily has Bianca up!"

Bianca immediately panics, grabbing for Emily's face, raking her fingers across the eyes before the referee can get around to see it.

Emily cries out and drops Bianca behind her.

The crowd boos.

Bianca lands on her feet, grabs Emily from behind, and snaps her backward to the mat with a neckbreaker.

Mark Bravo: "Eye rake! Bianca went to the eyes!"

John Phillips: "The referee was blocked by Emily's body! He did not see the fingers across the face!"

Bianca covers again, pressing her forearm across Emily's jaw.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out again.

Bianca slaps the mat, then climbs to her feet and turns toward the stage.

She spreads her arms at the Hightowers.

Bianca Page: "Nothing?"

The boos swell.

Bianca laughs, looking from Buck to Dakota to David.

Bianca Page: "That's adorable."

Buck takes two hard steps forward this time.

Dakota immediately catches his arm.

Buck looks at her, furious.

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Dakota shakes her head once, even though her own face shows how badly she wants to move too.

David says nothing.

He keeps watching Emily.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page is taunting the Hightowers now."

Mark Bravo: "She knows exactly what she is doing. She is daring them to break their word. If they come down here, Emily loses the one thing she asked for. If they stay, Bianca keeps picking her apart."

Bianca turns back to Emily and drags her up again.

She hooks Emily by the head, looking for Graceful, the Ace Cutter.

But Emily shoves her forward at the last second.

Bianca hits the ropes and rebounds.

Emily catches her with a sudden finger crank, twisting Bianca's hand and wrist hard enough to make Bianca scream.

The crowd reacts loudly as Emily yanks Bianca down to one knee.

John Phillips: "Finger crank from Emily! Bianca Page is in trouble!"

Mark Bravo: "That is nasty old-school Hightower stuff right there. Small joint manipulation, pain first, questions never!"

Bianca screams again as Emily bends the fingers back, then transitions into a Fujiwara-style armbar attempt.

Bianca scrambles toward the ropes immediately, panic flashing across her face.

Emily drops her weight and tries to cinch the arm under control.

Bianca reaches.

Ace reaches too.

The referee sees Ace moving and turns sharply toward him.

Referee: "Back away!"

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Ace raises both hands, innocent.

That moment gives Bianca just enough room to twist her body and get one boot on the bottom rope.

Referee: "Rope break!"

Emily releases at three, slower than earlier but still legal.

Bianca rolls to the apron, clutching her arm.

Emily sits up, breathing hard, frustration all over her face because she knows how close that was.

John Phillips: "Emily had Bianca in danger right there, but Bianca makes it to the ropes."

Mark Bravo: "And did you see Ace? He did not touch Bianca, but he made the referee look at him. That split-second distraction helped Bianca get the rope."

Emily stands and points toward Ace.

Emily Hightower: "Keep your hands off the ring."

Ace smiles up at her.

Ace Andrews: "My hands are very clean."

Emily steps toward the ropes, but Bianca suddenly reaches from the apron and grabs Emily by the head, snapping her throat-first across the top rope.

Emily falls backward to the canvas, coughing again.

Bianca rolls under the bottom rope and crawls into a cover.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily gets a shoulder up.

Bianca screams in frustration now, her polished mask beginning to crack.

Bianca Page: "Stay down!"

She grabs Emily by the hair and slams the back of her head against the mat once.

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The referee warns her immediately.

Referee: "Bianca!"

Bianca releases, then rises and stalks toward the corner.

She steps through the ropes and climbs to the top turnbuckle, still favoring the arm Emily attacked.

The crowd rises as Bianca steadies herself.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page going up top. She may be looking for Majestic, that top-rope elbow drop!"

Mark Bravo: "High risk here, especially with that arm bothering her."

Bianca launches.

Emily rolls out of the way.

Bianca crashes elbow-first into the canvas.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Nobody home!"

Mark Bravo: "Bianca got greedy!"

Emily crawls toward the ropes, using them to pull herself up.

Bianca rolls on the mat, clutching her elbow and shoulder.

Ace Andrews steps toward the apron, concern finally showing through the calm.

Emily sees him.

Then she looks toward the stage.

The Hightowers are still there.

Watching.

Not moving.

Emily pulls herself fully upright, breathing hard, eyes watering from the repeated rope attacks and eye rake.

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But she is still standing.

And for a second, the old confidence from the start of the match comes back.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower has weathered the storm. She has taken the shortcuts, the cheap shots, the interference from Ace Andrews, and she is still standing on her own."

Mark Bravo: "This might be the match she wanted, John. Not easy. Not clean from the other side. But hers."

Emily turns toward Bianca.

Bianca is on one knee.

Emily moves in and grabs her by the wrist.

Bianca swings wildly with the bad arm.

Emily ducks and hooks both of Bianca's arms.

The crowd rises again.

John Phillips: "Emily may be looking for Burn Out!"

Emily tries to twist into the tornado double arm DDT, but Bianca deadweights and drops to a knee, blocking the rotation.

Emily tries to muscle her again.

Bianca drops even lower, then suddenly drives the crown of her head up under Emily's chin.

Emily stumbles backward, dazed.

Bianca rises and fires a high knee.

Binx catches Emily under the jaw.

Emily drops to a knee again.

Mark Bravo: "High knee! Bianca found the chin!"

John Phillips: "Emily may be out on her feet!"

Bianca covers, hooking both legs tightly.

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Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out again.

The arena erupts.

Bianca sits up in disbelief, both hands in her hair now, composure shattered.

Ace Andrews' eyes narrow.

On the stage, Buck pumps a fist once, then immediately pulls it back like he remembers he is supposed to stay restrained.

Dakota exhales, relieved.

David's expression does not change.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower refuses to stay down!"

Mark Bravo: "And now Bianca Page is running out of patience. That is when people like Bianca get even more dangerous."

Bianca crawls toward Ace's side of the ring, one hand still on her elbow, the other reaching for the ropes.

Ace leans in close, speaking quietly.

The referee moves toward Bianca, checking the arm she crashed on the missed elbow drop.

Emily is still down, rolling slowly onto her side, trying to recover.

Bianca nods at something Ace says.

Then Ace slips one hand into his jacket.

Dakota sees it from the stage.

Her eyes sharpen.

But she does not move.

Not yet.

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Ace keeps his body angled carefully, shielding the motion from the referee.

Something small and metallic rests hidden in his palm.

John Phillips: "What is Ace Andrews doing?"

Mark Bravo: "Nothing good. Billionaires do not reach into their jacket during a match for gum."

Bianca rolls slightly toward the ropes.

Ace keeps the object low.

The referee stays focused on Bianca's arm.

Emily pushes herself up on one knee behind them, unaware of what is being passed.

On the stage, Buck looks toward Dakota.

Dakota says nothing.

David watches.

Still.

Unmoving.

The match has reached the point where one wrong choice will decide everything.

The camera tightens on Ace Andrews at ringside.

His body blocks the referee's view just enough.

His hand stays low.

Bianca Page turns her shoulder inward, selling the damage to her arm while subtly reaching back through the bottom rope.

The exchange is quick.

Small.

Practiced.

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Ace slips the metallic object into Bianca's hand.

She closes her fingers around it immediately.

John Phillips: "Ace Andrews just handed something to Bianca Page! I know the referee did not see it, but Ace Andrews just gave Bianca something!"

Mark Bravo: "Dakota saw it too, John. Look at the stage."

The camera cuts to the entrance stage.

Dakota Hightower has stepped forward half a pace, eyes locked on Ace's hand. Buck is beside her now, anger burning across his face. David Hightower remains behind them, arms still folded, posture unchanged.

Buck Hightower: "That son of a bitch gave her somethin'!"

Dakota's jaw tightens.

She looks at David.

David does not look back.

David Hightower: "She said stay out."

Buck Hightower: "She's about to get robbed!"

David Hightower: "Then she learns what that feels like too."

Buck stares at him, furious.

Dakota looks back toward the ring, conflicted, but she stays where she is.

John Phillips: "This is unbearable to watch. The Hightowers saw it. They know what happened. But Emily asked them not to get involved."

Mark Bravo: "And David Hightower is holding them to it. Cold as it looks, he is holding them to Emily's own words."

Back in the ring, the referee finally steps away from Bianca, satisfied that her arm is not seriously injured.

Bianca keeps her loaded hand hidden against her body as she pushes herself up with the ropes.

Emily Hightower is back on one knee near center ring, breathing hard, one hand on the mat, eyes still

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watering from the damage she has taken.

She looks exhausted.

But not beaten.

The crowd begins clapping for her.

Slow at first.

Then louder.

Emily hears it and starts to rise.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower has been through everything Bianca Page and Ace Andrews have thrown at her tonight. She is still trying to stand. Still trying to win this her way."

Mark Bravo: "But she does not know what Bianca has in her hand."

Bianca pulls herself up in the corner, keeping her back partially turned.

Emily reaches her feet and stumbles forward.

Bianca turns suddenly and swings.

Emily ducks.

The crowd erupts.

Bianca spins through, surprised, and Emily grabs her from behind.

Emily hooks Bianca around the waist and lifts.

This time, Bianca cannot block it.

Emily snaps her over with a heavy German suplex, releasing at the last second and sending Bianca crashing hard onto the mat.

John Phillips: "German suplex! Emily avoided the shot and planted Bianca!"

Mark Bravo: "That might have been the opening!"

Bianca rolls through the impact, landing near the ropes, her loaded hand still clenched. Emily drops to a

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knee after the suplex, too drained to cover immediately.

Ace Andrews slams one hand on the apron, shouting toward Bianca.

Ace Andrews: "Move! Now!"

The referee turns toward Ace and orders him back.

Referee: "Get away from the apron!"

Ace steps back, both hands raised again, playing innocent.

But the damage is done.

That shout gives Bianca enough awareness to roll toward the corner and pull herself up.

Emily sees her rising.

Emily pushes to her feet too.

She wipes at her face, blinking hard, trying to clear her vision.

Then she looks toward the stage.

The Hightowers are still there.

Buck looks like he is ready to tear the set apart.

Dakota is tense, hands curled, eyes sharp.

David stands behind them, unmoving.

Watching.

Not saving her.

Emily turns back toward Bianca.

Her face hardens.

If she is going to win, she is going to have to do it now.

John Phillips: "Emily knows she is running out of chances. She has to force the opening here."

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Mark Bravo: "And that is the danger. She is tired, she is frustrated, and when you force openings that are not really there, people like Bianca Page and Ace Andrews make you pay for it."

Bianca stumbles out of the corner, favoring her arm, trying to bait Emily in.

Emily charges.

She goes for Ode To My Father, the bull hammer elbow, looking to end it with one shot.

Bianca drops at the last second.

Emily's elbow sails over her head.

The momentum carries Emily into the ropes.

She rebounds awkwardly, turning back around.

Bianca steps in and drives the hidden foreign object into Emily's ribs.

Short.

Sharp.

Almost invisible from the referee's angle.

Emily's body folds instantly.

The crowd boos as the impact steals all the air from her.

John Phillips: "No! She hit her with it! Bianca Page just used whatever Ace gave her!"

Mark Bravo: "The referee was blocked! He did not see it!"

Emily staggers forward, arms dropping, mouth open as she tries to breathe.

Bianca hides the object against her palm, then snaps Emily into position.

Graceful.

The Ace Cutter hits clean.

Emily's face and chest crash into the canvas.

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Bianca rolls her over immediately, dropping across her body and hooking the far leg.

Ace Andrews turns his back to the ring for half a second, slipping the object back into his jacket as if nothing happened.

Referee: "One!"

The camera cuts to the stage.

Buck takes a full step forward.

Dakota grabs his arm with both hands.

Referee: "Two!"

Buck tries to pull free.

David finally turns his head toward him.

David Hightower: "No."

Buck freezes.

Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The bell sounds.

The Zénith de Strasbourg erupts into boos.

Bianca Page rolls off Emily and immediately slides toward the ropes, one hand clutching her arm, the other reaching for Ace.

Ace Andrews helps her out of the ring with a satisfied smile, already murmuring congratulations before the referee can even raise her hand.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... 'Classy' Bianca Page!"

John Phillips: "Bianca Page steals it! She steals it with help from Ace Andrews!"

Mark Bravo: "Emily Hightower wrestled clean, fought through shortcuts, and came within inches of turning this around. But one mistake, one overextension, and Ace Andrews' insurance policy decided the match."

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Bianca leans against Ace at ringside for a moment, still selling the damage, but the smile on her face tells the real story.

She survived.

She cheated.

She won.

Ace raises Bianca's arm halfway on the floor, careful not to draw too much attention from the referee. Bianca lifts her chin toward the stage and smirks directly at the Hightowers.

Bianca Page: "Good girl stayed all by herself."

Buck hears it.

His face twists with rage.

Dakota still holds onto his arm, but her eyes are cold now, locked on Bianca and Ace.

David Hightower remains still.

The camera cuts briefly to the stage.

The Hightowers are still standing there.

Watching.

Not moving.

John Phillips: "That image says everything. David, Buck, and Dakota Hightower saw what happened. They saw Ace Andrews pass Bianca Page that object. They saw Emily get robbed. And they still did not move."

Mark Bravo: "Because Emily asked them not to. And now Emily has to live with what that cost her."

Inside the ring, Emily Hightower lies on her side, one arm wrapped across her ribs, still trying to pull air back into her lungs.

The referee kneels beside her, checking on her condition.

Emily pushes him away weakly, frustration already replacing pain.

She rolls onto her back and stares up at the lights.

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Her chest rises and falls heavily.

Then her eyes slowly drift toward the stage.

David is still there.

Buck is still there.

Dakota is still there.

None of them came.

Emily's expression changes.

Not shock.

Not even anger at first.

Something smaller.

Something worse.

Realization.

John Phillips: "Emily wanted to know what it felt like to stand on her own. Tonight, she did. She wrestled one of her cleanest matches in weeks. She looked sharper, more focused, more confident."

Mark Bravo: "And then the business showed her the other side of that. Nobody saved her. Nobody stopped Ace. Nobody evened the odds."

Bianca and Ace continue backing up the ramp, but they give the Hightowers a wide berth, cutting toward the side of the stage instead of walking too close.

Bianca laughs as the boos chase her.

Ace looks completely pleased with himself.

Ace Andrews: "Momentum restored."

Bianca nods, still looking toward Emily in the ring.

Bianca Page: "As it should be."

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The camera cuts back to Emily.

She has rolled to one knee now, clutching her ribs, hair hanging around her face.

She looks toward the stage again.

Buck takes a step like he wants to come down now.

David finally lowers his arms.

But he does not come down.

Dakota does not either.

Emily sees that.

She swallows hard, then turns away from them, pushing herself up with the ropes instead.

John Phillips: "Emily is refusing help even now."

Mark Bravo: "Or maybe she is realizing help was never coming tonight."

Emily pulls herself up to her feet, unsteady, one arm still pressed tight to her ribs. The crowd gives her a respectful cheer, but she does not look like she hears it.

Her eyes remain down.

Her jaw is tight.

On the stage, David Hightower watches his daughter stand alone in the ring.

Buck looks furious.

Dakota looks conflicted.

None of them move.

The camera lingers on Emily, then cuts once more to the Hightowers on the stage.

Watching.

Not moving.

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Back in the ring, Emily grips the top rope with one hand, breathing hard, trying to hold herself together.

The loss is official.

The lesson is not over.

International Affair

The broadcast fades away from ringside.

For a moment, the screen goes black.

Then a single heartbeat pounds through the speakers.

THUMP.

A flash of the UTA World Championship.

THUMP.

A flash of the UTA Women's Championship.

THUMP.

The UTA International Championship.

THUMP.

The UTA Tag Team Championship.

THUMP.

The UTA Fighting Championship.

THUMP.

The UTA Hardcore Championship.

The heartbeat stops.

A deep voice cuts through the silence.

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Voiceover: "In UTA, championships are not handed out."

Clips flash across the screen in rapid succession.

Jarvis Valentine standing tall with the UTA Championship.

Marie Van Claudio raising the UTA Women's Championship with tears in her eyes.

Amy Harrison smirking with the International Championship in her grasp.

Valkyrie Knoxx clutching the Fighting Championship after another violent defense.

Eric Dane Jr. holding the Hardcore Championship like it belongs to him by bloodright.

Mack and Black standing with the UTA Tag Team Championship, The Empire looming behind them.

Voiceover: "They are fought for."

A hard cut to bodies crashing into barricades.

Voiceover: "Bled for."

A chair bends across someone's back.

Voiceover: "Stolen."

A hand grabs a championship in chaos.

Voiceover: "Protected."

A champion pulls a title close while staring down a challenger.

Voiceover: "And sometimes..."

The screen goes black again.

Voiceover: "They are all put at risk at once."

The UTA logo slams onto the screen.

Then it fractures.

Seventy names begin flashing too fast to fully read, layered over crowd noise, entrance lights, and violent

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impact shots from the World Tour.

Voiceover: "At International Affair, UTA presents the most dangerous match in company history."

The words burn onto the screen.

ALL OR NOTHING

The music swells, dark and cinematic.

Voiceover: "Seventy superstars."

Clips flash faster now.

Bianca Page smirking beside Ace Andrews.

Emily Hightower fighting through pain.

Maxx Mayhem grinning through chaos.

Bobby Dean looking uncertain, then hopeful, then lost.

Hakuryu standing cold and composed.

Tyger II raising the Tiger Claw.

Clovis Black staring forward like a weapon waiting to be used.

Marie Van Claudio reaching toward the ropes.

Valkyrie Knox lifting the Fighting Championship.

Amy Harrison mouthing the words, "Long live The Empire."

Voiceover: "Every championship."

Each active UTA title flashes across the screen again, one after another, louder and faster with each cut.

Voiceover: "One match."

The screen shows a darkened arena. Empty. Waiting.

Voiceover: "No champion is safe."

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A shot of champions looking over their shoulders.

Voiceover: "No challenger is guaranteed."

A shot of exhausted competitors crawling toward gold.

Voiceover: "No alliance can be trusted."

The Empire stands together before the image glitches into separate shots of each member.

Voiceover: "No legacy can protect you."

Marie Van Claudio. Tyger II. Eric Dane Jr. Emily Hightower.

Voiceover: "And no one leaves the same."

The words return.

SEVENTY SUPERSTARS

ALL TITLES ON THE LINE

ONE MATCH

The music drops out.

A final montage hits in silence for half a second at a time.

A hand reaching for a championship.

A body falling from the ropes.

A referee calling for the bell.

A champion screaming.

A crowd exploding.

Then the voice returns, lower now.

Voiceover: "At International Affair, everyone enters with a dream."

The screen fades to black.

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Voiceover: "Most leave with nothing."

A final graphic appears.

UTA INTERNATIONAL AFFAIR

Featuring the All or Nothing Match

Seventy Superstars. All Titles. One Match.

Voiceover: "International Affair. All or Nothing. Coming soon."

The UTA logo fades in beneath the graphic.

Cheater Cheater Pumpkin Eater

The backstage corridor outside the gorilla position is still buzzing with the residual energy of Bianca Page's just-concluded match. A production assistant hurries past with a headset dangling from one ear. Bianca strides through the curtain ahead of Ace Andrews, her hair still perfectly composed despite the match, a self-satisfied smile already spread across her face. She is mid-sentence to Ace, dismissing every question with the ease of someone who has already decided the evening was flawless.

Ace Andrews: "Flawless. Absolutely flawless. Did you see their faces? The whole crowd looked like they wanted to cry -- I loved every second of it."

Bianca Page: "Of course they did. They paid to see excellence and, for once in their miserable little lives, they got it."

Bianca pauses to glance at her reflection in a dark monitor mounted on the equipment casing nearby, touching a strand of hair back into place. Ace is already reaching for her championship aspirations like a hype man who never gets a day off. Then -- footsteps. Fast ones.

Brittany Reid rounds the corner at a brisk clip, twin ponytails bouncing, green-and-black gear still on, pom-pom bows catching the hallway light. She spots Bianca immediately and her eyes go wide -- not with fear, but with the specific delight of someone who just found exactly what they were looking for.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh -- there you are? I have been, like, literally looking everywhere for you! I even checked the snack table first, which, side note -- someone totally ate all the gummy bears and that is, like, a whole entire crime situation that someone needs to answer for!"

Bianca turns slowly. Her smile does not change. It simply becomes a different kind of smile.

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Bianca Page: "I'm sure you were."

Brittany Reid: "Okay so, like -- you totally cheated out there? Like, super obviously cheated! Everybody saw it, the cameras saw it, it's literally already a GIF somewhere, I guarantee it! And like -- that's just really, really lame? No offense! Actually, like, a little offense!"

A long pause. Bianca studies Brittany the way a gallery curator studies something that does not belong on her wall.

Bianca Page: "You're adorable. You know that? Truly. The little bows. The -- " she gestures vaguely at all of Brittany " -- everything. It's like someone asked a Build-A-Bear what it wanted to be when it grew up."

Ace Andrews: stepping forward, grinning "You're really out here bothering a champion-in-waiting over a technicality? Sweetheart, go back to your pom-poms."

Brittany Reid: "Okay, like -- doing shady sh*t behind the referee's back? That's, like, the whole word for that thing, it's not a technicality, those are totally different! And also -- omigosh -- didn't I already beat you? Last week? I literally beat you last week! Clean! I remember because I was, like, super hungry after and I ate like 50 tacos with Sol and it was, like, a really kawaii night overall?"

The smile on Bianca's face does not waver. But something behind her eyes does. Her chin lifts a fraction of an inch.

Bianca Page: "You got lucky. Once. People win the lottery too. It doesn't make them wealthy, it just makes them briefly inconvenient."

Brittany Reid: "I mean -- my record against you is literally one and zero? Like, those are real numbers that exist in the real world! Math is a thing! It's, like, a whole subject! But sure, totally, lottery, omigosh, whatever you need to tell yourself, that's super valid for you!"

That lands. Bianca takes one slow step forward, her voice dropping from dismissive to deliberate.

Bianca Page: "Let me explain something to you, little girl, because no one in your cheerleading circle apparently thought to. You are a novelty. You flip, you spin, you do your little tricks, and people clap because people clap for anything shiny. But novelties have a shelf life. And yours -- " she leans in just slightly " -- is expiring."

Brittany Reid: nodding enthusiastically, like she is taking the most helpful notes "Okay, yeah, totally, uh huh, uh huh -- omigosh that was, like, so many words? And literally none of them were 'you're right, Brittany, I cheated, my bad!' Which is, like -- that was the only part I actually needed! You could've just said that and we'd both be on our way and I could go investigate the gummy bear situation, which is still a very open case!"

Bianca's hand shoots out toward Brittany's collar -- not a strike, a grab, the opening move of someone who

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has decided words are finished.

Brittany doesn't flinch. If anything she looks mildly inconvenienced, like someone just spilled something small on her uniform.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh -- okay! Okay, wow! Super brave of you! Let's totally do this right now, you creep -- I will literally wreck you in this hallway and it will be, like, so fast and so clean that they won't even need to mop up, because I am a total professional and also I just wrestled and I am very warmed up!"

Then -- silence.

Bianca's eyes cut past Brittany's shoulder.

Lexi Gold has materialized at the far end of the corridor, arms folded, leaning against the wall like she has been there for a while and simply chose now to be noticed. She isn't watching the confrontation. She is watching Bianca. Specifically. Only.

Something shifts in Bianca's face. Not fear -- Bianca Page does not do fear, or at least she does not let it have an address. But recognition. The kind that costs something.

Ace clocks it immediately. His grin flickers.

Ace Andrews: quietly, for once "Bianca--"

Bianca Page: without looking at him "I see her."

A long beat. Bianca releases Brittany's collar. Slowly. Each finger deliberate. She smooths the front of her own attire with both hands, a gesture that has nothing to do with her fit.

She holds Lexi's gaze across the corridor -- neither of them speaks, neither of them moves -- and the air between them has the specific, pressurized quality of two people who have already said everything and are currently deciding whether to say it again.

Bianca Page: "Lexi."

Lexi Gold: "Bianca."

Bianca is the one who looks away first. She does it like it was her idea and refocuses on Brittany.

Bianca Page: "Enjoy your little rescue. It won't always come."

She turns. One beat. Then, almost to herself, just loud enough:

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Bianca Page: "Of all the places."

She walks. Ace falls in beside her, already leaning in to murmur something. Her jaw is set. Her heels click sharp and even down the concrete corridor until the sound rounds a corner and disappears.

Brittany watches them go, then slowly turns to look at Lexi, ponytails swinging, head tilted at a genuinely curious angle.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh. Okay. So you two, like, totally have a whole entire thing? Like a whole situation? I could literally feel that from over here and I don't even know what that was -- are you guys, like, old rivals? Did she, like, steal your parking spot or something? Because she seems like someone who would one hundred percent steal a parking spot and then, like, act like it was always her parking spot?"

She glances back down the empty hallway, then at her collar where Bianca's hand had been, then back up at Lexi with a small sunny shrug.

Brittany Reid: "Anyway -- like, thank you? I totally had it, but also thank you, that was super nice of you! And also -- omigosh -- do you know who ate the gummy bears? Because that investigation is, like, still very much open and I feel like you seem like someone who knows things?"

Lexi Gold: "No, I haven't--so apologies. And to answer your first question... I've heard enough to get a pretty clear idea of the kind of person she is. In my eight years as a pro wrestler, I've dealt with more than my share of bullies, manipulators and people who thrive on tearing others down, and honestly I can't stand people like that. I deal with my own mental struggles on top of that every day, so I understand how heavy life can get. I'm Lexi by the way. Nice to meet you."

Always overflowing with energy, Brittany bounces with excitement. A grin stretches from ear to ear. Brittany Reid: "Brittany Reid, Killer Bee! Nice to meet ya! Omigosh, you are like, totally that girl from the front row last week, right? You have got to tell me how you stayed so, like, super-duper chill with that total asshat sitting right in front of you! If that were me, I literally would have just, like, done a double tuck off that barrier and totally kicked that bitch right in her stupid face! I mean, it would have been such a vibe, right? Total victory!"

Lexi nods quietly, folding her arms across her chest as a heavy sigh escapes her. For a moment, she's lost in her thoughts, wishing she could turn back time and rewrite that outcome. She resumes eye contact with Brittany.

Lexi Gold: "Yeah it was tough sitting there and watching Amy do exactly what she always does--bend the rules, take the cheap shots, and use every dirty tactic in the book whenever things weren't going her way. That's who she is, a heel to the core, and honestly, it's gotten old. Every time it looked like the match was slipping out of her hands, there she was, finding another shortcut, another way to steal momentum instead of actually earning it. That's why I was pulling for Dante the whole time. He fought with heart, with pride, and with the kind of passion you can't fake. He went out there and left absolutely everything in that ring without once needing to cheat, manipulate, or stoop to anyone's level just to get ahead. In my eyes that's what a real

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champion looks like, and if anyone deserved to walk away with that championship, it was Dante."

Lexi looks down at her watch.

Lexi Gold: "Anyway.. I know there are a lot of questions floating around about my status with this company. But I'm not in a place where I'm ready to answer everything just yet. When the time is right, I'll speak on it fully and clear the air myself. For now, I'm going to get going."

Brittany Reid: "Honestly? Having another girl around who isn't a complete disaster would be a total breath of fresh air. So, like, don't be a tease--totally sign that contract and help me curb-stomp some of these unwashed douchebags. I'm rooting for you, for sure! But right now, I've got a gummy bear bandit to catch and I'm gonna kick their teeth in. Later!"

Brittany smiles her big, bright grin and gives Lexi a little wave, before she heads back towards the catering area, with the hope that the gummy bears are restocked or at least replaced with another gummy animal. Lexi can't help but smile softly and waive back, but her mind quickly returns to her decision on UTA.

Will she or won't she?

This business don't care how good you are

The camera cuts backstage moments after the match.

The curtain near gorilla bursts open and Emily Hightower storms through it breathing hard, sweat still running down her face. Frustration rolls off her before she even says a word. She rips angrily at the tape around one wrist while pushing past a pair of stagehands trying to stay out of her way.

Further down the hallway, Sol Azteca stands near a monitor with her arms folded loosely across her chest. The glow from the screen flickers across the gold details of her mask while the replay of the finish rolls silently overhead.

She had clearly been watching.

Emily notices her immediately.

For a second it looks like Sol might say something.

But she doesn't.

No lecture.

No sympathy.

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No "I told you so."

She simply shifts slightly to the side and lets Emily walk past her.

That almost seems to bother Emily more than if Sol had actually spoken.

Emily slows for half a second after passing her, jaw tight, eyes burning with frustration, but she keeps walking without saying anything.

Then the rest of the Hightowers come through the curtain behind her.

Buck already looks ready to explode.

Buck Hightower: "This is bullshit. Absolute bullshit."

Dakota Hightower: "Buck--"

Buck Hightower: "No, screw that. We stood there and watched her get screwed all damn match."

Emily suddenly spins around toward them.

Emily Hightower: "No. Don't."

Buck stops immediately.

Emily points back toward the arena with frustration still shaking through her voice.

Emily Hightower: "You said you'd stay out of it."

Buck Hightower: "And look what happened."

Emily Hightower: "I said don't."

Buck looks ready to argue anyway, but David calmly steps forward before he can.

David Hightower: "And we did."

Emily stares at him, still breathing uneven from the match.

For a second the hallway goes quiet except for the muffled crowd still echoing somewhere deeper inside the building.

David takes another slow step toward her.

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Not aggressive.

Not loud.

Honestly, almost worse because of how calm he is.

David Hightower: "Nobody came to save you."

Emily's expression tightens immediately.

David Hightower: "You wanted your own fight."

A pause.

David Hightower: "And the second things got hard, where was all that respect everybody talks about?"

Emily opens her mouth slightly like she wants to answer him.

Nothing comes out.

Because deep down she knows exactly what he is trying to make her feel.

David nods once, almost like he expected the silence.

David Hightower: "This business don't care how good you are."

Another pause.

David Hightower: "It only cares if you survive it."

David brushes past her shoulder and starts walking down the hallway.

Buck glares back toward gorilla one last time before following him. Dakota lingers beside Emily for a moment longer, looking like she wants to say something reassuring, but eventually she follows too.

Emily stays standing there alone after they leave.

Breathing hard.

Trying to hold herself together.

Then slowly, her eyes drift back toward Sol still standing near the monitor.

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Sol still says nothing.

She just watches quietly from across the hallway.

And somehow that silence feels heavier than anything David said.

The camera lingers on Emily's expression for another second before fading back toward the arena.

Marie Van Claudio vs. Valkyrie Knox

The broadcast returns to ringside inside the Zénith de Strasbourg, where the crowd is still restless after the fallout from Bianca Page's victory over Emily Hightower.

The camera sweeps across the arena, catching fans still reacting to the night's earlier chaos. Signs rise throughout the crowd. French flags wave in the lower bowl. Then the lower-third graphic rolls across the screen.

UTA FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH

Fighting Championship Rules

Valkyrie Knox defends against Marie Van Claudio

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are moments away from a UTA Fighting Championship match, and I want to make this clear right away. Marie Van Claudio's UTA Women's Championship is not on the line here."

Mark Bravo: "No. This is about Valkyrie Knox defending the Fighting Championship under Fighting Championship Rules. Submission, knockout, or referee stoppage. But John, let's not pretend this match came from competition. It came from punishment."

John Phillips: "Earlier tonight, inside The Empire locker room, Amy Harrison blamed Marie Van Claudio for what happened last week. Avril Selene Kinkade entered on behalf of executive authority and approved this match. Amy called it a punishment. Valkyrie Knox called it putting Marie in her place."

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes this disgusting. Marie is the UTA Women's Champion. She is one of the most important women in UTA history. And tonight, in France of all places, Amy Harrison has turned what should have been a meaningful moment into humiliation."

John Phillips: "Marie's father, Jacques, wrestled in Paris. France is part of the Van Claudio family history. This should have been a proud night for Marie Van Claudio."

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Mark Bravo: "Instead, she's being marched into a fight she didn't ask for, against Valkyrie Knoxx, while Amy Harrison pulls the strings."

The lights begin to fall.

A dark purple glow spreads slowly across the entrance stage.

The noise of the crowd drops into a tense rumble.

Then thunder rolls through the speakers.

Low.

Heavy.

Ancient.

A war horn blares.

The crowd responds with a harsh wave of boos as smoke begins to crawl across the stage.

Through the smoke, Valkyrie Knoxx steps into view.

The UTA Fighting Championship is around her waist.

She stands beneath the dark purple light, steel-spiked gauntlet lifted slowly toward the rafters. She does not smile. She does not acknowledge the crowd. She simply stands there, carved out of violence, like the boos are weather moving around stone.

John Phillips: "There is the UTA Fighting Champion. Valkyrie Knoxx. The Iron Valkyrie. Former UTA Women's Champion, current Fighting Champion, and one of the most physically dominant forces in this company."

Mark Bravo: "And under Fighting Championship Rules, she becomes even more dangerous. This title is built around survival. It is built around punishment. And Valkyrie Knoxx may be the worst possible person to face when somebody else has decided you need to be punished."

Valkyrie lowers the gauntlet.

She begins to move.

One step.

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Then another.

Slow.

Measured.

But before she can start down the ramp, movement bursts through the curtain behind her.

Marie Van Claudio stumbles out onto the stage.

Not walking proudly.

Not appearing through the lights of her own entrance.

Pushed.

The crowd reaction changes instantly.

Sympathy crashes through the boos as Amy Harrison steps out behind her, one hand planted hard against Marie's back, shoving her forward into the purple glow of Valkyrie's entrance.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on."

Mark Bravo: "Not even her own entrance. Not even that."

Valkyrie stops near the top of the ramp and slowly turns her head.

She sees Marie.

She sees Amy.

Then Valkyrie smiles.

Not wide.

Not playful.

Just enough to show she understands exactly what this is.

Amy pushes Marie again.

Amy Harrison: "Move."

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Marie catches herself, shoulders tight, eyes lowered. The UTA Women's Championship is not around her waist for ceremony tonight. There is no spotlight for the First Lady of the UTA. No violin. No grand recognition. No moment to stand before the French crowd and honor the family ties that make this country matter to her.

Only Valkyrie's music.

Only Amy's hand at her back.

Only humiliation.

John Phillips: "This is sickening. Marie Van Claudio's father made his living wrestling in the French wrestling scene. He wrestled in Paris. This country is part of her family's story, part of why Marie became who she became. And Amy Harrison has stripped every ounce of dignity from this moment."

Mark Bravo: "She knows that, John. That's the point. Amy Harrison does not just want Marie beaten. She wants Marie diminished. She wants this crowd to see Marie Van Claudio not as a champion, not as a legend of the women's division, but as someone Amy can push around whenever she wants."

Marie glances out toward the crowd for just a moment.

The fans in Strasbourg respond immediately.

They cheer her.

Loudly.

Desperately.

A chant starts near the lower bowl and spreads fast.

Crowd: "MA-RIE! MA-RIE! MA-RIE!"

Marie hears it.

For one second, something flickers across her face.

Not confidence.

Not quite.

But recognition.

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The people still remember who she is.

Amy sees it too.

Her expression hardens immediately.

Amy Harrison: "Do not look at them."

She grabs Marie by the arm and yanks her forward, forcing her to keep walking.

Amy Harrison: "You are not here for them. You are here because I said so."

Valkyrie begins walking now, and Amy shoves Marie into motion behind her.

The three women head down the ramp together beneath Valkyrie's music.

Valkyrie leads like a champion marching toward execution.

Marie follows because she has been forced to.

Amy walks close behind, always near enough to push, always near enough to speak into Marie's ear, always near enough to make sure this feels less like a title match and more like a sentence being carried out.

Amy Harrison: "You wanted to embarrass me last week?"

Marie says nothing.

Amy Harrison: "You wanted to make me look weak?"

Marie keeps her eyes forward.

Amy Harrison: "Then tonight, you get to stand across from her."

Amy points toward Valkyrie.

Valkyrie does not look back.

She does not need to.

Amy Harrison: "And you get to remember exactly what happens when you forget your place."

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison is berating Marie the entire way down the ramp. This is supposed to be a Fighting Championship match. This is supposed to be Valkyrie Knoxx defending that championship. But Amy

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has made the entire presentation about breaking Marie Van Claudio down."

Mark Bravo: "And Valkyrie is fine with it. Look at her. She's not conflicted. She's not bothered. She is being handed someone Amy wants punished, and Valkyrie looks like she cannot wait to do the punishing."

Fans reach over the barricade toward Marie as she passes.

Some shout encouragement in French. Others chant her name. A few hold up signs calling her the First Lady of the UTA.

Marie's eyes move toward them again, instinctively drawn to the support.

Amy snaps her fingers sharply near Marie's face.

Amy Harrison: "Eyes forward."

Marie flinches.

The crowd boos furiously.

John Phillips: "Listen to this crowd. They hate this."

Mark Bravo: "They should. Marie Van Claudio should have been able to walk into France with her head high. She should have been able to feel this audience, feel that family history, feel what this stop on the World Tour means. Instead, Amy Harrison has turned it into public embarrassment."

At ringside, Valkyrie reaches the Fighting Championship table and stops.

She slowly unfastens the championship from around her waist.

With one hand, she lifts it high.

The purple light catches the faceplate as the crowd boos.

Valkyrie's expression remains cold and pleased.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie Knoxx holding up the UTA Fighting Championship. Again, Marie Van Claudio's Women's Championship is not on the line. This is Valkyrie's title defense."

Mark Bravo: "But emotionally? Amy has made it feel like Marie is defending her pride, her dignity, and whatever piece of herself Amy has not managed to take yet."

Valkyrie hands the Fighting Championship to the official at ringside, then turns toward Marie.

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For the first time since the entrance began, Valkyrie speaks.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Kneel--or be broken."

Marie looks at her.

There is fear there.

There is anger too.

Buried under humiliation. Buried under pressure. But there.

Amy steps up beside Marie and smiles.

Amy Harrison: "I would listen to her."

Marie's jaw tightens.

She does not answer.

Amy shoves her toward the ring steps.

Amy Harrison: "Inside."

Marie stumbles forward and catches the edge of the steps with one hand.

The boos grow even louder.

Valkyrie climbs onto the apron first and steps through the ropes with the slow confidence of a champion who believes the match is already hers.

Marie follows more slowly.

She pauses on the apron, looking once more over the Strasbourg crowd.

The chant rises again.

Crowd: "MA-RIE! MA-RIE! MA-RIE!"

This time, Marie holds the look a second longer.

Amy sees that from ringside.

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Her face sharpens.

Amy Harrison: "Do not make me say it again."

Marie closes her eyes briefly.

Then she steps through the ropes.

Inside the ring, Valkyrie stands near center, broad and still, Fighting Championship now with the referee, her gaze fixed on Marie like a predator that has been told not to rush because the prey is already trapped.

Marie moves to the opposite side, trying to gather herself, trying to breathe through the weight of the moment.

Amy remains at ringside, smiling like the architect of the entire humiliation.

John Phillips: "Marie Van Claudio is in the ring. Valkyrie Knoxx is waiting. Amy Harrison is at ringside. And this Fighting Championship match is already carrying a level of cruelty that has nothing to do with sport."

Mark Bravo: "Marie is trapped either way. If Valkyrie destroys her, Amy gets the punishment she wanted. If Marie somehow wins, Amy already promised there would be more than hell to pay."

The referee raises the UTA Fighting Championship high above his head.

The crowd reacts, but the sound is uneasy now.

This does not feel like opportunity.

It feels like survival.

Ring Announcer: "The following contest is scheduled for one fall and is for the UTA Fighting Championship! This match will be contested under Fighting Championship Rules!"

The crowd roars at the announcement, then quickly falls into boos again as Amy applauds mockingly from ringside.

Ring Announcer: "Introducing first, the challenger..."

There is a pause as Marie stands in the corner, eyes lowered.

Ring Announcer: "From Montreal, Quebec, Canada... she is the UTA Women's Champion... 'The First Lady of the UTA'... Marie Van Claudio!"

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The crowd cheers loudly, trying to give Marie the entrance moment she was denied.

Marie looks up, emotion crossing her face for half a second.

Amy's smile disappears.

Valkyrie does not move.

Ring Announcer: "And her opponent..."

Valkyrie steps forward.

Ring Announcer: "From Reykjavik, Iceland, weighing in at one hundred eighty-two pounds... she is the UTA Fighting Champion... Valkyrie Knoxx!"

Valkyrie lifts her steel-spiked gauntlet once more as the boos pour down.

The referee lowers the championship and hands it off to ringside.

Marie keeps her eyes on Valkyrie now.

Amy circles slowly at ringside, never letting Marie forget she is there.

John Phillips: "Fighting Championship Rules. Submission, knockout, or referee stoppage. Marie Van Claudio has walked into a brutal situation tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And the worst part is, John, this crowd wants to lift her up, but Amy Harrison is standing right there trying to drag her back down."

The referee checks with Valkyrie.

Valkyrie says nothing.

He checks with Marie.

Marie gives a small nod.

At ringside, Amy leans against the apron, eyes locked on Marie.

Amy Harrison: "Remember what I said."

Marie hears it.

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So does everyone close enough to ringside.

The referee looks toward the timekeeper.

Valkyrie rolls her shoulders.

Marie exhales slowly.

The bell is next.

The referee checks with Valkyrie Knox one final time.

Valkyrie says nothing.

She does not nod.

She does not blink.

She only stares across the ring at Marie Van Claudio, the UTA Fighting Championship now safely handed off to ringside.

The referee turns to Marie.

Marie stands in the opposite corner, shoulders tight, breathing carefully, eyes flicking between Valkyrie and Amy Harrison at ringside. The Strasbourg crowd is still chanting for her, still trying to give her something solid to stand on.

But Amy is closer.

Amy's voice cuts through the noise from the floor.

Amy Harrison: "Remember what I said."

Marie swallows.

The referee looks toward the timekeeper.

John Phillips: "This Fighting Championship match is about to begin. No pinfalls under these rules. Submission, knockout, or referee stoppage only."

Mark Bravo: "And that matters, John, because Marie Van Claudio is not just walking into a match. She is walking into punishment. Amy Harrison made sure of that."

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The referee calls for the bell.

DING DING DING!

The bell sounds.

And Marie Van Claudio does not move forward.

She does not raise her hands.

She does not circle.

Instead, her eyes go immediately to Amy Harrison.

It is small.

Instinctive.

Almost helpless.

A look that asks without saying it.

What do you want me to do?

John Phillips: "Look at Marie. She is looking to Amy. The bell has sounded, and Marie Van Claudio is looking to Amy Harrison like she is waiting for instructions."

Mark Bravo: "That tells you how deep this has gotten. Marie is a champion in her own right, and right now she does not even know if she is allowed to fight."

Amy leans closer to the apron, lips curled with impatience.

Amy Harrison: "Don't you dare embarrass me."

Marie's eyes lower for half a second.

That is all Valkyrie needs.

The Fighting Champion steps forward and shoves Marie hard in the chest.

Marie stumbles backward into the turnbuckles, catching herself with both hands on the top rope.

The crowd boos immediately.

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Valkyrie does not follow with a strike.

Not yet.

She just stands there, staring at Marie with cold contempt.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Fight."

Marie looks up at her, uncertain, rattled by the sudden contact but still not ready to answer it.

Valkyrie steps in again.

Another shove.

This one snaps Marie's shoulders back into the buckles harder.

Marie's hands come up halfway, not in a fighting stance, not really. More like defense. More like confusion.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie Knoxx just shoving Marie around, trying to provoke her, trying to force something out of her."

Mark Bravo: "And Marie has no idea how to respond. If she fights, Amy may punish her. If she does not fight, Valkyrie will punish her. There is no safe direction here."

Amy's voice rises from ringside.

Amy Harrison: "What are you doing? Stand there properly!"

Marie glances toward Amy again.

Valkyrie's eyes sharpen.

She steps close enough now that Marie can feel her breath.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Do you need permission to bleed?"

Marie says nothing.

Her face tightens, shame and anger colliding beneath the surface.

John Phillips: "And under these rules, Mark, Marie could simply submit. There are no pinfalls. If Marie Van Claudio wanted this over, if she wanted out of this punishment, she could tell the referee she submits and the match would end."

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Mark Bravo: "She could. But think about what that means. Submitting before Valkyrie even puts a hold on her? In France? With Amy Harrison watching? With the crowd chanting her name? That is not escape. That is another kind of humiliation."

John Phillips: "But standing there against Valkyrie Knoxx may be worse."

Mark Bravo: "That is the cruelty of it. Amy put Marie in a match where every choice hurts."

Valkyrie raises one hand and presses it against Marie's chest.

Not a shove yet.

Just pressure.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Kneel."

Marie's breathing quickens.

Valkyrie pushes her again.

Marie staggers out of the corner this time, nearly losing her footing before catching herself near the ropes.

The crowd boos, then shifts quickly back into chanting.

Crowd: "MA-RIE! MA-RIE! MA-RIE!"

Marie hears them.

Amy hears them too.

Amy Harrison: "Ignore them!"

Valkyrie steps forward again, looming over Marie.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "You are no champion."

Marie's eyes snap up.

That one lands differently.

Valkyrie sees it.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "You are Amy's mistake."

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Another shove.

Marie's back hits the ropes.

Something in her breaks loose before her mind can catch it.

Her hand flies.

SLAP!

The sound cracks across the ring.

The entire arena gasps, then erupts.

Valkyrie's head turns slightly from the impact.

Marie freezes.

Her own eyes go wide.

She looks at her hand like it betrayed her.

Like she did not mean to do it.

Like instinct moved faster than fear.

John Phillips: "Marie just slapped Valkyrie Knoxx!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Marie's face! She did not plan that. That was pure reflex, pure pride, and she knows immediately what she just did!"

At ringside, Amy Harrison explodes.

Amy Harrison: "What did you just do?!"

Marie turns toward Amy, panic flashing across her face.

Amy Harrison: "You stupid--"

But Amy never finishes.

Because Valkyrie Knoxx turns her head back toward Marie.

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Slowly.

Very slowly.

The cold expression is gone.

Now there is fury.

Marie backs up half a step.

Not enough.

Valkyrie lunges.

She drives a brutal forearm into Marie's jaw, snapping her head back and sending her stumbling into the corner.

The crowd erupts into boos as Valkyrie follows immediately, burying a second forearm into Marie's cheek.

John Phillips: "And now Valkyrie Knoxx is all over Marie!"

Mark Bravo: "That slap woke up every violent instinct Valkyrie has!"

Marie tries to cover up, but Valkyrie crowds her against the turnbuckles, using her size to trap her. A short elbow crashes into Marie's temple. Then another. Valkyrie grabs the top rope with one hand and drives a knee into Marie's midsection.

Marie folds forward, gasping.

Valkyrie shoves her upright again with both hands.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Again."

Another forearm.

Marie's knees dip.

Another knee to the body.

Marie drops lower.

The referee steps closer, watching carefully under Fighting Championship Rules, where a lack of intelligent defense can matter fast.

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Referee: "Marie, defend yourself!"

Marie brings her arms up, trying to protect her head.

Valkyrie punches through the guard with clubbing shots, hammering down across Marie's arms, shoulders, and side of the head.

At ringside, Amy is still screaming.

Amy Harrison: "You brought this on yourself! You hear me? You brought this on yourself!"

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison is blaming Marie for this while Valkyrie Knoxx mauls her in the corner!"

Mark Bravo: "That is exactly how Amy wants this to work. Marie gets punished, and somehow Marie is still made to feel responsible for the punishment."

Valkyrie drives her shoulder into Marie's ribs once.

Then again.

Then again.

Each impact crushes more air out of Marie, forcing her lower and lower in the corner.

Marie slides down the turnbuckles into a seated position, arms over her head now, trying to shield herself from the storm.

Valkyrie steps back half a pace.

Then stomps down into Marie's chest.

Another stomp.

Another.

The crowd boos louder as the referee moves in, counting only to force a corner break, not because a disqualification would automatically save Marie from the physical damage already being done.

Referee: "Back out, Valkyrie! One! Two! Three!"

Valkyrie does not immediately stop.

She plants one boot across Marie's throat and presses down.

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Marie's hands grab at Valkyrie's ankle.

Referee: "Four! Valkyrie, back off!"

Valkyrie finally breaks, stepping backward with deliberate slowness.

Marie coughs and clutches at her throat, still seated in the corner, eyes squeezed shut as she tries to pull breath back into her lungs.

Valkyrie stands above her, chest rising and falling, the anger still burning in her eyes.

Amy leans over the apron from the floor, voice sharp and venomous.

Amy Harrison: "Look at me, Marie."

Marie does not.

Amy Harrison: "Look at me!"

Marie opens her eyes, barely turning her head toward Amy.

Amy Harrison: "That was your warning."

Valkyrie steps forward again.

Marie is still seated.

Still trapped.

And the Fighting Champion is just getting started.

Valkyrie Knoxx stares down at Marie Van Claudio in the corner, chest rising and falling, jaw tight, the red mark from Marie's slap still faintly visible against her face.

Marie remains seated against the bottom turnbuckle, one hand at her throat, the other pressed across her ribs. She is not fighting back now. Not really. She is surviving in pieces, trying to breathe, trying to understand how quickly this spiraled from humiliation into violence.

The referee steps between them as much as he dares.

Referee: "Back up, Valkyrie. Give her space."

Valkyrie's eyes do not leave Marie.

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For a moment, it looks like she might ignore the official entirely.

Then she takes one step back.

Then another.

Then another.

The crowd noise rises uneasily as Valkyrie retreats all the way across the ring, not because she is giving Marie mercy, but because she is creating distance.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie Knoxx is backing up now, but I do not like the look of this."

Mark Bravo: "That is not restraint, John. That is a runway."

At ringside, Amy Harrison watches with narrowed eyes, arms folded, looking more pleased than concerned.

Amy Harrison: "Do it."

Marie hears Amy's voice and looks up just enough to see Valkyrie across the ring.

Valkyrie lowers her stance.

Her eyes lock on Marie's face.

The intent is obvious.

And horrible.

John Phillips: "Marie is still seated in that corner. She has nowhere to go."

Mark Bravo: "If Valkyrie hits this clean, the referee may not have a choice. That could be a knockout. That could be a stoppage. That could be the whole match."

The referee turns toward Marie.

Referee: "Marie, move! Defend yourself!"

Marie's eyes widen.

Valkyrie charges.

Heavy steps pound across the canvas as the Fighting Champion launches herself toward the corner, knee

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rising, aimed directly for Marie Van Claudio's face.

The crowd gasps.

At the last possible instant, Marie moves.

Not cleanly.

Not gracefully.

Instinctively.

She rolls sideways out of the corner, collapsing beneath the bottom rope as Valkyrie's knee drives full force into the turnbuckles.

THUD!

The impact echoes through the ring.

Valkyrie's body jolts as her knee smashes into the corner pad and the steel beneath it.

For the first time in the match, Valkyrie cries out.

John Phillips: "Marie moved! Valkyrie Knoxx just drove her knee into the corner!"

Mark Bravo: "That was pure survival! Marie did not counter. She did not plan. She got out of the way because every instinct in her body screamed at once!"

Valkyrie stumbles backward out of the corner, one hand dropping immediately to her knee. Her expression twists, fury mixing with pain.

Marie lies near the ropes on her side, coughing, wide-eyed, realizing a full second after the fact that she is still conscious.

At ringside, Amy Harrison's face changes instantly.

Amy Harrison: "No! No, get up! Get up and fix it!"

Valkyrie turns slightly, trying to put weight on the leg.

The knee buckles just enough to make her catch herself on the top rope.

The crowd comes alive.

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Not because Marie has taken control.

Not yet.

But because for the first time, Valkyrie Knox looks vulnerable.

John Phillips: "That knee may be damaged! Valkyrie Knox threw everything behind that charge, and Marie Van Claudio barely escaped disaster!"

Mark Bravo: "And under Fighting Championship Rules, that matters. No pinfalls. Marie cannot steal this with a quick cover. If she wants out with a win, she has to make Valkyrie submit, knock her out, or force the referee to stop it. But that knee could be the first opening she has had all match."

Marie slowly drags herself toward the ropes, still breathing hard, still shaken, but her eyes now fixed on Valkyrie's leg.

Amy sees the look.

Her panic sharpens into anger.

Amy Harrison: "Don't you dare, Marie!"

Marie freezes for half a second at Amy's voice.

Valkyrie snarls through the pain and turns back toward her.

The opening is there.

Small.

Dangerous.

And Marie Van Claudio has to decide whether survival is worth disobedience.

Marie Van Claudio stays near the ropes, one hand gripping the middle strand, the other pressed against the mat as she tries to pull herself up.

Across the ring, Valkyrie Knox tests her injured knee again.

It buckles.

Not much.

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But enough.

Enough for Marie to see it.

Enough for Amy Harrison to see Marie seeing it.

Amy's expression changes instantly.

Panic becomes fury.

Fury becomes control.

She lunges up onto the apron.

Amy Harrison: "Don't you dare!"

The crowd boos hard as Amy grips the top rope, leaning into the ring, eyes locked on Marie.

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison is up on the apron now!"

Mark Bravo: "She saw what we saw. Valkyrie's knee is hurt, and Marie knows it. Amy cannot risk Marie finding a way out of this."

The referee immediately turns away from Valkyrie and moves toward Amy.

Referee: "Amy, get down! Get off the apron!"

Amy ignores him completely.

Her attention is on Marie and Marie alone.

Amy Harrison: "Look at me!"

Marie looks up.

She cannot help it.

Amy points at her with venom in every movement.

Amy Harrison: "You go against me, you lose everything."

Marie's face tightens.

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The words land harder than any strike Valkyrie has thrown.

Amy Harrison: "Everything, Marie! You understand me? Your place, your protection, your dignity, your championship, all of it! You think this is bad? You do not know what bad is until you make me your enemy."

The referee keeps trying to cut her off.

Referee: "Amy! Down now!"

Amy Harrison: "Shut up!"

The official points toward the floor, his patience clearly gone.

Referee: "You are not part of this match!"

Amy still does not move.

Marie is frozen near the ropes, breathing hard, caught between the wounded champion behind her and the woman on the apron promising to take everything away if she dares to fight back.

John Phillips: "Marie had an opening. Valkyrie's knee is damaged, and Marie had an opening. But Amy Harrison is stopping her with threats."

Mark Bravo: "And that is exactly why Amy got on that apron. She does not need to hit Marie. She does not need to touch her. She just has to remind Marie of the cage she is in."

Behind Marie, Valkyrie Knoxx pushes off the ropes.

She puts weight on the injured knee.

Her face twists.

Pain flashes across it.

But Valkyrie does not stop.

She steps once.

Then again.

Each step is slower now, more deliberate, but the fury in her eyes carries her forward.

Marie does not see her.

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Her eyes are still on Amy.

Amy Harrison: "You remember who you belong to tonight."

Marie's jaw trembles slightly, anger and humiliation twisting together.

She opens her mouth like she might finally say something back.

She never gets the chance.

Valkyrie closes in from behind.

One arm snakes around Marie's throat.

The other locks behind her own bicep.

Marie's eyes go wide.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie from behind!"

Mark Bravo: "Choke hold! Valkyrie has Marie trapped!"

Marie's hands fly up immediately, clawing at Valkyrie's forearm, trying to wedge space between the arm and her throat.

Valkyrie grimaces as she plants on the injured knee just long enough to yank Marie backward.

Then she drops.

Both women crash down to the canvas, Valkyrie pulling Marie with her, the choke still locked in tight.

Valkyrie lands on her back and immediately wraps her good leg around Marie's body, cinching pressure through the waist and ribs while keeping the damaged knee protected away from Marie's reach.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie takes it to the mat! She has the choke locked in, and she is using the good leg to trap Marie's body!"

Mark Bravo: "That knee is hurt, but Valkyrie adjusted. She did not need to stand and throw Marie anymore. She just needed one opening, and Amy gave it to her."

The referee turns from Amy, who finally drops down from the apron with a satisfied smile.

He sees the choke and dives into position beside Marie.

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Referee: "Marie! Marie, can you answer me?"

Marie kicks one leg against the mat.

Her hands pry at Valkyrie's arm.

She does not tap.

She will not tap.

Not after France.

Not with the crowd chanting her name.

Not with Amy watching.

Not with every piece of her pride already stripped raw.

Valkyrie tightens the hold.

Her forearm digs beneath Marie's chin, cutting off the air, dragging Marie backward against her chest.

Marie's feet scrape against the canvas.

She reaches once toward the ropes.

Too far.

She reaches again.

Still too far.

John Phillips: "Marie is not tapping! Marie Van Claudio is refusing to tap!"

Mark Bravo: "But refusing to tap does not save you under Fighting Championship Rules. If she goes out, the referee can call this. If she cannot intelligently defend herself, it is over."

Amy Harrison paces at ringside, eyes bright with cruel satisfaction.

Amy Harrison: "That's it! Put her out!"

The crowd rains boos down on Amy, but she does not care.

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Inside the ring, Marie's movements begin to slow.

Her hands are still on Valkyrie's arm, but the strength is leaving them.

The referee moves closer.

Referee: "Marie! Stay with me!"

Marie's eyes are open, but they are starting to lose focus.

Her fingers twitch against Valkyrie's forearm.

Still no tap.

Valkyrie pulls back harder, her own teeth clenched from the pain in her knee, pouring every bit of anger from that slap, that missed knee, and that brief moment of vulnerability into the hold.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Sleep."

Marie's arm falls away from the choke.

The crowd reacts in alarm.

The referee grabs Marie's wrist and lifts her arm.

It drops.

He checks again, shouting toward her face.

Referee: "Marie! Can you hear me?"

There is no answer.

Marie's body slackens against Valkyrie's hold.

The referee immediately waves his arms.

DING DING DING!

Referee: "Call it! She's out! She's out!"

The bell sounds as the Strasbourg crowd erupts into boos and worried noise.

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Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner by knockout, and still UTA Fighting Champion... Valkyrie Knoxx!"

Valkyrie holds the choke for one second too long.

The referee grabs at her arm.

Referee: "Let go! Let go now!"

Valkyrie finally releases, shoving Marie away as she sits up and immediately grabs at her injured knee.

Marie rolls limp onto her side, eyes closed, chest moving but shallow, the official quickly checking on her.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie Knoxx retains the Fighting Championship, but Amy Harrison is the reason Marie never got to capitalize on that injured knee."

Mark Bravo: "Marie did not submit. She refused. But Valkyrie choked her unconscious, and under these rules, that is enough. Submission, knockout, or stoppage. Tonight, it is knockout."

At ringside, Amy Harrison applauds slowly.

Not for Valkyrie's championship defense.

For the punishment.

For the humiliation.

For the reminder.

Valkyrie pulls herself up with the ropes, favoring the injured knee as the referee retrieves the UTA Fighting Championship.

He hands it to her, and Valkyrie clutches the title against her chest before lifting it with one arm.

Her face still shows pain.

But her eyes are on Marie.

Amy slides into the ring and walks straight past Valkyrie.

She crouches near Marie, who is only beginning to stir.

Amy leans down close enough for Marie to hear her.

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Amy Harrison: "That is what happens when you forget yourself."

Marie does not respond.

She barely can.

Amy stands again, satisfied, while Valkyrie Knox remains the Fighting Champion behind her.

The camera holds on the image.

Valkyrie with the championship.

Amy smiling.

Marie down on the canvas in France, denied dignity, denied ceremony, and punished for the smallest moment of instinctive pride.

Field Trip

The shot opens backstage.

Not immediately on Eric Dane Jr.

Not yet.

First, we get the hallway.

A cleaner hallway than the ones Bobby Dean has been haunting tonight. Wider. Better lit. One of the corridors closer to the dressing rooms people actually care about. Production cases are stacked neatly against the wall. A folded table has been pushed aside. A few UTA crew members move in the background with the careful urgency of people who know something nearby is expensive.

Then--

SFX: honk.

The crew members stop.

One of them slowly turns his head.

SFX: honk.

World Tour: France '26

Closer now.

A faint electric whirr follows it.

Then a clunk.

Then another whirr.

Then another clunk.

The camera pans left.

Rolling into frame at the speed of a cautious parade float is Beautiful Bobby Dean's mobility scooter.

Bobby sits in the driver's seat, both hands on the handlebars, eyes forward, navigating with the grim focus of a man piloting a damaged submarine through enemy waters.

Standing on the small platform behind him, hands planted on Bobby's shoulders for balance, is Maxx Mayhem.

He has acquired two small cartons of chocolate milk.

No one explains where.

No one should.

Maxx holds one carton in his teeth while trying to stab the straw into the other. The scooter hits a tiny seam in the floor.

SFX: clunk.

Maxx wobbles.

A few drops of chocolate milk splash onto Bobby's shoulder.

Bobby stops the scooter immediately.

Slowly, he turns his head.

Bobby Dean: "Maxx."

Maxx freezes with the straw still half-punctured through the carton.

World Tour: France '26

Maxx Mayhem: "Road turbulence."

Bobby looks down at his shoulder.

Then back ahead.

He decides there are bigger problems.

The scooter continues.

SFX: whirr.

SFX: clunk.

Maxx leans forward over Bobby's shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "Is this the right way?"

Bobby squints down the hall.

Bobby Dean: "I think so."

Maxx Mayhem: "You said that before catering."

Bobby Dean: "And we found catering."

Maxx nods, accepting this.

Maxx Mayhem: "Strong point."

They pass a production assistant carrying a headset and clipboard. She presses herself flat against the wall as the scooter trundles past.

Maxx raises one carton in greeting.

Maxx Mayhem: "Milk?"

The production assistant says nothing.

Bobby keeps driving.

At the far end of the hallway, another door opens.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr. steps out.

The Hardcore Championship is over his shoulder.

He is dressed for later tonight, taped and ready, hair perfect, expression already fixed in that familiar blend of arrogance and irritation. He has clearly been in preparation mode for Clovis Black. Focused. Controlled. Built around the assumption that the world will wait until he is ready to be bothered.

Then he hears it.

SFX: honk.

Dane freezes.

The sound hits him like a personal insult.

He closes his eyes.

Only for a second.

When he opens them again, the scooter rolls into view.

Bobby sees him and immediately straightens in the seat.

Maxx sees him and lights up.

Maxx Mayhem: "There he is!"

Bobby taps the brake too hard.

The scooter jerks to a stop.

Maxx bumps lightly into Bobby's back, both cartons of chocolate milk held high in a miracle of survival.

Dane stares.

At Bobby.

At Maxx.

At the scooter.

At the chocolate milk.

World Tour: France '26

Back to Bobby.

For several seconds, he says nothing.

Which is worse.

Bobby swallows.

Bobby Dean: "Eric."

Dane does not answer.

Maxx steps off the back of the scooter and lands beside Bobby with a little bounce. He offers one of the cartons toward Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "Chocolate milk?"

Dane looks at the carton like Maxx has offered him evidence from a crime scene.

Eric Dane Jr.: "What."

Not a question.

A verdict.

Bobby lifts one hand slightly.

Bobby Dean: "I know this looks bad."

Dane's eyes move from Maxx to Bobby.

Slowly.

Eric Dane Jr.: "It looks exactly like what it is."

Bobby winces.

Maxx looks between them.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's good. Saves time."

Dane turns his head toward Maxx.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr.: "You."

Maxx points at himself with the chocolate milk carton.

Maxx Mayhem: "Me."

Dane looks back at Bobby.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And you."

Bobby sinks slightly into the scooter seat.

Bobby Dean: "Me."

Dane steps forward.

The Hardcore Championship shifts on his shoulder as he does.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I gave you one instruction."

Bobby nods quickly.

Bobby Dean: "I know."

Eric Dane Jr.: "One."

Bobby Dean: "I know."

Eric Dane Jr.: "Not a complicated instruction."

Bobby's mouth opens.

Nothing comes out.

Dane's eyes cut toward Maxx.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I told you to beat him."

Maxx lifts a finger.

Maxx Mayhem: "We talked about that."

Dane looks at him.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr.: "Nobody asked you to talk."

Maxx blinks.

Maxx Mayhem: "People keep making that mistake."

Dane ignores him and steps closer to Bobby.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I told you to walk into that ring, beat Maxx Mayhem, and prove to me that you were capable of being something other than a human cleanup bill."

Bobby grips the handlebars tighter.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And instead..."

Dane looks down at the scooter.

Then back at Bobby.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You turned yourself into Maxx Mayhem's sidecar."

Bobby's face falls.

Maxx looks down at the scooter.

Then at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "I thought I was the sidecar."

Dane snaps his head toward him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Shut up."

Maxx raises both hands.

The chocolate milk carton in one hand sloshes faintly.

Maxx Mayhem: "Hostile office environment."

Dane steps toward him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "This is not an office."

World Tour: France '26

Maxx's eyes widen.

Not because Dane made a point.

Because Dane has walked directly into the trap without seeing it.

Maxx Mayhem: "So you admit it."

Dane pauses.

Bobby looks from Dane to Maxx.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Admit what?"

Maxx points at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "You're not the office."

Dane stares.

Bobby's eyes lower slightly.

He remembers the question.

Can Eric make matches?

Does he have an office?

A nameplate?

A little bowl of mints?

Maxx takes one step closer, still holding the chocolate milk like a sacred object.

Maxx Mayhem: "You got a nameplate?"

Dane's expression hardens.

Maxx Mayhem: "Little desk?"

No answer.

Maxx Mayhem: "Little bowl of mints?"

World Tour: France '26

Dane says nothing.

Maxx turns to Bobby, as if presenting findings to a jury.

Maxx Mayhem: "No mints."

Bobby shifts uncomfortably.

Dane sees it.

That tiny shift.

That little crack.

His anger changes shape.

Becomes quieter.

Sharper.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Bobby."

Bobby looks up.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Get off the scooter."

Bobby hesitates.

Not rebellion.

Just delay.

His body has not caught up with the command yet.

Dane's eyes narrow.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Now."

Bobby slowly turns off the scooter.

It gives one faint dying beep.

SFX: beep.

World Tour: France '26

Maxx points at it.

Maxx Mayhem: "She objects."

Dane does not look away from Bobby.

Bobby plants one foot on the floor. Then the other. He pushes himself up, steadying his weight on the armrest before standing beside the scooter.

He looks smaller standing there.

Not physically.

Bobby is still Bobby.

But the scooter had given him ceremony. Motion. A tiny kingdom with a horn.

Now he is just standing in front of Eric Dane Jr. again.

Dane takes that in.

Satisfied.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Better."

Maxx's face changes.

Not fully serious.

Never fully serious.

But the grin fades enough to notice.

Maxx Mayhem: "You make him stand so you can talk down to him?"

Dane slowly turns.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You have no idea what you are talking about."

Maxx nods.

Maxx Mayhem: "Usually."

World Tour: France '26

A beat.

Maxx Mayhem: "But this one's loud."

Bobby glances at Maxx.

Dane catches that too.

Every glance is becoming evidence.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Oh, good. This is what we are doing now?"

He laughs once.

Short.

Cold.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You spend one match not wrestling this lunatic and suddenly he is your conscience?"

Bobby shakes his head.

Bobby Dean: "No, he's not--"

Eric Dane Jr.: "He is what, Bobby?"

Bobby stops.

Dane steps closer.

Eric Dane Jr.: "What is he?"

Bobby does not know how to answer.

Maxx helps.

Badly.

Maxx Mayhem: "Thirsty."

He sips the chocolate milk.

Dane's eyes flick toward him with open contempt.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr.: "You were supposed to beat him."

Bobby nods.

Bobby Dean: "I know."

Eric Dane Jr.: "You were supposed to prove Mexico was a mistake."

Bobby Dean: "I know."

Eric Dane Jr.: "You were supposed to prove you could follow one simple instruction without turning my life into a clown car with orthopedic seating."

Bobby flinches.

Maxx looks at the scooter again.

Maxx Mayhem: "Battle chair."

Dane rounds on him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I do not care what you call it."

Maxx leans slightly toward Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "He cares."

Bobby tries not to react.

Fails.

A tiny breath escapes him.

Almost a laugh.

Almost.

Dane hears it.

The hallway goes still.

Dane looks at Bobby like Bobby has just slapped him.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr.: "Was that funny?"

Bobby immediately shakes his head.

Bobby Dean: "No."

Eric Dane Jr.: "Did you laugh?"

Bobby Dean: "No, I just--"

Eric Dane Jr.: "You just what?"

Bobby grips the side of the scooter now. Not for balance. For something to hold.

Bobby Dean: "He asked why."

Dane blinks.

Eric Dane Jr.: "What?"

Bobby swallows.

Bobby Dean: "In the ring. He asked why we were fighting."

Maxx nods, pleased to be cited accurately.

Maxx Mayhem: "I did."

Dane's expression flattens.

Bobby Dean: "And I didn't know."

Silence.

The words sit there between all three men.

For Bobby, they are a confession.

For Maxx, they are proof.

For Dane, they are betrayal.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You didn't know."

World Tour: France '26

Bobby shakes his head.

Bobby Dean: "I mean, I knew you told me to."

Dane steps in.

Eric Dane Jr.: "That should have been enough."

Bobby looks down.

Maxx's eyes move from Dane to Bobby.

Then back to Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why?"

Dane does not even look at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "No, really."

Maxx steps into Dane's line of sight.

That finally pulls Dane's attention.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why should that be enough?"

Dane looks at Maxx like he has finally decided the conversation itself is beneath him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Because Bobby asked for a place."

Maxx looks at Bobby.

Bobby does not look back.

Eric Dane Jr.: "He wanted to belong."

Maxx turns back to Dane.

Eric Dane Jr.: "He wanted a chance to prove that following me around the building was something other than pathetic nostalgia and secondhand relevance."

Bobby's jaw tightens.

World Tour: France '26

Dane notices.

Keeps going.

Eric Dane Jr.: "So I gave him one."

Maxx nods slowly.

Maxx Mayhem: "You gave him me."

Eric Dane Jr.: "I gave him a test."

Maxx Mayhem: "What did he win?"

Dane says nothing.

Maxx leans in.

Maxx Mayhem: "If he beat me."

He points at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "What did Bobby win?"

Bobby looks up now.

Just enough.

Dane's silence stretches half a second too long.

Then he smiles.

A very small smile.

The kind that knows it can still hurt people without raising its voice.

Eric Dane Jr.: "He would have won the privilege of not embarrassing me for five consecutive minutes."

Bobby's face changes.

Not dramatically.

No grand heartbreak.

World Tour: France '26

No tears.

Just a little piece of something hopeful slipping out of place.

Maxx sees it.

Dane sees Maxx see it.

That makes Dane angrier.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do not look at him like that."

Maxx's head tilts.

Maxx Mayhem: "Like what?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Like you understand anything."

Maxx steps closer.

Still no attack.

Still no violence.

Just Maxx being too close to the truth and too weird to dismiss.

Maxx Mayhem: "I understand useful."

Dane laughs under his breath.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do you?"

Maxx nods.

Maxx Mayhem: "Useful things get used."

The line hits Bobby again.

Harder this time.

Because Dane hears it too.

Dane looks at Bobby.

World Tour: France '26

Eric Dane Jr.: "And there it is."

Bobby looks confused.

Eric Dane Jr.: "That is all it took?"

He points at Maxx.

Eric Dane Jr.: "A trash goblin with chocolate milk says one halfway clever thing, and now you are standing here questioning me?"

Bobby shakes his head.

Bobby Dean: "I'm not questioning you."

But even Bobby does not fully believe it.

Dane steps closer.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Yes, you are."

A beat.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And do you know the worst part?"

Bobby says nothing.

Dane leans in.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You are bad at that too."

Bobby takes that one.

Quietly.

Maxx does not.

Maxx Mayhem: "Hey."

Dane's eyes cut to him.

Maxx Mayhem: "He's very good at scooter."

World Tour: France '26

Dane stares.

Maxx offers this with complete sincerity.

Or something close to it.

Maxx Mayhem: "And he knew where the chocolate milk was."

Bobby looks at Maxx, surprised despite himself.

Maxx gestures with the carton.

Maxx Mayhem: "That matters."

Dane lets out a short, humorless laugh.

Eric Dane Jr.: "This is unbelievable."

He turns away from both of them, running a hand over his mouth as he paces two steps down the hall.

Then he stops.

Turns back.

The Hardcore Championship catches the light as he moves.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I have a championship match tonight."

Bobby nods automatically.

Bobby Dean: "Against Clovis Black."

Dane points at him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do not say it like you are involved."

Bobby's mouth closes.

Dane walks back toward him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You had one job tonight. You failed it. Spectacularly. Publicly. With transportation."

Maxx raises the chocolate milk.

World Tour: France '26

Maxx Mayhem: "And refreshments."

Dane ignores him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "So now, for the first time all evening, you are going to do exactly what I tell you."

Bobby waits.

Dane points down the hall.

Away from him.

Away from Maxx.

Away from the title.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Leave."

Bobby's eyes flick to the hallway.

Then back to Dane.

Then to Maxx.

Maxx looks at him.

Not smiling now.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I said leave."

Bobby's hand tightens on the scooter handlebar.

Maxx Mayhem: "Your name's Bobby."

Dane slowly turns toward him.

Maxx shrugs.

Maxx Mayhem: "Not Leave."

Bobby looks down.

That should not matter.

World Tour: France '26

It is stupid.

It is Maxx.

But it lands anyway.

Dane's voice drops.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Bobby."

Bobby looks up.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You want to keep pretending there is still a place for you?"

Bobby goes still.

Dane lets that sit.

Then he gestures again.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then go stand somewhere I do not have to look at you."

Bobby absorbs it.

For a moment, nobody moves.

Then Bobby slowly lowers himself back onto the scooter.

The plastic frame creaks.

The little machine beeps faintly as he turns it back on.

SFX: beep.

Maxx watches.

Dane watches.

Bobby does not look at either of them.

He turns the scooter with a careful, awkward three-point maneuver that takes too long and somehow makes the silence worse.

World Tour: France '26

SFX: whirr.

SFX: clunk.

SFX: whirr.

The scooter points down the hall.

Bobby starts forward.

Slowly.

Maxx takes one step like he might follow.

Dane's voice cuts across the hallway.

Eric Dane Jr.: "He goes alone."

The scooter stops.

Bobby's shoulders rise and fall once.

Maxx looks at Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "That another office rule?"

Dane steps toward him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No."

He adjusts the Hardcore Championship on his shoulder.

Eric Dane Jr.: "That is me being generous."

Maxx studies him.

Then looks at the title.

There it is.

The shift.

For the first time in this segment, Maxx does not look at Bobby.

World Tour: France '26

He looks at the Hardcore Championship.

The same way he looked at the scooter earlier.

Interested.

Hungry.

Amused.

Dane notices.

His grip tightens on the belt.

Eric Dane Jr.: "What?"

Maxx points at the title with his chocolate milk straw.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's funny."

Dane's eyes narrow.

Eric Dane Jr.: "This?"

Maxx nods.

Maxx Mayhem: "That."

Dane steps closer.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You think my championship is funny?"

Maxx glances toward the hallway, where Bobby is still paused on the scooter, not gone yet, not fully present either.

Then Maxx looks back at Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "Little bit."

Dane's jaw tightens.

Maxx takes a sip of chocolate milk.

World Tour: France '26

Maxx Mayhem: "But you're funnier."

Dane moves like he might swing.

Maxx does not flinch.

Not because he is brave in any normal sense.

Because something in him is already waiting for the collision.

But before Dane can do anything, a crew member appears at the far end of the hallway and calls out.

Crew Member: "Eric! Five segments to go till title match!"

Dane does not look away from Maxx.

Maxx smiles.

There it is again.

That wide, dangerous thing.

Maxx Mayhem: "Don't be late."

Dane steps back.

One step.

Only one.

Enough to show that the match matters more than Maxx right now.

Not enough to feel like retreat.

He looks toward Bobby.

Still sitting there.

Still not quite gone.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And you?"

Bobby turns his head slightly.

World Tour: France '26

Dane's voice is flat.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stay out of my way."

Bobby says nothing.

Dane turns and walks off toward the ring, the Hardcore Championship over his shoulder, his posture rigid with contained fury.

Maxx watches him go.

Then looks back toward Bobby.

The scooter gives one small, accidental chirp.

SFX: honk.

Bobby closes his eyes.

Maxx lifts his chocolate milk in salute.

Maxx Mayhem: "She gets it."

Bobby does not answer.

He just sits there, hands on the handlebars, staring down the hallway where Dane disappeared.

The camera holds on him.

Then Maxx.

Then the empty corridor between them.

Cut.

Awakening

The camera pans across the arena, catching fans on their feet, signs raised, voices loud, the energy of the World Tour still rolling hard through France.

John Phillips: "Mark, after everything we have already seen tonight, I do not think there is any way to predict where this show goes next."

World Tour: France '26

Mark Bravo: "We have had fighting championship chaos, Empire cruelty, Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem going on a chocolate milk field trip, and now we are talking about seventy superstars and every championship at International Affair. My notes are just a cry for help at this point."

The crowd noise continues rolling through the building.

Then, all at once, the lights go out.

The arena drops into total darkness.

The reaction changes immediately.

No music.

No warning.

Just darkness.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute."

Mark Bravo: "Oh, I don't like this."

The big screen flickers once.

Then again.

A symbol appears.

A Reaper.

Stark. Cold. Silent.

The crowd reacts with a sharp rise of noise, some cheers breaking through, some unsettled murmurs spreading fast as the symbol hangs there over the blacked-out arena.

John Phillips: "That symbol..."

Mark Bravo: "You know exactly who that is."

The symbol burns on the screen for another second.

Then the opening of "Black Flame" by Bury Tomorrow hits.

World Tour: France '26

The darkness cracks under violent pulses of white and red light, flickering across the stage like emergency strobes in a city alley. The screen behind the entrance shifts to dark streets, fractured shadows, and the harsh suggestion of Harrisburg under nightfall.

The crowd rises louder.

Then Chris Ross steps through the curtain.

Street clothes.

Cold expression.

Folded steel chair in one hand.

He does not storm out.

He does not shout.

He does not swing the chair over his head or demand the crowd look at him.

He simply stands there beneath the pulsing light, the chair hanging at his side, face unreadable.

John Phillips: "There he is. Chris Ross."

Mark Bravo: "And there is that chair again."

John Phillips: "Over the past few weeks, Chris Ross has become one of the most unsettling presences in UTA. Not loud. Not explosive in the way we have known him before. Cold. Methodical. Silent until he decides the moment requires action."

Mark Bravo: "That is what makes this version of Ross so dangerous. Chris Ross used to feel like a live wire. Now he feels like someone cut the power and left you in the room with him anyway."

Ross begins walking down the ramp.

Slow.

Measured.

The chair swings slightly with each step, metal catching flashes of light as he moves toward the ring.

Fans near the barricade lean forward, yelling toward him, reaching out, trying to get some kind of reaction.

World Tour: France '26

They get nothing.

Ross keeps his eyes forward.

John Phillips: "This is the same man who once held the UTA Championship. The same man who has built his reputation on brutality, street violence, and taking matches beyond the point where a simple three count feels like enough."

Mark Bravo: "Ross has said it before. A three count does not mean anything to him if somebody else leaves in an ambulance. That is not a catchphrase, John. That is a worldview."

John Phillips: "But recently, it has not just been violence. It has been timing. It has been patience. He walked out with a chair in Mexico and said nothing. He haunted Samuel Scythe's match. In Italy, he used that chair to change the Hardcore Championship contendership picture entirely."

Mark Bravo: "And that is the part that should scare people. When Chris Ross was angry, at least you knew what direction the storm was moving. Now? He is picking moments. He is choosing targets. He is letting people wonder why until it is too late."

Ross reaches the bottom of the ramp and stops.

He looks at the ring.

Not the fans.

Not the commentary desk.

The ring.

The folded steel chair remains in his right hand.

John Phillips: "You can feel the building reacting to him, Mark. There is respect here, there is fear, and there is uncertainty. Nobody knows exactly what Chris Ross wants to say or do tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And with Chris Ross, those are two very different questions. What does he want to say, and what does he want to do? Because one of those might involve a microphone, and the other one might involve that chair."

Ross turns toward the steel steps.

He climbs them one at a time, still unhurried, still carrying the chair low at his side.

At the top, he pauses on the apron.

World Tour: France '26

The lights continue to pulse around him.

"Black Flame" pounds through the arena as the Reaper symbol flashes again across the screen behind him.

Ross steps through the ropes.

Inside the ring, he walks to the center.

He lowers the chair until the bottom edge rests against the canvas.

One hand remains on the folded steel.

His eyes move slowly across the crowd.

For the first time since appearing, he truly looks at them.

The music begins to fade.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross is in the ring, chair in hand, and Strasbourg is waiting to hear from The Reaper of Harrisburg."

Mark Bravo: "Or waiting to see who he hits with it."

Ross stands in the center of the ring.

The chair remains folded beside him.

The music dies completely.

The lights settle just enough to leave him framed in shadow and red-white flashes from the screen.

The crowd noise swells around him.

Ross does not speak yet.

He just waits.

Chris Ross stands in the center of the ring.

The folded steel chair rests in his hand, the bottom edge touching the canvas. The lights remain low around him, the Reaper symbol still burning on the screen behind the stage.

The crowd in Strasbourg is loud, but not in the usual way.

World Tour: France '26

There is anticipation.

There is unease.

There is the feeling that whatever Chris Ross has come out here to say, it will not be shouted.

It will not need to be.

Ross slowly raises the microphone.

Then he waits.

The crowd noise rolls around him.

He does not fight it.

He does not yell over it.

He just waits until the building starts to quiet on its own.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross has not said much over the last several weeks. When he has appeared, his actions have spoken for him."

Mark Bravo: "That might be what makes this feel so dangerous, John. When a man like Chris Ross finally decides to talk, you listen."

Ross lifts the microphone closer.

His voice, when it comes, is low.

Cold.

Measured.

Chris Ross: "Your UTA Champion..."

He pauses.

The mention of Maxwell Jett brings a hard wave of boos from the crowd.

Ross does not react to them.

Chris Ross: "...and his cronies are not here tonight."

World Tour: France '26

Another pause.

Ross turns his head slightly, eyes drifting toward the entranceway.

Chris Ross: "Samuel Scythe..."

The name draws another reaction, this one colder, sharper.

Ross lets it breathe.

Chris Ross: "...nowhere to be found."

He lowers his eyes to the steel chair in his hand.

For a moment, he studies it like it is not a weapon.

Like it is evidence.

Chris Ross: "I guess it's just me..."

Ross slowly lifts the chair away from the canvas.

Chris Ross: "...and my chair here."

He looks down at it one more time.

Then he drops it in front of him.

The chair lands flat on the canvas with a sharp metallic crash.

CLANG.

The sound cuts through the arena.

Ross does not flinch.

He simply looks back up.

Chris Ross: "When Valentina was hurt..."

A low rumble moves through the crowd.

Chris Ross: "When Lauren's picture was torn..."

World Tour: France '26

His jaw tightens, but his voice does not rise.

Chris Ross: "When my title was taken from me..."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "I snapped."

Ross nods once.

Not ashamed.

Not proud.

Just honest.

Chris Ross: "I admit that."

The crowd stays with him, hanging on the quiet delivery.

Chris Ross: "But then Samuel Scythe..."

Ross slowly turns his eyes toward the hard camera.

Chris Ross: "...and that no-backbone-having shitbag Ace Andrews..."

The crowd pops hard at the insult.

Ross lets it pass.

His expression does not change.

Chris Ross: "...did what they did to me."

He lowers the microphone slightly, glancing at the chair on the canvas.

Chris Ross: "Leaving me to be crucified in the center of that ring by Maxwell Jett."

The arena noise dims under the weight of the line.

Ross raises the microphone again.

Chris Ross: "That was the moment it all changed."

World Tour: France '26

No shout.

No dramatic movement.

Just the statement.

Chris Ross: "Some of the guys in the back..."

He glances toward the stage again.

Chris Ross: "...they say I've lost it."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "They say I've gone crazy."

Ross almost smiles.

Almost.

Chris Ross: "Nah."

The word is quiet, but it lands harder than a yell.

Chris Ross: "See, the Keystone State Killa is the thug from the streets."

He starts to pace now.

Slowly.

One step around the chair.

Then another.

Chris Ross: "He goes off the handle."

Another step.

Chris Ross: "Doesn't think."

He stops.

Chris Ross: "Just..."

World Tour: France '26

A beat.

Chris Ross: "Reacts."

Ross looks down at the chair again.

Chris Ross: "And that version of me?"

He nods faintly.

Chris Ross: "That version does damage."

The crowd rumbles in agreement.

Chris Ross: "That version leaves people hurt."

His eyes come up.

Chris Ross: "That version makes people afraid of what happens next."

Ross steps closer to the chair, but does not pick it up.

Chris Ross: "But sometimes..."

He pauses long enough that the building grows still again.

Chris Ross: "Just sometimes..."

He looks directly into the camera now.

Chris Ross: "It takes something more than a rage-filled killer to make things right."

The crowd noise rises, then falls again, sensing the turn.

Chris Ross: "So have I lost it?"

Ross lets the question sit.

He slowly shakes his head.

Chris Ross: "Not in the way they say I have."

A pause.

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Chris Ross: "No."

His eyes narrow.

Chris Ross: "I've had an awakening."

The Reaper symbol flickers on the screen behind him.

Ross stands still in the center of the ring, the chair at his feet.

Chris Ross: "The awakening of The Reaper of Harrisburg."

The crowd reacts loudly now, a mix of cheers and unsettled noise.

Ross keeps his voice low.

Even colder.

Chris Ross: "The Killa is good for quick reactions."

He taps one finger lightly against his own chest.

Chris Ross: "Good for doing damage."

Then he lowers his hand.

Chris Ross: "But the Reaper?"

He looks toward the entranceway again.

As if speaking to people who are not here.

Chris Ross: "The Reaper comes for final judgment."

A long pause.

Chris Ross: "And judgment time is now."

The crowd erupts, but Ross speaks through it without raising his voice much at all.

Chris Ross: "Samuel Scythe."

He lets the name hang.

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Chris Ross: "Ace Andrews' version of a reaper."

Ross looks down at the chair.

Chris Ross: "You have been judged."

He slowly lifts his gaze.

Chris Ross: "Ace Andrews."

A bitter rumble moves through the fans.

Chris Ross: "You have been judged."

Ross turns toward the hard camera.

Chris Ross: "Maxwell Jett."

The boos explode at the champion's name.

Ross waits.

He lets the hate swell.

Then he cuts through it, calm as ever.

Chris Ross: "You have been judged."

Ross lowers the microphone.

He stands over the chair in silence.

The camera pushes in slowly.

His face is cold.

His breathing even.

No rage.

No explosion.

Only purpose.

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After several beats, he raises the microphone again.

Chris Ross: "The verdict?"

Another pause.

Longer this time.

The crowd waits with him.

Ross looks directly into the camera.

Chris Ross: "Execution."

The word lands like a door closing.

Ross lowers the microphone again.

The crowd erupts around him, but he does not move.

Not yet.

He lets the word hang in the air.

John Phillips: "My God."

Mark Bravo: "That was not a threat, John. That sounded like a sentence."

Ross crouches slowly and picks up the folded steel chair.

He holds it in one hand again, resting it against his thigh.

Chris Ross: "I am done chasing noise."

He turns slightly, looking toward the stage.

Chris Ross: "I am done reacting when people expect me to react."

Another pause.

Chris Ross: "From here on out, I move when I decide to move."

He lifts the chair slightly.

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Chris Ross: "I swing when I decide to swing."

Ross looks back into the camera.

Chris Ross: "And when I come for you..."

His expression stays still.

Chris Ross: "You will not hear me coming until the judgment is already standing in front of you."

The crowd roars again.

Chris Ross: "Samuel."

He tilts his head slightly.

Chris Ross: "You wanted to be somebody else's weapon."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "Now you get to find out what happens when a weapon gets marked for collection."

Ross turns his attention back to the camera.

Chris Ross: "Ace."

The name comes out with disgust, but still controlled.

Chris Ross: "Keep hiding behind suits, contracts, money, and monsters."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "The grave does not care how rich you are."

The fans react loudly to that.

Chris Ross: "And Maxwell..."

The boos rise again.

Ross waits them out.

Chris Ross: "You can bring your boys."

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He shifts the chair in his grip.

Chris Ross: "You can bring your title."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "You can bring every First Class trick you got left."

Ross leans slightly toward the camera.

Chris Ross: "But sooner or later, every champion has to stand alone with what he did."

His voice drops even lower.

Chris Ross: "And when that day comes..."

Ross pauses.

Chris Ross: "I will be there."

He lowers the microphone one more time.

The lights pulse behind him.

The Reaper symbol burns across the screen again.

Ross looks down at the chair.

Then back to the hard camera.

Chris Ross: "717."

The crowd begins to react, recognizing the old call.

Chris Ross: "HBG."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "Represent."

He drops the microphone.

It hits the canvas beside the chair with a dull thud.

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For a moment, Chris Ross simply stands there.

Cold.

Silent.

Steel chair in hand.

Then "Black Flame" begins to creep back through the speakers.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross has declared final judgment on Samuel Scythe, Ace Andrews, and Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "And I do not think he cares who hears it. I think he wanted them to hear it. I think he wanted everyone to understand this is not Chris Ross losing control. This is Chris Ross choosing control."

Ross slowly turns toward the ropes, chair still hanging from his hand, the Reaper symbol glowing behind him as the crowd continues to roar.

Hakuryu vs. Tyger II

The promise has settled over the arena like a held breath. Stevens said it. Avril said it. The Wolves are not here tonight. The building believes it.

Then the lights die.

A gong. Low and resonant, filling the arena from the floor up. Another. With each strike a white spotlight blooms at the top of the ramp, and Sinja steps into it first -- white suit, white facepaint, absolutely still. The smoke begins to crawl across the stage floor, thick and low. The spiritual chants rise through the speakers and press against every wall in the building. A third gong, and Hakuryu emerges from the darkness behind his disciple -- pilgrim hat low, head bowed, shakujo staff in hand, robes pristine. He does not acknowledge the crowd. He does not acknowledge the booing that builds the moment the audience recognizes him. He moves down the ramp the way water moves -- unhurried, inevitable. At the bottom of the ramp he stops. His head tilts upward by a fraction. Both hands come together in prayer formation. His lips move. Whatever he says, no one in this building will ever know what it was.

John Phillips: "The WrestleZone Champion making his way to the ring, and you can hear this crowd letting him know exactly how they feel about him tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And he absolutely does not care. Look at him, John. He is not even acknowledging that there are fifteen thousand people in this building. As far as Hakuryu is concerned, this arena is empty."

He ascends the ring steps. Sinja holds the ropes open. Hakuryu steps through and moves to the center of

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the ring, removing his hat and robes in slow, deliberate sequence and handing them to Sinja without looking. He rolls his neck once. He moves to his corner.

John Phillips: "He looks focused tonight. After what happened last week with Van Patton and the Unholy Wolf Brigade costing him a clean title defense, Hakuryu was in Scott Stevens' office earlier this evening making his displeasure very clearly known."

Mark Bravo: "Displeasure. That's a polite word for it. That man looked like he wanted to dismantle the entire building."

John Phillips: "And both General Manager Scott Stevens and Avril Selene Kinkade assured him that Van Patton, Tkachuk, and Torunn are formally barred from this arena tonight. The talent entrances are locked down. Security has been notified. Tonight should be a clean night."

Mark Bravo: "Should be. Love the optimism."

The arena darkens again -- but differently this time. Not black. Blue and violet and ghostly cold, low fog rolling across the stage floor. Taiko drums begin, deliberate and building. An eerie flute weaves beneath them. And Tyger II steps out.

He pauses at the top of the stage. Head bowed. One slow breath. He looks up toward the rafters -- not performing, not pandering, doing something that looks remarkably like asking for something. His hands form the Tiger Claw. He holds it. Then he begins his descent.

John Phillips: "And his challenger -- Tyger II. The son of the legendary Tatsumi Tanaka, carrying the legacy of one of the most respected names in this industry every single time he steps through that curtain."

Mark Bravo: "And I'll tell you something -- there is something about this kid that I don't think Hakuryu has fully accounted for. You look at these two on paper and the styles are not as different as people think. Both methodical. Both precise. Both treat that ring like it means something."

John Phillips: "The difference being--"

Mark Bravo: "The difference being that Hakuryu treats that ring like it belongs to him. Tyger II treats it like he has to earn the right to stand in it. One of those men is going to find out tonight which approach actually holds up."

Tyger II reaches the ring. He steps through the ropes and moves to the center of the canvas, bows his head, performs the Tiger Claw one final time, and retreats to his corner. The two men stand across from each other. The referee raises the WrestleZone Title for the audience before handing it to the timekeeper.

John Phillips: "The WrestleZone Championship on the line. Hakuryu has held that title since defeating Van Patton earlier this year -- and tonight he defends it against a former holder of that very title who has earned

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this opportunity through nothing but performance."

Mark Bravo: "No politics. No shortcut. Tyger II earned this."

The bell rings.

Neither man moves.

Ten seconds. Fifteen. Twenty. The crowd murmurs, then quiets. This is not hesitation. This is two practitioners of patience recognizing each other across the canvas and neither willing to surrender the first psychological advantage of the match.

John Phillips: "Neither man in a hurry here."

Mark Bravo: "This is fascinating. Two wrestlers who both operate on studied calm, and right now they are just reading each other. Like a chess game where both players are deciding whether to even touch a piece."

Tyger II takes one measured step forward. Hakuryu does not move. His eyes track the step the way a man tracks something he anticipated. Tyger II stops. Studies. Hakuryu studies back. Then Hakuryu moves -- not forward, sideways. One slow lateral step, beginning a circle. Tyger II mirrors it. They orbit each other, the crowd watching in a silence that feels almost reverent.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu initiating the circling -- both men getting a feel for movement patterns before either commits."

Mark Bravo: "Watch Tyger II's feet. He's not mirroring out of instinct. He's making a choice. He's letting Hakuryu lead right now because he wants to see how the champion moves before he commits to anything."

The collar-and-elbow tie-up comes without announcement -- one moment they are circling, the next they are locked. Hakuryu uses the size advantage immediately, driving Tyger II back a half-step before Tyger II plants his feet and redirects the pressure, spinning the angle. Rather than be redirected, Hakuryu disengages cleanly. He steps back. He looks at Tyger II for a long moment.

John Phillips: "Clean break initiated by the champion."

Mark Bravo: "But look at his face, John. That redirect registered. He expected to drive Tyger II straight back and instead Tyger II moved him. That is not nothing."

They lock up again. Hakuryu transitions directly to a wristlock -- slow, deliberate torque, not to pop the joint immediately but to introduce the pressure as a statement. Tyger II rolls through it, reversing the wrist, and for a moment the hold belongs to the challenger. Hakuryu steps into it rather than resist, closing the distance and neutralizing the leverage. They separate.

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John Phillips: "Nice chain wrestling sequence -- Tyger II reversing the wristlock and Hakuryu choosing to step in rather than fight the hold."

Mark Bravo: "Smart by the champion. Fighting that position would have cost him more than just releasing. But Tyger II gets credit in his own head for that reversal. These little moments build up over twenty minutes."

Hakuryu pauses. Both hands come together. He prays -- eyes closed, lips moving -- and the crowd responds with a swell of jeering. Sinja watches from ringside, arms folded. Tyger II watches from across the ring. He does not mirror it. He does not mock it. He waits.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu observing his ritual before continuing."

Mark Bravo: "And Tyger II just lets him. Smart. You rush Hakuryu out of that prayer and he files it away. You wait, you study what comes out of it."

Hakuryu opens his eyes and comes forward -- a sharp elbow to the jaw, stiff and sudden, and Tyger II's head snaps hard to the side. The sound of it draws a pained reaction from the crowd. Hakuryu follows immediately with a second elbow before Tyger II can reset, grabs the arm, and sends him hard into the ropes. Tyger II comes off and Hakuryu is waiting -- a Tornado Kick that catches him square across the chest and drops him to one knee.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu on the offensive -- and that elbow was stiff."

Mark Bravo: "He threw that like he was trying to relocate Tyger II's jaw. No warmup, no feint, just violence. That is the difference -- Hakuryu's offense is not designed to impress. It is designed to damage."

Hakuryu does not press the advantage immediately. He stands where he is and watches Tyger II work back to his feet. He is studying the recovery -- how long it takes, which direction Tyger II favors, whether he shakes out his neck or his jaw. Cataloguing it.

John Phillips: "The champion not pressing the advantage there -- almost like he wanted to see how Tyger II would respond to that shot."

Mark Bravo: "He's building a file. Every time Tyger II takes a shot and gets up, Hakuryu is logging the data. He will use all of it later."

Tyger II gets upright. He rolls his jaw once -- minimal, controlled -- and approaches again. This time the exchange is faster. A strike combination from Tyger II -- a forearm, a kick to the thigh, a second forearm -- that Hakuryu absorbs before firing back with a chop that cracks across the chest and echoes through the first ten rows. Tyger II takes it. He delivers a kick into Hakuryu's midsection in answer. Hakuryu takes it. They stand in close range and trade -- chop for kick, elbow for forearm -- and the crowd rises with each exchange.

John Phillips: "And now these two going shot for shot in the center of the ring!"

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Mark Bravo: "Listen to this crowd! They came alive the second Tyger II started firing back! This is what this kid does -- you hit him and he hits back, and before you know it you're in a war you didn't budget for!"

Hakuryu ends the exchange on his own terms -- a Superkick, planted and precise, that catches Tyger II flush across the jaw and drops him to the canvas. The crowd reacts with a pained sound. Hakuryu stands over him and brings his hands together in prayer -- not in mockery, but in ritual, as though Tyger II's position on the mat is something ordained and Hakuryu is merely acknowledging it accordingly.

John Phillips: "Superkick and Tyger II is down."

Mark Bravo: "And he's praying over him. That is not a celebration. That is a man marking a moment. He is not going for the pin because he does not think it is over. He just wants Tyger II to understand what is coming."

Tyger II rises. Hakuryu watches him do it.

They reset in the center of the ring and Hakuryu reaches for another collar-and-elbow, but this time he transitions immediately to a side headlock, wrenching it tight and walking Tyger II toward the ropes. Tyger II shoots him off. Hakuryu hits the ropes and comes back with a shoulder block that drives Tyger II down. Off the ropes again, Tyger II drops flat, Hakuryu leaps over him, off the opposite ropes -- and Tyger II explodes upright with a dropkick that catches Hakuryu directly in the chest and sends him stumbling backward into the ropes.

John Phillips: "Dropkick from Tyger II and Hakuryu is back into the ropes!"

Mark Bravo: "Timed that perfectly. He read the rope sequence and waited for exactly the right moment. That's ring intelligence -- that is not luck."

Hakuryu steadies himself on the ropes and looks at Tyger II. Something in his assessment has been updated. He straightens, smooths his attire, and brings his hands together briefly -- a shorter prayer than before, almost perfunctory -- then moves back to the center of the ring.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu collecting himself after that dropkick."

Mark Bravo: "He did not expect that. Not the speed of it. He is recalibrating."

The next lock-up produces a different result -- Hakuryu moves to a hammerlock, walking behind Tyger II and wrenching the arm up behind the back, applying pressure to the shoulder. He holds it, increasing the torque gradually, and steers Tyger II toward the corner where he drives the arm shoulder-first into the turnbuckle. Once. Twice. He pulls him back out, switches to an armbar standing, and drops to one knee to change the angle of the pressure. The crowd jeers steadily.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu going to work on the arm and shoulder of Tyger II now -- targeting a specific body

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part."

Mark Bravo: "This is the file opening. He identified the shoulder as a target and now he is going to spend the next several minutes making that shoulder a liability. Anything Tyger II does from this point forward -- every strike, every aerial move -- is going to require that arm, and Hakuryu is making sure it costs him every time he uses it."

Tyger II works out of the armbar, reversing to a wrist position, but Hakuryu transitions smoothly to a keylock and drives him back toward the mat. Tyger II posts on his free hand and pushes back up, using the base to create separation, and manages to spin free. He rolls to distance. Both men on their feet.

John Phillips: "Tyger II creating separation -- shaking out that arm."

Mark Bravo: "He already knows that shoulder is going to be a factor. You can see him rotating it. Testing the range. Making sure he still has full movement."

Hakuryu is patient. He does not chase. He lets Tyger II shake the arm out, lets him reset, and then moves forward again with a deliberate collar-and-elbow that he immediately converts to a full arm drag, sending Tyger II across the canvas and maintaining the arm position as Tyger II lands, applying an arm bar on the mat and using his body weight to press the shoulder flat. The referee moves in to check.

John Phillips: "Arm drag directly into the armbar -- Hakuryu maintaining control of that arm throughout."

Mark Bravo: "He didn't let it go. That entire transition was one continuous attack. The arm drag was not to create distance. The arm drag was just the delivery mechanism for the armbar."

Tyger II works methodically -- he does not thrash, does not burn energy fighting the position blindly. He walks his feet toward Hakuryu, stacking the position, changing the geometric relationship between them, and manages to roll onto his side and then his knees, forcing Hakuryu to adjust. In the adjustment there is a half-second of looseness and Tyger II pulls the arm free, rolling away and finding his feet.

John Phillips: "Tyger II escaping the armbar -- working his way through it technically rather than fighting it with strength."

Mark Bravo: "That is a trained man right there. He did not try to muscle out of that. He solved it like a puzzle. That's his father's influence -- Tatsumi Tanaka was one of the most technically complete wrestlers this company ever had, and you are seeing that in the son right now."

They face each other across the ring and Hakuryu's expression has shifted -- not perturbed, but engaged. There is something in his eyes now that was not there in the opening minutes. He is no longer simply cataloguing. He is interested.

He prays.

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John Phillips: "Hakuryu with another ritual pause -- and this crowd letting him hear it."

Mark Bravo: "You know what I notice? Each prayer is a little different. The first few were about reading Tyger II. This one -- watch his face when he opens his eyes -- this one is about deciding something."

He opens his eyes. He comes forward -- and the match changes register. A sharp Superkick feint that Tyger II reads and steps back from, immediately followed by a real one to the midsection that folds him forward, and then Hakuryu grabs the head and drives him down with a DDT. He rolls through without releasing, pulls Tyger II back up, and hits a second DDT -- harder than the first. The crowd's noise is a sustained, steady drone. He pulls Tyger II up a third time and drives him with a snap suplex instead, bridging for a cover.

One. Two -- knockout.

John Phillips: "Double DDT into the snap suplex -- cover -- only two!"

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu shifting gears. He decided to put combinations together and the first pin attempt of the match comes up short, but that near-two-count tells him something. He knows exactly how much Tyger II has left at any given moment."

Hakuryu rises from the knockout without reaction. He pulls Tyger II up and sends him hard into the corner, following immediately with the Handspring Back Elbow that smashes into Tyger II's face and chest. Tyger II crumples in the corner and Hakuryu drags him out by the arm, slow and deliberate, pulling him to the center of the ring where he applies a modified crossface -- not a pinning attempt, a punishment hold, working the neck and the previously targeted shoulder simultaneously.

John Phillips: "Modified crossface applied by the champion -- working that neck and shoulder now."

Mark Bravo: "He is building a case. Every hold compounds the previous one. The shoulder from earlier, the DDTs on the neck, now this position tying both together. By the time Hakuryu decides to finish this match, every part of Tyger II's upper body is going to be screaming."

Tyger II's hands find the mat. He begins to push. His free arm, the one not compromised by the earlier shoulder work, takes the weight, and he manages to get to his knees, partially relieving the neck pressure. Hakuryu wrenches the hold tighter. Tyger II pushes harder -- pushing through what is clearly considerable pain, the effort visible in every muscle of his back -- and manages to stand despite the crossface still applied, converting a disadvantaged position into one with options.

John Phillips: "Tyger II fighting up -- remarkable strength to stand up inside that crossface."

Mark Bravo: "He just dead-lifted himself off the mat with a man hanging off his neck. That is not technique. That is will."

Standing in the crossface, Tyger II reaches back, grabs Hakuryu's leg, and dumps him with a modified

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snapmare that breaks the hold and puts the champion on the canvas instead. Tyger II steps back, shakes his neck out, and the crowd reacts to the reversal with real appreciation.

John Phillips: "Snapmare reversal by Tyger II -- breaking the crossface and putting Hakuryu on the mat!"

Mark Bravo: "And now look -- Hakuryu is up immediately. He's not hurt. But Tyger II just reversed him and the crowd is responding. The momentum in this building just shifted a fraction and Hakuryu can feel it."

Hakuryu is indeed up quickly -- too quickly, the way a prideful man gets up to prove he can. He faces Tyger II and for just a moment they are standing in the center of the ring with the crowd behind the challenger and the silence of a match that has just entered a new chapter.

Tyger II throws first. A quick kick to the thigh -- not a fight-ender, a tester. Hakuryu absorbs it. Another kick, same leg. Absorbed. A third -- and Hakuryu grabs the leg on the fourth attempt, holding the ankle, and Tyger II hops on his standing leg for a half-second before launching a jumping enzuigiri with the free foot that catches Hakuryu directly in the side of the head. Both men go down.

John Phillips: "Enzuigiri! Both men down!"

Mark Bravo: "He baited him! He threw three kicks at the same leg knowing Hakuryu would eventually grab it, and the moment he did Tyger II had the counter ready. That was not improvised. That was planned."

The referee begins his count. Both men find their feet at six. They look at each other. The crowd is on its feet.

Tyger II moves first this time. A forearm combination -- quick and sharp -- driving Hakuryu toward the ropes. Hakuryu absorbs and fires back with a chop that staggers Tyger II, but Tyger II comes right back with a kick to the chest that buckles Hakuryu's knees slightly. The crowd rises with each exchange. Hakuryu throws a big elbow that Tyger II ducks under, springs off the middle rope, and comes back with the Ghost Fang Kick -- the flash superkick -- that catches Hakuryu across the jaw and drops him to one knee.

John Phillips: "Ghost Fang Kick! Hakuryu down to one knee!"

Mark Bravo: "THERE IT IS! Out of nowhere! Tyger II used the ropes as a launching pad and that superkick was absolutely perfect! Hakuryu is on one knee and this crowd is going absolutely crazy!"

Tyger II does not cover. He lets the moment breathe -- a deliberate choice, building the pressure, doing something he has earned the right to do. He crouches slightly, locks eyes with Hakuryu, and waits for the champion to rise. Hakuryu works back to both feet. He faces Tyger II.

He prays.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu taking a moment -- and this crowd is letting him hear it."

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Mark Bravo: "He just got rocked by that superkick and his instinct is to pray. Not to clinch. Not to stall. To pray. You have to respect the consistency even if you don't like the man."

When Hakuryu opens his eyes, he moves differently. The generous patience is gone. What replaces it is sharper and colder -- a man who has decided that the cataloguing phase is complete and it is time to act on everything he has stored. He comes forward and the sequence that follows is the most sustained offensive run of the match -- a Superkick to the midsection, a Tornado Kick that turns Tyger II completely around, a Praying Rope Walk Chop that cracks across the chest from the elevated position, then a snap German Suplex that bridges for a cover.

One. Two -- knockout.

John Phillips: "Sustained combination from the champion -- cover -- Tyger II out at two!"

Mark Bravo: "Every single one of those moves was precision. Each one set up the next. The rope walk chop is beautiful on its own but it is also the distraction that lets him set the suplex without a counter attempt. He is a machine right now."

Hakuryu rises from the knockout and pulls Tyger II immediately back to his feet, driving him hard into the corner and following with a running knee to the midsection that doubles him over. A second knee. Tyger II's legs are unsteady. Hakuryu pulls him upright by the shoulder -- the same shoulder he targeted earlier -- and sends him across the ring with an Irish Whip before following immediately, closing the distance before Tyger II can rebound, and crushing him against the opposite buckle with a running forearm. Tyger II slumps. Hakuryu peels him off the corner with a full nelson grip and hits the Nenbutsu Bomb -- the sitout powerbomb from the prayer position -- driving Tyger II into the canvas with a sound that reaches the upper deck. Cover.

One. Two -- knockout.

John Phillips: "NENBUTSU BOMB! Tyger II driven into the mat -- and still only two!"

Mark Bravo: "How is he kicking out of that?! That powerbomb hit like a truck! Hakuryu sat all the way through it and Tyger II still got the shoulder up!"

Hakuryu sits back from the cover and looks at the referee. The referee holds up two fingers. Hakuryu rises. There is no anger in his face, no frustration -- but there is something new. A recalculation. He moves to the corner and begins to climb. Second rope. He settles. He waits for Tyger II to find a vertical base, and the moment Tyger II is upright, the Praying Standing Moonsault launches across the ring and lands across the chest. Cover.

One. Two -- knockout again.

John Phillips: "Another nearfall -- Tyger II will not stay down!"

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Mark Bravo: "At what point does this get into Hakuryu's head, John? He has been systematically dismantling this man for the better part of this match and Tyger II keeps kicking out. That is a variable he is not used to."

Hakuryu looks at the mat for a moment. Just a moment. Then he rises and pulls Tyger II to a seated position, moving behind him and dropping to his knees -- the setup for the Kasu obu Doragon. The Camel Clutch. He wrenches the hold into the center of the ring with both arms locked under the chin, using the full weight of his torso to press the spine into the arc. The referee moves in close. Tyger II's face is compressed with the effort of resisting.

John Phillips: "The Curse of the Dragon locked in -- Hakuryu's submission finisher -- and this is deep."

Mark Bravo: "There is nowhere to go from this position unless you can get to the ropes. The back is being hyperextended, the neck is being cranked, and both arms are tied up. Tyger II has to find a rope or this is over."

Tyger II does not panic. He plants his knees and begins to walk them forward -- one inch, another inch -- while Hakuryu wrenches the hold tighter with each forward movement, making him pay for every inch earned. The crowd counts along with each small gain. Three inches. Four. Hakuryu locks his body down further and Tyger II halts -- arms burning, back screaming -- and the referee checks. Tyger II shakes his head. He plants again and pushes. Another inch. Another.

John Phillips: "Tyger II crawling for the ropes -- and Hakuryu making him pay for every inch!"

Mark Bravo: "This is the hardest thing a wrestler can do. The hold is perfect, the man applying it weighs two hundred and forty pounds and knows exactly how to make those two hundred and forty pounds feel like five hundred, and Tyger II is just -- inching -- toward -- that rope."

His fingers close around the bottom rope. The crowd erupts. The referee calls for the break. Hakuryu holds it -- one count, two -- then releases with the unhurried compliance of a man who broke the hold because he decided to. He rises. He steps back. He brings his hands together.

John Phillips: "Tyger II gets the rope -- the hold broken."

Mark Bravo: "And Hakuryu holds it until he's good and ready to let go. Extra message delivered. Received."

Tyger II pulls himself up using the ropes. He is slower now -- not broken, but carrying the accumulated cost of this match in every movement. He turns. He and Hakuryu look at each other and the crowd is making the kind of noise that tells you a match has moved from performance into something else entirely.

Hakuryu prays.

And something changes in Tyger II's eyes.

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John Phillips: "There is something different in Tyger II's face right now."

Mark Bravo: "He just decided. Whatever ceiling he put on his own intensity because he was managing the match structure -- he just removed it. Watch his hands. Watch his feet. He is a different man than he was ten seconds ago."

Tyger II moves forward and the tempo of the match shifts completely. He is no longer responding -- he is initiating. A rapid forearm combination that backs Hakuryu into the ropes, a snapmare that takes the champion off his feet, and Tyger II immediately to the second rope -- a springboard moonsault that lands clean across Hakuryu's chest. Cover.

One. Two -- kickout.

John Phillips: "Springboard moonsault! Cover -- two count!"

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu kicks out but look at how Tyger II is moving now! That is not the same speed he was operating at earlier. He has shifted into another gear entirely!"

Tyger II does not pause. He pulls Hakuryu up, forearm to the jaw, whips him into the ropes, and on the return drops low for the Yokai Driver -- the sitout fireman's carry spinebuster -- and the impact shakes the ring. Cover.

One. Two -- Hakuryu gets the shoulder up at two and nine-tenths.

John Phillips: "YOKAI DRIVER! Hakuryu barely -- BARELY -- kicks out!"

Mark Bravo: "That was a HAIR. That was a single hair away from a new WrestleZone Champion! Tyger II cannot believe it and frankly neither can I!"

Tyger II pushes himself up and the crowd is giving him something earned -- not sympathy, not charity, but genuine recognition. He signals. The Tiger Claw. He lowers into a crouch, locks eyes with Hakuryu who is rising slowly, and the building holds its breath.

John Phillips: "Tyger II signaling for the Tiger Eclipse -- his finisher -- if this connects--"

Mark Bravo: "If this connects, it is over. Period."

Hakuryu rises. Tyger II explodes -- and Hakuryu sidesteps, barely, snatching the arm on the way past and redirecting Tyger II's momentum hard into the corner. Tyger II hits the buckle chest-first and staggers backward -- right into a release German Suplex from Hakuryu that sends him across the ring. Hakuryu is on him before he can breathe -- a running knee to the face on the way up, then a full Koya Otoshi -- the crucifix powerbomb from the prayer position -- that drives Tyger II into the canvas with a violence that echoes through the building.

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John Phillips: "KOYA OTOSHI! Counter into the crucifix powerbomb and Tyger II has been planted!"

Mark Bravo: "He countered the Tiger Eclipse and put together a THREE MOVE SEQUENCE off it! That is not a man who is tired. That is a machine. A cold, praying, terrifying machine."

Hakuryu does not cover. He stands and looks at Tyger II on the canvas and something has resolved in his expression -- not relief, not triumph. Resolution. He moves to the corner. He climbs. He reaches the top rope. He turns, settles his footing with care, and brings both hands together in prayer.

The Ryu no Kokyu. The Breath of the Dragon. The diving headbutt from the prayer position, launched from the top rope.

It connects clean. The impact drives the air out of the building. Hakuryu goes into the cover and hooks both legs.

One.

Two --

Tyger II kicks out.

The arena comes apart.

John Phillips: "TWO! TYGER II KICKS OUT AT TWO!"

Mark Bravo: "I -- WHAT. He hit it CLEAN. He launched from the TOP ROPE and drove his skull into Tyger II's chest from twelve feet in the air and TYGER II KICKED OUT. What does this man have to do?!"

Hakuryu rises from the cover and the expression on his face is something this audience has never seen from him. Not fury. Not panic. Something quieter and more dangerous than either. He looks at the referee. The referee holds up two fingers. Hakuryu looks down at Tyger II.

He is utterly still.

He prays.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu taking a moment -- and this crowd is electric."

Mark Bravo: "He hit his best shot and Tyger II is still breathing. That does not happen to Hakuryu. That is not something he has had to process before and right now that prayer is doing a lot of work."

When he opens his eyes, there is a decision in them. He pulls Tyger II to a seated position and moves behind him for the Kasu obu Doragon again -- but this time he is faster, and the hold is set deeper than the

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first application, informed by everything the first application taught him. Every adjustment is precise. Tyger II's back bends at a more severe angle. The referee moves in immediately.

John Phillips: "The Curse of the Dragon locked in a second time -- and it looks even deeper than the first!"

Mark Bravo: "He learned from the first application. He knows exactly how Tyger II tried to escape the last time and he has already closed those options. The positioning of his body, the angle of the arms -- this is a different hold than the first one even though it's the same move."

Tyger II's arms begin to shake. He tries to plant his knees and finds less left in them than before. He manages one inch forward. Another. The crowd is counting every movement. Hakuryu wrenches. Tyger II halts.

Sinja, at ringside, watches with visible satisfaction. He leans forward slightly, hands on the barricade, watching Tyger II fade.

And then the crowd shifts.

Not an eruption. A murmur. The kind that starts in one corner of a building and travels through it like a current through water until every section is carrying it.

John Phillips: "What -- what is -- wait a moment--"

Mark Bravo: "Is that -- John, is that Van Patton?"

Van Patton, Theron Tkachuk, and Torunn Sigurjonsson are walking through the arena concourse -- tickets in hand, moving with unhurried calm toward three front row seats directly at ringside. They did not come through the curtain. They walked in through the public entrance like any other paying customer. Tkachuk leading the way, causing the crowd to part. Torunn with warpaint already applied, rolling her neck as she walks. Van Patton behind of both of them, a notepad under his arm, looking for all the world like a man who bought a ticket to watch a sporting event.

John Phillips: "That is Gunnar Van Patton. Tkachuk and Torunn are with him -- but they were barred from this arena tonight! Stevens said--"

Mark Bravo: "They were barred from the talent entrances. Barred from backstage. Barred from any door this company controls. Nobody said anything about buying a ticket and sitting in the front row like a paying customer. They found the gap."

John Phillips: "Security is moving toward them--"

Mark Bravo: "And Van Patton is already showing them the tickets. Look at that. Three legitimate, purchased, valid tickets. There is nothing security can do and he knew it the moment he bought them."

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The trio sits. Van Patton settles into his seat and crosses one leg over the other and opens the notepad. Gunnar whistles loudly, calling to one of the vendors, in hopes of getting a beer sent his way. Tkachuk sits beside him with arms folded and eyes forward and the expression of a man who has been asked to occupy a chair next to someone he could break in half and is making a considered choice not to. Torunn leans toward the barricade and fixes her gaze on the ring -- on Hakuryu specifically -- with the slow, deliberate intensity of a predator communicating to its prey that it has been located.

The grin begins slowly.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu has registered their presence -- he still has the Curse of the Dragon applied but you can see it in his eyes -- he knows they're there."

Mark Bravo: "He saw them the second they sat down. He's trying to maintain the hold but his focus has fractured. That is exactly what they wanted. They don't need to do anything else. Just being there is the weapon."

Tyger II feels the hold loosen by a fraction -- just a fraction -- as Hakuryu's attention divides. He plants his knees and pushes with everything he has left. Two inches. Three. The fingers of one hand are six inches from the bottom rope.

John Phillips: "Tyger II crawling -- he is close to that rope--"

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu is distracted, John! He keeps glancing toward the barricade! He is losing focus in the hold and Tyger II can feel it!"

Sinja, still seething from last week's events, steps toward the barricade and begins directing comments at the trio -- sharp and pointed and emboldened by the presence of security and the legal barriers in place. He mocks the notepad. He says something toward Tkachuk that draws a reaction from the surrounding crowd. He leans closer to the barricade.

John Phillips: "Sinja getting involved here -- directing comments at the Brigade -- and he needs to be careful--"

Mark Bravo: "Sinja, I am begging you from a professional standpoint -- do not lean over that barricade--"

Torunn's hand shoots out and closes around Sinja's throat.

Not a choke. A grip. Slow and vice-like, lifting him just enough to drag him over the barricade. She does not strike him. She simply holds him -- the way you hold something you have decided belongs to you until you decide otherwise. Her expression does not change. Her eyes move from Sinja's face to Hakuryu's face in the ring.

John Phillips: "TORUNN HAS SINJA BY THE THROAT--"

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Mark Bravo: "SHE JUST REACHED OVER THAT BARRICADE AND GRABBED HIM! Like picking up a newspaper! Sinja cannot get free--"

Sinja's sounds reach the ring.

Hakuryu releases the Kasu obu Doragon, leaving an unconscious Tyger II on the mat, and is through the ropes in a single motion -- and Theron Tkachuk rises from his seat and steps directly into the space between the champion and Van Patton. He does not raise his hands. He does not threaten or posture. He simply stands there -- all six feet six inches and two hundred and ninety-two pounds of him -- and stares at Hakuryu with the flat, cold expression of a man who has decided to be a wall and is fully committed to that decision for as long as it takes.

Behind Tkachuk, Van Patton has risen from his seat. His hands are up -- palms out -- his face arranged in an expression of complete theatrical innocence. Wide eyes. A slight, slow shake of the head. The physical language of a man who cannot fathom how any of this happened and had absolutely nothing to do with it. He holds the notepad loosely at his side.

Gunnar Van Patton: "What in tarnation?"

John Phillips: "The referee is counting -- Hakuryu is on the outside -- he cannot get past Tkachuk--"

Mark Bravo: "Tkachuk is not touching him! He is standing in a public space at a public event and there is nothing -- nothing -- illegal about that! Hakuryu cannot go through him without escalating this into something that ends his title reign tonight and Van Patton knows it!"

John Phillips: "Four! Five!"

Mark Bravo: "Van Patton back there looking completely baffled! Like he has never seen anything so surprising in his entire life! Outstanding performance!"

Torunn still has Sinja. She has not moved. The grin is full now -- slow and savoring and private.

Six. Seven.

Hakuryu's fists are at his sides. He is three feet from Tkachuk. Three feet from his cornerman. He cannot go through Tkachuk without the chaos escalating beyond control. Tkachuk would have no issue striking him, leading to the DQ victory, but Hakuryu's ego won't allow such a weak victory to happen. Hakuryu's is completely boxed in -- not by force, but by geography and a man following an order to stand in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

John Phillips: "Eight! Hakuryu needs to get back in that ring--"

Mark Bravo: "He CAN'T! He physically cannot get to Sinja without going through Tkachuk. Van Patton built

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a massive Canadian wall between them"

Nine.

Ten.

The bell rings.

Torunn casually tosses Sinja back over the barricade, not hard enough to hurt him. Just enough to say that he is not longer required. Finished. Done. Sinja climbs up to one knee, hand at his throat. Torunn straightens, rolls her neck slowly, and sits back in her seat as though nothing of significance has occurred. She looks at her hand briefly. Then she looks at Hakuryu.

She is still grinning.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu has been counted out. The WrestleZone Title does not change hands on a countout -- the champion retains -- but the WrestleZone Champion has just been defeated for the second time in two weeks, engineered by the same group of people, using a completely different method."

Mark Bravo: "They never broke a rule. Not one. Torunn grabbed Sinja and let go the second the bell rang. Tkachuk stood in a public area with his hands at his sides. Van Patton stood behind him looking utterly shocked by what he was seeing. Every single thing they did tonight was perfectly legal and it cost Hakuryu a match he had completely under control."

Security floods ringside. Avril Selene Kinkade arrives with the Fatu Twins -- Kimo and Keanu positioning themselves on either side of the trio with the patient, immovable efficiency of men who are very good at their jobs. Avril stops in front of Van Patton. She looks at him for a long moment without speaking. Van Patton closes his notepad, tucks it neatly under his arm, and tips his ballcap to her. He turns and moves toward the exit. Tkachuk follows without a word or a glance at anyone. Torunn rises last -- unhurried, deliberate -- and before she turns to leave she gives Hakuryu one long, unbroken look across the ring. Still grinning. Then she turns and walks away.

Mission accomplished. They never needed to stay.

The camera returns to Hakuryu, surrounded by security. His gaze turns to Avril, who had made promises that have now been shattered.

Kimo and Keanu position themselves in front of Avril, advising without words that Hakuryu's rage better be directed elsewhere. The WrestleZone Title is placed in his hands by the referee and he is gripping it so hard his knuckles have gone white. Sinja stands beside him, still visibly shaken, one hand at his throat. Hakuryu does not pray. He does not perform any ritual. He does not acknowledge the crowd. He does not move at all.

He focuses on the exit the wolves have just taken.

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John Phillips: "You can feel the anger radiating off of Hakuryu. We've never seen him crack like this before."

Mark Bravo: "The white dragon is about to breathe fire. You can bet on that."

Proving Grounds

The screen fades away from the arena.

Black.

Then the sound of a single breath.

Not calm.

Focused.

Hungry.

A heavy drumbeat kicks in.

One strike.

Then another.

The UTA logo flashes on the screen, followed immediately by the bold branding for:

PROVING GROUNDS

The music swells into something harder now, all rising tension and sharp percussion.

Quick flashes hit the screen.

Training drills.

Faces shouting in the middle of heated exchanges.

Bodies hitting the mat.

A referee counting.

A contestant slamming a fist into the canvas in frustration.

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Another standing tall after a win.

A voiceover cuts in.

Voiceover: "The field started crowded."

The screen flashes with clips of the earlier weeks. Names. Elimination graphics. Near falls. Judges watching. Emotions boiling over.

Voiceover: "Dreams were tested."

A body crashes hard into the corner.

Voiceover: "Promises were broken."

Two contestants scream at each other nose to nose.

Voiceover: "And every week, someone learned that wanting it..."

The music cuts for half a beat.

Voiceover: "Wasn't enough."

The words slam onto the screen.

FINAL FIVE

The beat changes.

Each remaining competitor gets their own hard spotlight.

Darren Valiant appears first. Footage of him in the ring, polished, confident, composed under the lights.

Darren Valiant: "Winning live matters. Not because it flatters my ego -- though let's not pretend it doesn't -- but because it proves I translate where it counts."

Cut to Jace Van Ardent. Thoughtful. Guarded. Always watching, always measuring.

Jace Van Ardent: "Tonight saved me and warned me in the same breath. That's useful. Also unpleasant."

Cut to Roxie Raze. Sharp eyes. Intensity. A fighter who looks like she still does not trust the result unless she took it with her own hands.

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Roxie Raze: "I won. I'm still here. And somehow this doesn't feel clean. That probably says something important."

Cut to Boone Mercer. Heavy hands. Hard jaw. The kind of presence that makes every room feel smaller just by stepping into it.

Boone Mercer: "The room's real small now. I like that. Means every dude left had to bleed for it."

Then Tatum Quinn. Focused. Driven. Carrying the look of someone who knows survival is no longer the story. Now it is expectation.

Tatum Quinn: "I'm still here because tonight I was finally felt. That's not a small thing. But it also means the standard changed for me now."

The screen splits into five panels.

Darren.

Jace.

Roxie.

Boone.

Tatum.

The music builds underneath them.

Voiceover: "Five remain."

Clips fly rapidly now.

Darren throwing a crisp strike combination.

Jace rolling out of danger and resetting.

Roxie firing back with a burst of aggression.

Boone driving through someone with force.

Tatum refusing to stay down.

Voiceover: "Two weeks left."

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The words appear huge across the screen.

TWO WEEKS LEFT

Voiceover: "One contract."

The music drops down again, replaced for a moment by the sound of a pen clicking.

A UTA contract appears on screen.

Blank signature line.

Waiting.

Voiceover: "One life-changing opportunity."

Each finalist appears again, this time in slower, harder shots. Sweat. bruises. determination. doubt. confidence. hunger.

Voiceover: "Who has the poise to shine when the lights hit?"

Darren Valiant.

Voiceover: "Who has the instinct to survive when the pressure closes in?"

Jace Van Ardent.

Voiceover: "Who has the fire to turn uncertainty into violence?"

Roxie Raze.

Voiceover: "Who has the toughness to embrace the pain and keep swinging?"

Boone Mercer.

Voiceover: "And who can rise when the standard gets higher than ever before?"

Tatum Quinn.

The five-panel image returns.

This time, it pulses with each beat of the music.

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Voiceover: "The field is down to the final five."

A hard cut to the Proving Grounds logo.

Voiceover: "Two weeks left to prove you belong."

Another cut. The contract again.

Voiceover: "Two weeks left to survive the pressure."

Another cut. The five finalists.

Voiceover: "Two weeks left to answer the question."

The music cuts out entirely.

Silence.

Then the final line lands.

Voiceover: "Who will walk out with a UTA contract?"

The final graphic appears.

UTA PROVING GROUNDS

FINAL FIVE

TWO WEEKS LEFT

ONE CONTRACT

The logo lingers for one last beat.

Then the screen fades back toward the live show.

A Word

The camera cuts backstage.

A hallway just beyond gorilla position. Concrete walls. Black road cases. Production cables taped down in uneven lines across the floor. Somewhere off to the side, a monitor plays the live arena feed with the volume

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low, the image still showing the last few moments of Chris Ross standing in the ring with the steel chair in his hand.

Melissa Cartwright steps into frame, microphone in hand, eyes already focused down the hallway.

She is moving with purpose, but there is caution in her pace. This is not chasing someone down after a controversial pinfall. This is not grabbing a quick quote from an angry wrestler after a backstage argument.

This is Chris Ross.

And lately, silence has been the warning sign.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris? Chris Ross?"

The camera follows her as she turns the corner.

There he is.

Chris Ross walks alone down the hallway, still in street clothes, folded steel chair hanging from one hand. His pace is slow. Measured. Unhurried. He does not look like a man leaving a promo.

He looks like a man who has already said what needed to be said.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris, can I get a word?"

Ross keeps walking.

Melissa quickens her pace, catching up beside him but not stepping fully in front of him yet.

Melissa Cartwright: "Earlier tonight, you said Samuel Scythe, Ace Andrews, and Maxwell Jett had all been judged. You said the verdict was execution."

Ross still does not stop.

The chair swings slightly beside his leg.

Melissa Cartwright: "People are going to want to know what that means."

That gets him to slow.

Not stop.

Slow.

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Melissa notices and carefully steps ahead of him, turning so the microphone is between them.

Melissa Cartwright: "Can you explain it?"

Ross stops.

The hallway seems to quiet around him.

He looks at Melissa.

Not angry.

Not impatient.

Just cold.

Melissa holds her ground, but the microphone dips half an inch before she steadies it again.

Chris Ross: "You want me to explain execution?"

His voice is quiet.

Too quiet.

Melissa takes a breath.

Melissa Cartwright: "I want you to explain what you intend to do."

Ross looks down at the chair in his hand.

Then back to Melissa.

Chris Ross: "That's the problem with people around here."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "Everybody wants the warning."

He shifts the chair slightly in his grip.

Chris Ross: "Everybody wants the speech."

Another pause.

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Chris Ross: "Everybody wants to hear how bad it's gonna hurt before it hurts."

Melissa studies him, then presses carefully.

Melissa Cartwright: "You named three people. Samuel Scythe. Ace Andrews. Maxwell Jett. Are you saying you're coming for all three of them?"

Ross does not answer immediately.

Instead, he turns his head slightly toward the monitor behind them, where the image of his in-ring segment has faded into the show graphics.

Chris Ross: "Samuel Scythe made a choice."

His eyes return to Melissa.

Chris Ross: "Ace Andrews paid for that choice."

A beat.

Chris Ross: "Maxwell Jett enjoyed it."

Melissa lowers the microphone slightly, absorbing the line, then raises it again.

Melissa Cartwright: "And now?"

Ross leans in just a fraction.

Chris Ross: "Now they stop enjoying it."

The words hang in the hallway.

Melissa glances briefly at the chair, then back up.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris, when you say execution, are you talking about ending careers? Are you talking about violence? Are you talking about taking the UTA Championship back from Maxwell Jett?"

For the first time, Ross gives the smallest hint of a smile.

It is not warm.

It is not reassuring.

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Chris Ross: "Yes."

Melissa pauses.

Melissa Cartwright: "All of it?"

Ross looks past her now, down the hallway.

Chris Ross: "Judgment doesn't ask which part you want."

He starts to step around her.

Melissa moves with him, still trying to keep the interview alive.

Melissa Cartwright: "You also said this was not you losing control. You said this was an awakening. What changed?"

Ross stops again.

This time, his eyes sharpen slightly.

Chris Ross: "Control."

Melissa waits.

Chris Ross: "That's what changed."

He lifts the chair, not threateningly, just enough for it to enter the frame between them.

Chris Ross: "Before, I would've swung this at the first face I saw."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "Before, I would've broken the first body that got close enough."

He lowers the chair again.

Chris Ross: "That is what they expected."

Ross looks directly into the camera now.

Chris Ross: "That is what they planned for."

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His voice drops even colder.

Chris Ross: "They did not plan for patience."

Melissa shifts the microphone back toward herself.

Melissa Cartwright: "So what happens next?"

Ross looks at her again.

Another long silence.

The kind he has made into part of his language.

Chris Ross: "Next?"

He tilts his head slightly.

Chris Ross: "They start looking over their shoulders."

A pause.

Chris Ross: "Then they start losing sleep."

Another pause.

Chris Ross: "Then they start making mistakes."

Ross turns his eyes back to the camera.

Chris Ross: "And when they do..."

He raises the chair slightly again.

Chris Ross: "I collect."

Melissa's expression tightens, professional but visibly unsettled.

Melissa Cartwright: "Is that message meant for Maxwell Jett?"

Ross does not blink.

Chris Ross: "Maxwell already got the message."

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A pause.

Chris Ross: "He just thinks he can hide behind distance."

Ross steps closer to the camera, not Melissa now.

Chris Ross: "He thinks because he's not in this building tonight, he's safe."

He shakes his head once.

Chris Ross: "That ain't safety."

Another pause.

Chris Ross: "That's delay."

The hallway seems to tighten around the word.

Melissa Cartwright: "And Samuel Scythe?"

Ross' eyes shift back to her.

Chris Ross: "Scythe wanted to be a reaper."

His grip tightens slightly on the chair.

Chris Ross: "He should have known better than to steal a name from a graveyard he ain't ready to walk through."

Melissa does not immediately respond.

Ross begins to move again, stepping around her.

Melissa Cartwright: "Chris, one last question."

Ross stops with his back half-turned.

Melissa Cartwright: "Are you done talking now?"

Ross looks over his shoulder.

For a moment, there is nothing but the low hum of the hallway and the distant roar of the crowd bleeding through the walls.

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Chris Ross: "I was done talking before I came out here."

He lifts the chair slightly.

Chris Ross: "This just needed witnesses."

Ross turns and walks away down the corridor.

Melissa remains where she is, microphone still raised, watching him disappear into the darker end of the hallway.

The camera stays on her for a beat as she exhales slowly, trying to regain the rhythm of the broadcast.

Melissa Cartwright: "Back to ringside."

But even after she says it, her eyes drift once more toward the hallway where Chris Ross vanished.

The shot lingers.

Then cuts away.

Eric Dane Jr. vs Clovis Black

The camera returns to ringside inside the Zénith de Strasbourg.

The arena is loud now, restless and ready, the French crowd carrying the kind of energy that only comes when a show has reached its final fight. The ring crew has cleared the area. The official stands inside the ropes, speaking briefly with the timekeeper while the UTA Hardcore Championship graphic fills the screen.

UTA HARDCORE CHAMPIONSHIP

Eric Dane Jr. defends against Clovis Black

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, it is time for our main event. The UTA Hardcore Championship is on the line. Eric Dane Jr. defends against The Empire's Clovis Black."

Mark Bravo: "And this one has bad intentions written all over it. Hardcore Championship rules, Clovis Black, Eric Dane Jr., and a title that has already caused more chaos than half the roster combined."

John Phillips: "Clovis Black earned this opportunity by defeating Samuel Scythe last week in Italy, and tonight he walks into the main event with a chance to bring even more gold back to The Empire."

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Mark Bravo: "And you know Amy Harrison is watching this somewhere with a smile on her face. The Empire already has power. Already has influence. If Clovis Black walks out with the Hardcore Championship, that is not just another title. That is another weapon."

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. has had a strange night already. Bobby Dean, Maxx Mayhem, the tension backstage, and now this. He cannot afford distraction. Not against a man like Clovis Black."

Mark Bravo: "Clovis is not a man you survive while distracted. Clovis is not a man you survive while thinking about your feelings. Clovis is a runaway locomotive with fists, and if Dane Jr. is still thinking about Bobby Dean, he may wake up without a championship."

The lights begin to fall.

Not completely.

They sink into a low, industrial darkness, the kind that makes the ring, the ramp, and the barricades look colder. Harder. Less forgiving.

A low bass-heavy beat begins to rumble through the arena.

Ominous.

Mechanical.

Like something enormous starting up somewhere deep beneath the building.

The crowd reaction shifts with it, boos rolling through the Zénith de Strasbourg with a different texture now. Not theatrical. Not playful.

Uneasy.

Then a freight horn blares through the speakers.

SFX: BWAAAAAAAAAAM!

The sound seems to shake the walls.

Smoke crawls across the stage in low sheets.

For one long moment, there is only the beat.

Only the horn's echo.

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Only the sense of something coming.

Then Clovis Black steps through the shadows.

Hood up.

Sleeveless trench coat hanging from his shoulders.

Eyes locked forward.

No Amy Harrison.

No Trey Mack.

No full Empire procession.

Just Clovis Black.

And somehow, that makes it feel worse.

John Phillips: "There he is. Clovis Black. Kansas City, Missouri. Six-foot-two, two hundred seventy-three pounds. One half of the UTA Tag Team Champions, and tonight, challenger for the UTA Hardcore Championship."

Mark Bravo: "That man does not look like he is walking to a title match. He looks like somebody defaulted on a payment plan and he came to collect the whole building."

Clovis stops at the top of the ramp.

He does not raise his arms.

He does not acknowledge the crowd.

He does not scan the arena for approval, hatred, fear, or anything else.

He simply looks down the ramp toward the ring.

Heavy.

Silent.

Absolute.

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John Phillips: "Clovis Black is all business. No wasted motion. No showboating. No theatrics beyond the feeling that something very bad is about to happen."

Mark Bravo: "Everything he does looks like it hurts, John. His punches sound different. His slams sound different. When Clovis Black hits somebody, it does not look like he is trying to get a reaction. It looks like he is trying to make sure they remember the date."

Clovis begins walking.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Heavy boots striking the ramp in time with the bass beat.

Fans at the barricade lean forward, shouting at him, reaching for him, trying to pull even the smallest reaction out of him.

They get nothing.

Clovis gives them the same thing he gives everyone before impact.

Silence.

John Phillips: "This is a man who defeated Samuel Scythe in a Hardcore Championship contendership match. That alone tells you the kind of danger Eric Dane Jr. is facing tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And remember how that happened. Clovis did not talk his way into this. He did not complain his way into this. He walked into a fight with Samuel Scythe and won it. That is the most Clovis Black way possible to earn a title shot."

John Phillips: "Now he gets Dane Jr. under Hardcore Championship rules, and if you are Eric Dane Jr., there are not many opponents worse suited for survival than this man."

Mark Bravo: "Clovis already wrestles like the rulebook is a suggestion somebody left in the glove compartment. You put him in a Hardcore Championship match? That is not opening the door. That is taking the door off the hinges and handing it to him."

Clovis reaches ringside and stops in front of the apron.

He looks at the ring.

The referee watches him carefully from inside, suddenly seeming very aware of how much smaller he feels

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in this moment.

Clovis turns toward the steel steps.

He climbs them one at a time.

Each step lands heavy enough to make the metal groan beneath him.

At the top, he pauses on the apron.

The camera cuts tight to his face beneath the hood.

His eyes remain forward.

Cold.

Unblinking.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black has been called The Empire's big, strong, silent killer. Tonight, Amy Harrison may not be at his side, but her influence is all over this opportunity."

Mark Bravo: "Amy positioned him. Clovis earned it. Now the question is whether Eric Dane Jr. can survive what The Empire has pointed at him."

Clovis steps through the ropes.

He walks to the center of the ring.

Then, slowly, he reaches up and pulls the hood down.

The boos swell.

Clovis does not react.

He strips off the sleeveless trench coat in one sharp motion and hands it through the ropes to an attendant without looking at them.

His powerhouse frame is fully visible now, shoulders broad, arms loose, posture relaxed in the most threatening way possible.

He does not pace.

He does not bounce.

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He simply stands.

And that is enough.

John Phillips: "Look at the contrast between Clovis Black and Eric Dane Jr. Clovis is direct power, direct violence, direct impact. Dane Jr. brings ego, athletic risk, and a habit of making every situation stranger than it needs to be."

Mark Bravo: "Dane Jr. is dangerous because he will try anything. Clovis is dangerous because he does not need to. He knows exactly what works. He hits you. He throws you. He breaks you down. He keeps going until the job is done."

Clovis backs into his corner, shoulders rolled forward, eyes fixed on the entrance stage now.

The bass-heavy beat begins to fade under the rising crowd noise.

The freight horn echoes one final time.

SFX: BWAAAAAAAAAAM!

Then the music dies.

Clovis Black remains in the corner.

Silent.

Massive.

Waiting.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is here. The challenger is ready. Up next, the UTA Hardcore Champion, Eric Dane Jr."

Mark Bravo: "And somewhere backstage, Dane Jr. just heard that horn and realized the bill has come due."

Clovis Black stands in the corner.

Silent.

Massive.

Waiting.

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The arena noise swells around him, but Clovis does not move. His eyes stay locked on the entrance stage, shoulders rolled forward, hands loose at his sides. The UTA Hardcore Championship opportunity is moments away, and the challenger looks less like a man preparing for a match than a machine waiting for the next command.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is in the ring, and now we await the champion. Eric Dane Jr. defends the UTA Hardcore Championship in our main event here in Strasbourg."

Mark Bravo: "And if Dane Jr. was rattled earlier tonight, if Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem got under his skin even a little, he better have shaken it off by now. Because Clovis Black is not going to care about anyone's emotional journey."

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. has carried that Hardcore Championship with arrogance, with entitlement, and at times, with outright denial of what holding that title really means. But Scott Stevens made it clear in Italy. The loopholes are closed. Appropriate stipulations. Real defenses. No reinterpretations."

Mark Bravo: "And this is as real as it gets. Clovis Black earned the shot. The Hardcore Championship is on the line. Weapons are in play. Pain is expected. And Dane Jr. has to defend against a man who already wrestles like every match is happening in a parking lot after last call."

The lights cut sharply.

Not a slow fade.

A snap.

The building drops into darkness for half a second before a burst of white light explodes across the stage.

A wall of camera flashes strobes across the entranceway.

Silver light spills over the ramp.

The video screen erupts with a montage of stars, chrome, and distorted clips of Eric Dane Jr. holding the Hardcore Championship above his head. Every image is too polished. Too self-important. Too convinced of its own greatness.

Then the music hits.

Loud.

Flashy.

Obnoxiously grand.

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The boos begin immediately.

And through the light steps Eric Dane Jr.

The UTA Hardcore Championship is draped over his shoulder.

He is dressed like someone who believes the concept of subtlety is for people without last names. Silver gear catches the light, stars flashing across his trunks and boots. His wrists and fingers are taped with meticulous care, more aesthetic than functional, every bit of him put together to scream that the stage belongs to him.

Over it all, he wears an entrance jacket that looks too expensive, too ornate, and entirely too pleased with itself.

Dane stops at the top of the ramp.

He lifts his chin.

He adjusts the Hardcore Championship with two fingers.

Then he smirks.

John Phillips: "And here comes the UTA Hardcore Champion. Eric Dane Jr."

Mark Bravo: "Say what you want about him, John, but the kid knows how to make people hate looking at him."

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr., the son of one of the most accomplished names in this industry, but he has spent his entire UTA run trying to prove he is more than that name. He has tried to drag legacy behind him like a spotlight."

Mark Bravo: "And he has been successful enough to become Hardcore Champion. You cannot take that part away from him."

John Phillips: "No, you cannot. But tonight may be the most physically dangerous defense of his reign. Clovis Black is bigger, stronger, and under these rules, the champion cannot rely on technical escape routes."

Dane starts down the ramp.

Slow at first.

Not because he is cautious.

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Because he wants everyone to watch him.

He points to the Hardcore Championship, then taps the faceplate twice.

The French crowd boos harder.

Dane smiles like they are applauding.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Look at it. That's as close as any of you get."

He turns slightly, presenting the championship to the camera on the ramp.

Then his eyes shift toward the ring.

Clovis Black has not moved.

That matters.

Dane's smirk stays on his face, but it tightens at the corners.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. trying to project confidence, but look at the ring. Clovis Black has not taken his eyes off him since the lights came back up."

Mark Bravo: "Clovis is not impressed by jackets. He is not impressed by last names. He is not impressed by the little title-polishing routine. Clovis is looking at Dane like a job site hazard."

Dane keeps walking.

With each step, the champion's swagger grows a little louder, like he can feel the size difference from across the ring and is trying to drown it out with posture.

A fan near the barricade shouts at him.

Dane stops just long enough to glance over.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You couldn't afford the autograph."

The boos spike.

Dane laughs under his breath and continues down the ramp.

John Phillips: "One thing we know about Eric Dane Jr., he is relentless. He may be inexperienced compared to the legacy he constantly invokes, but he does not stop. He will throw himself into danger if he

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thinks it makes him look like a star."

Mark Bravo: "That is both his strength and his problem. He will try anything. Shooting stars, springboards, headbutts, big risks. But against Clovis Black, one bad idea can become the last bad idea of the night."

John Phillips: "And we saw earlier tonight, Dane Jr. has already been pulled emotionally in multiple directions. Bobby Dean, Maxx Mayhem, the stress of this title defense, the pressure of being forced to defend under real Hardcore Championship expectations."

Mark Bravo: "The pressure is real, but I'll give Dane this. He walks like a man who refuses to admit pressure exists."

Dane reaches ringside and stops in front of the ring.

He looks up at Clovis.

Clovis looks down at him.

For the first time, the visual difference is impossible to ignore.

The champion, smaller, flashy, title over his shoulder, ego wrapped around him like armor.

The challenger, broad, silent, stripped of spectacle, waiting in the corner like impact given human form.

Dane's jaw works once.

Then he smirks again.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You waiting for permission?"

Clovis says nothing.

Dane scoffs, then turns away like he got the last word.

He walks around ringside with the championship still over his shoulder, taking a deliberate lap before entering. He pauses at the commentary desk and leans just enough toward John Phillips and Mark Bravo.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Call this correctly."

Mark Bravo: "Absolutely, champ."

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. with instructions for us before defending the Hardcore Championship."

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Mark Bravo: "I am choosing self-preservation."

Dane turns away from commentary and heads toward the steel steps.

He places one boot on the bottom step, then pauses to adjust the title again.

The crowd boos the delay.

Dane takes his time anyway.

He climbs the steps, reaches the apron, and stops outside the ropes.

Inside, Clovis takes one step forward.

Just one.

Dane sees it immediately.

The champion freezes for the smallest fraction of a second, then covers it by wiping his boots on the apron with exaggerated importance.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black took one step and Dane Jr. noticed immediately."

Mark Bravo: "Everybody noticed. The lights noticed. That step had weight."

The referee moves between them, motioning Clovis back.

Referee: "Back up, Clovis. Let him in."

Clovis slowly returns to his corner.

Dane watches him, then steps through the ropes.

Once inside, the champion immediately raises the Hardcore Championship high above his head.

The boos pour down.

Dane turns in place, forcing every side of the arena to look at him with the title.

He stops with his back partly to Clovis, still showing off for the crowd.

Clovis does not rush him.

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Clovis does not even twitch.

That somehow makes the moment more threatening.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. reminding everyone that he is the champion."

Mark Bravo: "He better remind himself too, because once that bell rings, the belt does not block a lariat."

Dane finally lowers the championship and pulls it against his chest for a second.

His eyes cut toward Clovis.

Then toward the stage.

Just briefly.

A flicker.

Maybe looking for Bobby Dean.

Maybe making sure Maxx Mayhem is nowhere near him.

Maybe both.

Then he turns back toward Clovis and forces the smirk back into place.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. glanced toward the stage there."

Mark Bravo: "You think he's looking for Bobby?"

John Phillips: "After what happened earlier tonight, I would not be surprised."

Mark Bravo: "That is the worst thing he can do. Look anywhere but at Clovis Black."

The referee steps toward Dane and asks for the championship.

Dane does not hand it over right away.

He looks at the official.

Then at Clovis.

Then down at the title.

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Eric Dane Jr.: "Careful with it."

The referee takes the championship.

Dane keeps one hand on it an extra second before finally letting go.

The official raises the UTA Hardcore Championship high in the center of the ring.

The crowd roars.

Clovis Black stares at the title.

Eric Dane Jr. stares at Clovis.

The referee turns, showing the championship to each side of the arena before handing it off to the timekeeper.

Ring Announcer: "The following contest is your main event of the evening, and it is for the UTA Hardcore Championship!"

The crowd erupts again.

Ring Announcer: "Introducing first, the challenger. From Kansas City, Missouri, weighing in at two hundred seventy-three pounds... representing The Empire... Clovis Black!"

The boos roll through the building, low and heavy.

Clovis does not react.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent. From Mobile, Alabama, weighing in at one hundred eighty-three pounds... he is the UTA Hardcore Champion... Eric Dane Jr.!"

Dane throws both arms up, soaking in the boos like they are proof of his importance.

He backs into his corner and begins bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet, rolling his neck, loosening his shoulders, trying to look fearless.

Clovis remains still.

The contrast is brutal.

John Phillips: "This is the moment. Eric Dane Jr. defends. Clovis Black challenges. Hardcore Championship on the line."

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Mark Bravo: "And Dane Jr. better have more than attitude tonight. He better have speed, creativity, weapons, and maybe a really good exit strategy."

The referee checks with Clovis.

Clovis gives the smallest nod.

The referee checks with Dane.

Dane smirks, then says something that the camera barely catches.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Watch greatness."

The referee looks toward the timekeeper.

Clovis Black leans forward for the first time.

Eric Dane Jr. rolls his shoulders and adjusts his wrist tape.

The crowd rises.

The referee glances once more between Eric Dane Jr. and Clovis Black.

There is no long lecture this time.

No reminder to keep it clean.

No warning about closed fists, rope breaks, or fighting on the floor.

This is the Hardcore Championship.

The rules are not gone completely.

But they are far enough away that neither man seems concerned about them.

John Phillips: "Hardcore Championship on the line. No traditional disqualifications. No count-outs. The referee is here to count the fall, call a submission, or stop this if someone cannot continue."

Mark Bravo: "Which means Eric Dane Jr. cannot hide behind rules, and Clovis Black cannot be restrained by them. That is a terrifying sentence for two very different reasons."

The referee calls for the bell.

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DING DING DING!

The crowd erupts.

Clovis Black steps out of his corner immediately.

Heavy.

Direct.

No hesitation.

Eric Dane Jr. steps out too, but not forward.

Sideways.

He circles.

He keeps distance between himself and the challenger, eyes flicking from Clovis' shoulders to his hands to the space behind him. Dane's smirk remains, but the movement tells the truth. He knows exactly what happens if Clovis gets both hands on him too early.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. is not rushing in. That may be the smartest decision he has made all night."

Mark Bravo: "You do not lock up with Clovis Black unless your retirement plan includes traction."

Clovis advances.

Dane circles again.

Clovis cuts him off with one step.

Dane changes direction and immediately slides under the bottom rope to the floor.

The crowd boos as Dane lands at ringside and taps his temple with one finger.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Think, big man."

Clovis looks down at him from inside the ring.

He does not chase right away.

That seems to irritate Dane more than if he had.

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John Phillips: "Dane Jr. rolling outside, and under Hardcore rules, the referee cannot count him out."

Mark Bravo: "Exactly. Dane can create space. He can pick the battlefield. He can make Clovis come to him."

Dane backs toward the commentary side of the ring, still watching Clovis. He crouches near the apron and lifts the ring skirt.

The crowd rises.

Dane starts digging underneath the ring.

Inside, Clovis steps over the middle rope and onto the apron.

Dane pulls out a kendo stick.

He grins.

Then he looks up.

Clovis is already on the floor.

Dane's grin vanishes.

Clovis charges.

Dane swings the kendo stick hard into Clovis' ribs.

CRACK!

Clovis takes the shot and keeps coming.

Dane swings again.

CRACK!

This one catches Clovis across the shoulder.

Clovis grunts, reaches out, and grabs Dane by the front of the jacket.

The crowd roars.

John Phillips: "Dane got two shots in, but Clovis walked through them!"

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Mark Bravo: "That is the problem. Weapons help, but they do not mean much if the man you hit treats pain like a weather report."

Clovis yanks Dane forward and hurls him back-first into the barricade.

The impact rattles the front row.

Dane collapses to a knee, eyes wide, air leaving his body in one sharp burst.

Clovis looks down at the kendo stick, now lying on the floor.

He picks it up.

Dane immediately tries to crawl away.

Too late.

Clovis brings the stick down across Dane's back.

CRACK!

Dane arches and shouts, rolling toward the ring steps.

Clovis follows and swings again, this time across the ribs.

CRACK!

The kendo stick splinters slightly from the force.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black with that kendo stick now, and there is a different sound when he swings it."

Mark Bravo: "Dane used it like a weapon. Clovis is using it like he is chopping firewood."

Dane reaches the steel steps and grabs the bottom half, trying to pull himself up.

Clovis drops the damaged kendo stick and reaches for him.

Dane suddenly kicks backward, catching Clovis low in the shin.

It is not pretty.

It is not honorable.

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It works.

Clovis pauses for half a second.

Dane grabs the top half of the steel steps and yanks it loose with both hands.

Clovis steps in.

Dane drives the edge of the steps into Clovis' midsection.

THUD!

Clovis bends forward, breath forced out.

Dane drops the steps immediately, grabs Clovis by the back of the head, and drives his face down into the steel.

Clovis staggers away, one hand going to his mouth.

John Phillips: "There is the cunning of Eric Dane Jr.! He went low, created the opening, and used the steel steps!"

Mark Bravo: "That is Dane's path tonight. He cannot outmuscle Clovis. He cannot outmean Clovis in a straight line. He has to turn the environment into a trap."

Dane sucks in air and staggers back against the apron, one arm wrapped around his ribs.

Then he looks at Clovis, who is still standing.

Dane's face flashes with disbelief.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stay down!"

Clovis turns toward him.

Blood glistens faintly at the corner of Clovis' mouth.

He wipes it with the back of his hand.

Then he looks at the smear.

Then back at Dane.

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The arena buzzes.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, that was the wrong part of Clovis to wake up."

Dane immediately dives back under the ring skirt.

He pulls out a steel chair.

Clovis advances.

Dane throws the chair directly at him.

Clovis catches it against his chest on instinct.

Dane jumps.

Dropkick into the chair.

The steel blasts backward into Clovis' face and chest, finally knocking the big man off balance.

Clovis stumbles into the barricade and drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "Dropkick into the chair! Dane Jr. got Clovis down to a knee!"

Mark Bravo: "That is smart. That is ugly, but that is smart. Do not swing at the wall. Throw something into it and hit that instead."

Dane scrambles to his feet, grabs the chair, and folds it shut with frantic speed.

He raises it over his head.

Clovis pushes up from one knee.

Dane brings the chair down across his back.

CRASH!

Clovis drops back to one knee.

Dane swings again.

CRASH!

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Again.

CRASH!

The crowd boos as Dane unloads on the challenger, each shot more desperate than dominant.

Eric Dane Jr.: "This is my title!"

Another chair shot across the shoulder.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Mine!"

Another.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. just hammering Clovis Black with that chair!"

Mark Bravo: "He has to. This is not arrogance anymore. This is survival wearing arrogance's jacket."

Dane backs away, breathing hard, chair still in hand.

Clovis remains on one knee, one hand on the floor, head lowered.

Dane looks to the referee, who has followed them outside.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Ask him!"

The referee steps toward Clovis.

Referee: "Clovis, can you continue?"

Clovis slowly lifts his head.

He does not answer the referee.

He looks at Dane.

Dane sees the eyes.

He takes one step back.

Mark Bravo: "I would like to formally state that I hate that look."

Clovis rises.

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Slowly.

Heavy.

Dane charges with the chair.

Clovis swings a big boot.

The boot drives the chair straight back into Dane's face.

CRACK!

Dane drops like the strings have been cut.

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "Big boot! Clovis Black kicked the chair right into the face of Eric Dane Jr.!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not a counter. That was a traffic accident."

Dane rolls onto his side, clutching his face, legs kicking against the floor.

Clovis stands over him.

No smile.

No trash talk.

Just breath.

Just damage.

Clovis bends down and grabs Dane by the back of the neck and waistband.

He hauls the champion up and drives him spine-first into the barricade again.

Then pulls him out.

And drives him into the apron.

Then pulls him out.

And drives him into the barricade a second time.

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Dane's body folds against the barrier, the crowd in the front row recoiling behind it.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is just throwing the champion around ringside!"

Mark Bravo: "This is what happens when he gets his hands on you. Dane has tricks. Clovis has gravity and bad intentions."

Clovis grabs Dane again and rolls him under the bottom rope into the ring.

Dane crawls toward the center, one hand on his face, the other reaching blindly for distance.

Clovis turns away from the ring.

He lifts the apron skirt.

The crowd roars.

Clovis pulls out a table.

John Phillips: "And now Clovis Black has a table!"

Mark Bravo: "Hardcore Championship main event. You knew furniture was going to become a character eventually."

Clovis slides the table into the ring.

Then he reaches under again.

He pulls out a second chair.

He throws that in too.

Then a trash can lid.

Then a full metal trash can.

The French crowd rises louder with each weapon added to the battlefield.

Inside the ring, Dane slowly sits up.

He sees the table.

Then the chair.

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Then the trash can.

Then Clovis climbing onto the apron.

Dane's eyes sharpen.

Pain is there.

Fear too, maybe.

But so is calculation.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. is hurt, but look at his eyes. He is already thinking."

Mark Bravo: "He has to. If he stops thinking, Clovis starts rearranging his skeleton."

Clovis steps through the ropes.

Dane scrambles backward and grabs the trash can lid.

Clovis advances.

Dane hurls the lid at Clovis' head.

Clovis raises an arm and deflects it, but the momentary block gives Dane enough time to grab the trash can itself.

Clovis reaches for him.

Dane jams the trash can over Clovis' head and shoulders.

The crowd erupts.

Clovis staggers, blinded for the first time.

Dane grabs the nearby chair.

He swings into the trash can.

CRASH!

The metal dents around Clovis.

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Dane swings again.

CRASH!

Clovis stumbles back toward the ropes.

Dane winds up and hits the can a third time.

CRASH!

Clovis tips through the ropes and spills to the floor, the trash can clattering off him as he drops to the mats outside.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. blinds Clovis with the trash can, and now the champion has finally created separation!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the champion's best weapon tonight. Not the chair. Not the table. Distance."

Dane stands in the ring, chair in hand, breathing hard.

He looks down at Clovis on the floor.

Then he looks at the ropes.

The crowd starts buzzing before he even moves.

John Phillips: "Oh no. Dane Jr. is thinking high risk."

Mark Bravo: "Of course he is. It is who he is. It is also why every insurance company in the world has night sweats."

Dane drops the chair and runs to the opposite ropes.

He rebounds hard.

Clovis is rising outside.

Dane launches himself through the ropes.

Tope con hilo.

He crashes into Clovis on the floor, sending both men hard into the barricade.

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The arena explodes.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. takes flight! Tope con hilo wipes out Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "That is what Dane brings! He may be smaller, he may be cocky, he may be irritating enough to make glass crack, but he will throw himself into traffic if he thinks it wins him the moment!"

Both men are down outside.

Dane rolls onto his back, arms spread, chest heaving.

Clovis lies on his side near the barricade, one arm across his body.

The referee leans through the ropes, checking both men, but there is no count to save either of them.

There is only the match.

There is only the title.

And there is only however much punishment each man can survive.

Dane Jr. reaches for the barricade first.

His fingers hook over the top rail, pulling himself up one inch at a time. His face is flushed, his breathing ragged, but there is a wild satisfaction in his eyes. He took the risk. He threw himself at Clovis Black. And for the first time in the match, the challenger is down because of something Eric Dane Jr. did by choice.

Clovis rolls onto one knee near the floor mats, one hand pressed against his ribs. The trash can lies dented nearby. The chair is still in the ring. The table remains unfolded, waiting like a bad idea nobody has finished yet.

John Phillips: "Both men are down after that tope con hilo from Eric Dane Jr., and Mark, credit where it is due. Dane Jr. needed something big, and he found it."

Mark Bravo: "He found it by throwing his entire body at Clovis Black and hoping physics had his back. That is bold. Reckless, stupid, and probably medically inadvisable, but bold."

Dane gets both feet under him and staggers toward Clovis.

He grabs the challenger by the back of the head and trunks, trying to pull him up.

Clovis is heavy.

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Very heavy.

Dane grits his teeth, yanking again, then drives a short knee into Clovis' face to soften him up.

Clovis' head snaps back.

Dane follows with another knee.

Then another.

They are not elegant strikes. Not clean. Not pretty. They are survival shots, fast and mean, thrown because the champion knows he cannot let Clovis get fully upright.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. going to the knees now, trying to keep Clovis Black grounded."

Mark Bravo: "That is smart. You chop the tree before it stands up. Because once that tree stands up, it starts powerbombing people."

Dane grabs the discarded trash can lid from the floor and slams it across Clovis' back.

CRACK!

Clovis drops one hand to the floor mat, but he does not fall completely.

Dane hits him again.

CRACK!

The lid bends in the middle.

Dane looks at the warped metal, then at Clovis, who is still pushing up.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Oh, come on!"

He throws the lid aside and backs up, eyes darting around ringside.

Then he spots the steel steps again.

The top half is still separated from earlier, sitting crooked near the corner.

Dane stumbles toward it and grabs the edge, dragging it across the floor with an ugly scrape.

SCRAAAAAPE.

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The crowd rises as Dane positions the steps near Clovis.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. has those steel steps again. We saw him use them earlier to turn the momentum."

Mark Bravo: "This is where Dane is dangerous. He may not be bigger. He may not be stronger. But he is mean enough to use the building against you."

Clovis reaches his feet, staggering just enough to show the damage is building.

Dane charges forward, looking to drive the steps into him again.

Clovis suddenly explodes.

He swings a brutal forearm over the top of the steps, smashing Dane across the side of the head.

Dane drops the steps immediately and spins away, collapsing against the apron.

Clovis grabs the steel steps with both hands.

He lifts them.

Dane sees it.

His eyes widen.

Clovis hurls the steps forward.

Dane dives out of the way at the last second, and the steps crash violently against the ring post.

CLANG!

The entire corner shakes.

John Phillips: "Dane moved! Clovis Black nearly crushed him with those steps!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not throwing furniture. That is attempted demolition."

Dane crawls around the corner, scrambling on hands and knees, pulling himself up by the ring skirt.

Clovis turns toward him, shaking out his shoulder from the force of the throw, then begins walking again.

Slow.

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Heavy.

Inevitable.

Dane looks up and sees him coming.

There is no smirk now.

Only urgency.

Dane reaches under the ring again and pulls out another chair.

He swings from his knees.

CRASH!

The chair cracks across Clovis' thigh.

Clovis stops.

Dane swings again, this time into the same leg.

CRASH!

Clovis drops to one knee, jaw clenched.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. attacking the leg now! He is trying to take the base away from Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "Finally. That is the first truly sane strategy he has had. You cannot throw what you cannot stand under."

Dane rises and backs away, chair raised, breathing hard.

Clovis plants one boot, then the other, forcing himself back up despite the damage.

Dane shakes his head in disbelief.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stay down, you big--"

He does not finish.

Because a sound cuts through the arena.

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Not music.

Not a horn from the production truck.

A tiny, familiar, deeply inappropriate sound.

SFX: honk.

Dane freezes.

The chair lowers half an inch.

The crowd reacts before the camera even finds it.

A swell of laughter, cheers, confusion, and disbelief rolls through the Zénith de Strasbourg.

SFX: honk.

Closer now.

Dane closes his eyes.

Just for a second.

Like a man praying that the sound is not what he knows it is.

John Phillips: "No."

Mark Bravo: "Yes."

John Phillips: "Please tell me that is not what I think it is."

Mark Bravo: "John, that is the call of the wild."

The camera swings toward the entrance ramp.

At the top of the stage, rolling into view with all the speed, grace, and mechanical uncertainty of a parade float held together by optimism, comes Beautiful Bobby Dean's mobility scooter.

The Battle Chair.

Bobby Dean sits in the driver's seat, both hands on the handlebars, eyes wide, posture locked in intense concentration.

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Behind him, standing on the small back platform with both hands planted on Bobby's shoulders, is Maxx Mayhem.

Maxx looks delighted.

Bobby looks terrified.

The scooter hits the slight decline of the ramp and immediately lurches forward a little too quickly.

Bobby Dean: "Easy! Easy!"

Maxx Mayhem: "We ride!"

SFX: honk.

The crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem are coming back out here on the mobility scooter!"

Mark Bravo: "Battle Chair, John. Say her name with respect."

John Phillips: "This is the last thing Eric Dane Jr. wanted to see right now!"

Dane stands at ringside, chair still in hand, staring toward the ramp in absolute disbelief.

His face cycles through confusion, anger, dread, and something close to betrayal in the span of two seconds.

Clovis Black is still on one knee near the floor, recovering from the chair shots to the leg, but even he turns his head slightly toward the stage.

The scooter continues down the ramp.

Slowly.

Mostly.

There is an occasional wobble.

Maxx raises one hand to the crowd while keeping the other on Bobby's shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "MAIN EVENT TRANSPORT!"

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Bobby immediately snaps his head up.

Bobby Dean: "Both hands! Both hands, Maxx!"

Maxx puts his hand back down on Bobby's shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "Safety first."

The scooter jerks again.

Bobby Dean: "That was not safety!"

At ringside, Dane slowly lifts the chair and points it toward them like it might ward them off.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No. No, no, no. Absolutely not."

Bobby hears him and starts waving one hand, which only makes the scooter drift slightly toward the barricade.

Bobby Dean: "Eric! I'm not here to mess anything up!"

Dane's eyes widen.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then why are you here?!"

Maxx leans over Bobby's shoulder and points at Dane with absolute confidence.

Maxx Mayhem: "Moral support!"

Dane looks like that answer has damaged him physically.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I do not want moral support from either of you!"

The scooter continues its slow descent.

Whirr.

Clunk.

Whirr.

Clunk.

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Dane turns his back on Clovis for just a moment too long, glaring up the ramp at the approaching disaster.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. is completely distracted now. Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem have pulled his attention away from Clovis Black."

Mark Bravo: "And that is bad. That is very bad. You do not take your eyes off Clovis Black unless your next move is prayer."

Behind Dane, Clovis pushes himself to his feet.

Slowly.

He favors the leg Dane attacked, but he is standing.

Dane does not know it yet.

He is still looking at Bobby.

Bobby Dean: "I just wanted to make sure you were okay!"

Eric Dane Jr.: "I am in the middle of a title defense!"

Maxx Mayhem: "Then why are you yelling at traffic?"

Dane's mouth opens.

No answer comes fast enough.

The scooter reaches the lower end of the ramp and slows near ringside, Bobby fumbling with the controls while Maxx grins over his shoulder.

Behind Dane, Clovis Black takes one heavy step forward.

The crowd rises, warning the champion with sound alone.

Dane hears the shift.

Too late.

He turns.

Clovis Black is there.

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Big boot.

The chair in Dane's hands gets blasted straight back into his chest and chin.

CRACK!

Dane collapses to the floor in a heap.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black! Dane Jr. took his eyes off the challenger, and Clovis made him pay!"

Mark Bravo: "The Battle Chair has arrived, and Eric Dane Jr.'s night just got a lot worse!"

Bobby slams the scooter brake.

SFX: honk.

Maxx looks down at Dane on the floor.

Then at Clovis Black.

Then at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "We should've brought more milk."

Bobby looks horrified.

Bobby Dean: "I said I wasn't gonna mess it up."

Clovis stands over Dane, breathing heavily, the damaged leg still bothering him, but the challenger is upright and back in control.

Dane lies on the floor, clutching his jaw and chest, eyes half-open and furious as he realizes exactly who he sees parked near ringside.

Bobby Dean.

Maxx Mayhem.

The Battle Chair.

Not what Eric Dane Jr. wanted to see at all.

Clovis Black bends down and grabs Eric Dane Jr. by the hair.

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Dane's hands immediately shoot to Clovis' wrist, trying to pry free, trying to create space, trying to turn this back into anything other than Clovis Black controlling where his body goes next.

It does not work.

Clovis hauls him upright and drives a short, brutal forearm into his jaw.

Dane staggers backward, nearly falling into the side of Bobby Dean's scooter.

Bobby panics and tries to reverse.

The scooter gives a weak beep.

SFX: beep.

Bobby Dean: "Sorry! Sorry! I'm movin'!"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Then move!"

Bobby twists the handlebar too sharply, causing the scooter to turn in a wide, awkward half-circle instead of backing away.

Maxx Mayhem leans with it like they are taking a corner at Daytona.

Maxx Mayhem: "Easy, captain!"

Bobby Dean: "Do not captain me right now!"

John Phillips: "Bobby Dean is trying to get out of the way, but somehow he and Maxx Mayhem are only making this situation worse for Eric Dane Jr."

Mark Bravo: "That is the Bobby Dean promise. The intent is pure. The result is property damage."

Dane turns toward them, furious, one hand still on his jaw.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Go away!"

That is all the opening Clovis needs.

He grabs Dane from behind, wraps both arms around his waist, and lifts him clean off the floor.

The crowd rises.

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Clovis turns and drives Dane back-first into the edge of the apron with a vicious release.

THUD!

Dane folds backward over the apron before collapsing to the floor, his body twisting awkwardly as he lands.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black just launched the Hardcore Champion into the apron!"

Mark Bravo: "And that is the hardest part of the ring, John. People say that all the time because it is true and because it sounds awful when someone hits it like that."

Clovis does not pause to admire the damage.

He grabs Dane again and rolls him under the bottom rope into the ring.

Dane lands near the table that was slid in earlier, one arm wrapped around his lower back, face twisted in pain.

Clovis follows more slowly, his leg still bothering him from Dane's chair attacks, but his control of the match has not loosened.

Bobby finally gets the scooter pointed away from ringside, only to accidentally bump the front tire into the lower edge of the barricade.

SFX: clunk.

Bobby Dean: "I'm stuck."

Maxx Mayhem: "We have become part of the arena."

Bobby Dean: "That is not helpful."

Dane hears them from inside the ring as he drags himself toward the ropes.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stop talking!"

Clovis steps through the ropes.

Dane turns back just in time to see the challenger advancing.

Dane scrambles backward, grabs the bent trash can lid from the canvas, and throws it at Clovis' bad leg.

The lid clips the knee.

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Clovis grunts and drops briefly to one hand on the mat.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. still fighting! He knows that leg is the one opening he has found against Clovis Black."

Mark Bravo: "That is what I mean about Dane. The kid is obnoxious, arrogant, and currently being haunted by a scooter, but he is still dangerous. He is still thinking."

Dane crawls toward the second steel chair in the ring and grabs it with both hands.

Clovis pushes upright again.

Dane swings low.

CRASH!

The chair connects against the same thigh.

Clovis drops to one knee.

Dane rises, wobbly but urgent, and smashes the chair down again.

CRASH!

Clovis catches the chair on the third swing.

Dane's eyes widen.

Clovis looks up from one knee, both hands now gripping the chair.

Dane tries to pull it back.

Clovis does not let go.

Instead, Clovis yanks the chair toward himself, pulling Dane down into range and blasting him with a short headbutt.

CRACK!

Dane stumbles backward, eyes glassing for half a second.

Clovis rises and drives the chair straight into Dane's ribs.

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THUD!

Dane doubles over.

Clovis throws the chair aside and hooks Dane around the waist.

He lifts.

Deadlift German suplex.

Dane lands high on his shoulders and neck, rolling through from the force and ending near the corner.

John Phillips: "Deadlift German suplex by Clovis Black! My God, Dane Jr. was folded up!"

Mark Bravo: "That is two hundred seventy-three pounds of bad mood throwing you like luggage."

Clovis drops to one knee after the suplex, favoring the leg, but he does not stay there long.

He grabs the table and begins setting it up in the center of the ring.

The crowd roars at the sight.

Outside, Maxx Mayhem watches with great interest from the back of the scooter.

Maxx Mayhem: "Table."

Bobby Dean: "Yes, Maxx, that is a table."

Maxx Mayhem: "Think she wants to meet the table?"

Bobby looks back at him, horrified.

Bobby Dean: "The scooter does not want to meet the table."

Dane, still on the mat, hears the word scooter and lifts his head with pure irritation.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do not bring that thing near the ring!"

Bobby throws both hands up defensively.

Bobby Dean: "I am not!"

The moment Bobby takes his hands off the handlebars, the scooter rolls forward an inch on the slight floor

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slope.

SFX: squeak.

Bobby slams his hands back down.

Bobby Dean: "I am not on purpose!"

Mark Bravo: "That distinction may not help in court."

Clovis finishes setting up the table and turns back toward Dane.

Dane uses the ropes to pull himself up in the corner. His chest heaves. His back arches with every breath. His eyes keep darting from Clovis to Bobby, then back to Clovis, then to Maxx, then back again.

He is furious.

He is hurt.

He is surrounded by problems.

And he is still looking for a way out.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. has taken tremendous punishment already, but he is still fighting to survive this. Say what you will about him, he has not quit."

Mark Bravo: "Because quitting would mean admitting Clovis Black is better, and I think Dane Jr. would rather be thrown through six tables than say that out loud."

Clovis charges into the corner.

Corner avalanche splash.

Dane barely moves in time.

Clovis crashes chest-first into the turnbuckles, but he catches himself before he fully rebounds.

Dane grabs the middle rope and pulls himself through to the apron, escaping to the outside edge of the ring.

Clovis turns.

Dane springboards.

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He launches off the top rope with a reckless knee aimed at Clovis' head.

It connects.

Clovis staggers backward, nearly falling into the table, but stays upright.

Dane lands hard on the canvas and immediately clutches his own knee, the impact hurting him almost as much as it hurt Clovis.

John Phillips: "Springboard knee from Dane Jr.! He caught Clovis flush!"

Mark Bravo: "And Clovis is still standing! How is he still standing?"

Dane crawls to the chair again.

He pulls it close and uses it like a crutch to get upright.

Clovis turns, dazed but not down.

Dane charges and smashes the chair across Clovis' skull.

CRASH!

Clovis finally drops backward onto the table.

The crowd explodes.

Dane looks at him.

Then at the corner.

Then at the ceiling.

Then out toward the crowd.

That familiar arrogance flickers through the pain.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. has Clovis Black on the table!"

Mark Bravo: "No. No, no, no. This is where Dane's brain starts writing checks his body cannot cash."

Dane points toward the corner.

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Eric Dane Jr.: "Watch greatness!"

Outside, Bobby Dean looks up from the scooter.

Bobby Dean: "I am watchin'!"

Dane snaps his head toward Bobby.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Not you!"

Maxx leans over Bobby's shoulder.

Maxx Mayhem: "We're both watching."

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stop!"

Dane's focus breaks just long enough for Clovis to roll off the table.

The crowd reacts.

Dane turns back.

Clovis is no longer where he left him.

Dane's face drops.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. took his eyes off Clovis again!"

Mark Bravo: "The man told them to watch greatness and then got mad that they watched!"

Clovis is on one knee beside the table, one hand gripping the edge.

Dane rushes him with the chair.

Clovis surges upward and drives his shoulder into Dane's midsection.

The chair flies out of Dane's hands.

Clovis powers forward and rams Dane into the corner.

The turnbuckles shake violently.

Clovis drives a shoulder into Dane's ribs.

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Then another.

Then another.

Dane's body jolts with each impact, his mouth open, breath gone.

Clovis grabs him by the wrist and yanks him out of the corner.

The Whistle.

Short-arm lariat.

Dane gets turned inside out, crashing to the canvas near the table.

John Phillips: "The Whistle! Clovis Black nearly took Dane Jr.'s head off!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the setup. That is the warning shot before the Freight Line!"

Clovis stands over Dane, shaking out the damaged leg, breathing heavily through his nose.

The crowd rises as Clovis reaches down and drags the champion up again.

Outside, Bobby Dean looks increasingly distressed.

Bobby Dean: "Eric! You gotta move!"

Dane, barely standing, hears him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I know!"

Bobby Dean: "Okay, I just didn't know if you knew!"

Eric Dane Jr.: "I know I need to move!"

Maxx nods sagely.

Maxx Mayhem: "Movement is important."

Dane looks like he wants to scream, but Clovis yanks him in.

Clovis lifts Dane for the Blackout Slam.

Dane twists desperately, raking Clovis across the eyes with both hands.

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There is no disqualification to save anyone from it.

Clovis releases him with a grunt, staggering backward, one hand to his face.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. to the eyes! There are no disqualifications here, and Dane knew it!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not pretty, but pretty got thrown out the window about three chairs ago."

Dane stumbles backward and falls through the ropes to the floor.

He lands near the scooter.

Bobby looks down at him.

Dane looks up at Bobby.

A horrible silence passes between them.

Bobby Dean: "You okay?"

Dane's face twists in disbelief.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Do I look okay?"

Bobby considers this with dangerous sincerity.

Bobby Dean: "You look... active."

Maxx nods from behind him.

Maxx Mayhem: "Alive adjacent."

Dane grabs the scooter's front basket area and pulls himself up.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Both of you shut up."

Inside the ring, Clovis wipes at his eyes and turns toward the floor.

Dane sees him coming.

He looks at the scooter.

Then at Bobby.

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Then at Maxx.

Then back at Clovis.

A bad idea forms.

John Phillips: "I do not like the way Dane Jr. is looking at that scooter."

Mark Bravo: "Nobody ever likes the way anyone looks at that scooter."

Dane grabs the scooter by the handlebars.

Bobby Dean: "Hey! Hey! Be careful with her!"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Get off!"

Bobby Dean: "What?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Get off the stupid thing!"

Bobby freezes, offended and alarmed.

Bobby Dean: "She is not stupid."

Maxx leans down toward Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "Her name is Battle Chair."

Eric Dane Jr.: "I don't care what her name is!"

Dane tries to pull the scooter forward, possibly to use it as a shield, possibly as a weapon, possibly because his mind is too desperate to pick one.

Bobby hits the brake instinctively.

The scooter jerks.

Dane stumbles.

Maxx wobbles, then throws one hand up for balance.

Maxx Mayhem: "Mutiny!"

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The crowd roars with laughter and alarm as Clovis slides out of the ring behind Dane.

Dane turns.

Too late again.

Clovis grabs him by the back of the neck and trunks, then hurls him shoulder-first into the side of the scooter.

SFX: CLUNK.

The scooter rocks violently but stays upright.

Bobby screams.

Bobby Dean: "MY BABY!"

Dane crumples to the floor beside it, clutching his shoulder.

Maxx looks down at Dane.

Then pats the scooter's handlebar gently.

Maxx Mayhem: "She took it well."

John Phillips: "Clovis Black just used Bobby Dean's scooter as a weapon against the Hardcore Champion!"

Mark Bravo: "Battle Chair has entered the match officially, John. Put some respect on her bump card."

Bobby is flustered, looking from the scooter to Dane to Clovis.

Bobby Dean: "Eric, I'm sorry! I didn't know he was gonna do that!"

Dane rolls onto his back, grimacing.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Why are you still here?!"

Bobby's face falls.

For half a second, the comedy drops out of him.

He looks genuinely wounded.

Then Clovis reaches down and grabs Dane again.

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The match does not care about Bobby's feelings.

Clovis rolls Dane back into the ring under the bottom rope.

Dane drags himself toward the table, one arm nearly useless from the impact into the scooter. He is still moving, still trying, still refusing to let the championship slip away.

Clovis follows him in.

Outside, Bobby remains parked near ringside, hands on the handlebars, looking miserable.

Maxx, still standing on the back platform, watches Clovis stalk Dane.

Maxx Mayhem: "He really does not like help."

Bobby says nothing.

Inside the ring, Clovis Black stands over Eric Dane Jr. once again.

The challenger has stayed on top.

The champion has survived through cunning, shortcuts, weapons, and instinct.

But now the Battle Chair, Bobby Dean, and Maxx Mayhem have turned ringside into one more problem Eric Dane Jr. cannot escape.

Clovis Black stands over Eric Dane Jr.

No rush.

No wasted motion.

Just that heavy, silent presence looming above the champion while Dane crawls backward on the canvas, one arm clutched close to his ribs, the other dragging across the mat in search of anything he can use.

The table remains set in the middle of the ring.

A chair lies near the ropes.

The bent trash can lid is somewhere by the corner.

But none of it is close enough.

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Clovis is.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. is in deep trouble here. Clovis Black has taken almost everything Dane has thrown at him, and the challenger is still standing."

Mark Bravo: "Dane has been clever. He has been nasty. He has used weapons, speed, and every shortcut he can find. But right now, Clovis Black is the only thing in front of him, and that is a terrible view."

Dane reaches for the chair with his fingertips.

Still too far.

Clovis steps on the chair.

The metal flattens beneath his boot with a small, final scrape.

Dane looks from the chair to Clovis.

Clovis bends down and grabs him by the wrist.

He yanks Dane up like the champion weighs nothing.

Dane comes to his feet crooked, barely balanced, eyes wide with the desperate calculation of a man running out of exits.

Clovis pulls him in close.

The crowd rises, sensing something awful coming.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black may be setting him up again. He may be looking for Freight Line or Blackout Slam through that table."

Mark Bravo: "If Clovis hits either one right here, we may have a new Hardcore Champion."

Outside the ring, Bobby Dean grips the handlebars of the Battle Chair, frozen in place, watching helplessly.

Maxx Mayhem leans forward over Bobby's shoulder, eyes wide, not smiling now.

Bobby Dean: "Eric..."

Dane hears his name.

His eyes flick briefly toward Bobby.

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Not for help.

Not even for reassurance.

Just anger.

Embarrassment.

The unbearable humiliation of being watched at the exact moment he has nothing left.

Clovis hooks him.

Dane's body reacts before pride can stop it.

He drops low.

And swings upward.

Hard.

Violent.

Desperate.

With every ounce of panic, survival, ego, and spite still left in him.

The low blow lands with a sickening impact.

The entire arena reacts at once.

A collective groan rolls through Strasbourg like a wave crashing into concrete.

Clovis Black's eyes go wide.

His grip on Dane releases immediately.

For the first time all match, the challenger does not look angry.

He does not look cold.

He does not look unstoppable.

He looks human.

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Very, very human.

John Phillips: "Oh my God!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not a low blow. That was a war crime below the belt!"

Clovis staggers backward, both hands dropping, knees bending as his entire body locks up around the impact.

Dane collapses to one knee in front of him, gasping, one hand on the mat, the other still curled from the strike.

There is no disqualification.

No bell.

No referee stepping in to save Clovis from what just happened.

Hardcore rules.

Dane knew it.

And he used it.

John Phillips: "Hardcore rules mean no disqualification, and Eric Dane Jr. just went as low as a man can possibly go!"

Mark Bravo: "I think he found a basement under the basement, John."

Outside, Bobby Dean's mouth drops open.

Bobby Dean: "Oh."

Maxx Mayhem slowly winces, shifting his weight on the back of the scooter.

Maxx Mayhem: "That man just met tomorrow."

Bobby looks horrified.

Bobby Dean: "Is that allowed?"

Maxx looks at the ring.

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Then at Bobby.

Maxx Mayhem: "In this match?"

A beat.

Maxx Mayhem: "Emotionally, no. Legally, probably."

Inside the ring, Clovis staggers toward the table, half-folded over, still trying to stay upright through the pain. He reaches out and catches the tabletop with one hand, stopping himself from going down completely.

Dane sees it.

Even now, through the exhaustion and the pain, his eyes sharpen.

The opening is ugly.

But it is an opening.

Dane crawls toward the chair Clovis stepped on moments ago. He grabs it with one hand and drags it close, using it to pull himself up.

Clovis turns slowly.

Still bent.

Still furious.

Still dangerous.

But vulnerable.

Dane rises with the chair and swings with everything he has left.

CRASH!

The chair cracks across Clovis' skull.

Clovis drops to one knee beside the table.

Dane stumbles backward from his own momentum, then forces himself forward again.

Another chair shot.

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CRASH!

Clovis slumps against the table's edge.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. following up! Chair shot after chair shot to Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "That low blow was survival. These chair shots are strategy. Dane has the monster hurt, and he knows this may be the only chance he gets."

Dane throws the chair down and grabs Clovis by the head.

He tries to pull him onto the table.

At first, Clovis resists.

Even damaged, even rocked, even after that low blow, the challenger's hands lock around the table edge and refuse to give Dane what he wants.

Dane grits his teeth and drives a knee into Clovis' face.

Then another.

Then, with a furious shout, he grabs the chair again and wedges it across Clovis' back before shoving him down onto the table.

The table creaks under Clovis' weight.

Dane backs away, staggering, eyes darting toward the nearest corner.

The crowd begins to rise.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is on the table. Dane Jr. has bought himself time, but at what cost?"

Mark Bravo: "At every cost, John. That is the point. Dane Jr. is spending everything he has to survive this title defense."

Dane turns toward the corner.

Outside, Bobby sees it.

Bobby Dean: "Eric, no."

Dane stops for half a second, head snapping toward Bobby.

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Eric Dane Jr.: "Do not tell me what to do!"

Bobby flinches.

Maxx looks down at him, quieter now.

Maxx Mayhem: "He heard you."

Bobby nods, but does not look reassured.

Dane turns back to the corner and starts climbing.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Each step up the turnbuckles takes more effort than the last. His ribs are screaming. His shoulder is nearly useless. His jaw is swelling from the chair-assisted boot earlier.

But the Hardcore Championship is still his.

And Clovis Black is on the table.

For Eric Dane Jr., that is enough reason to do something reckless.

John Phillips: "Dane Jr. is climbing. We have seen this man go to the air again and again, but after the punishment he has taken tonight, I do not know how much he has left."

Mark Bravo: "He does not need much if he lands. But if he misses, Clovis Black may not need a finisher. He may just need to breathe on him hard."

Dane reaches the top rope and steadies himself.

The crowd roars.

Clovis lies across the table, the chair still resting awkwardly against his body.

Dane looks out across the arena.

Then down at Clovis.

Then, briefly, toward Bobby and Maxx at ringside.

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His face hardens.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Watch greatness."

This time, he does not wait for an answer.

Eric Dane Jr. stands on the top rope.

Unsteady.

Bruised.

Breathing through his mouth now, ribs rising and falling in uneven bursts, one hand briefly gripping the top of the ring post to keep himself upright.

Below him, Clovis Black lies across the table.

The chair is still draped awkwardly across his body, bent and warped from the violence of the match. Clovis is not fully out, not fully gone, but the low blow, the chair shots, and the damage have left him in the worst position possible.

Flat.

Exposed.

Underneath a man reckless enough to try anything.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. is on the top rope. Clovis Black is on the table. The Hardcore Championship hangs in the balance right here."

Mark Bravo: "This is insane. This is stupid. This is exactly why Dane Jr. is still champion if he hits it and exactly why he may never walk right again if he misses."

Outside the ring, Bobby Dean grips the handlebars of the Battle Chair, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

Bobby Dean: "Eric..."

Maxx Mayhem stands on the back platform, one hand on Bobby's shoulder, the other resting against his own chin now.

He is not smiling.

Not laughing.

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Not making a joke.

He is watching.

Really watching.

Dane looks down.

Then he throws himself backward into the air.

Shooting Star Press.

For one impossible second, the champion turns through the lights of the Zénith de Strasbourg, body twisting through pain, ego, panic, and instinct.

The crowd rises with him.

Then he crashes down.

Full impact.

Through Clovis Black.

Through the chair.

Through the table.

CRAAAAAASH!

The table explodes beneath them.

Wood splinters outward. The chair bounces free and skids toward the ropes. Dane and Clovis disappear into a collapsed wreckage of legs, arms, metal, and broken wood.

The arena detonates.

John Phillips: "He hit it! Dane Jr. hit the Shooting Star Press through the table!"

Mark Bravo: "Somehow! Somehow he hit it! I don't know if that was genius, desperation, or a very flashy accident!"

Both men are down.

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Dane is folded across Clovis, barely moving. His face is twisted in agony, one arm trapped beneath him, the other limp across Clovis' chest.

The referee dives into the debris.

He checks the shoulders.

Clovis Black is down.

Dane's arm is across him.

That is enough.

Referee: "ONE!"

Outside the ring, Bobby Dean rises slightly off the seat of the Battle Chair.

Bobby Dean: "Come on..."

Referee: "TWO!"

Clovis' hand twitches.

His shoulder strains.

For one awful second, it looks like the locomotive might still move.

Dane's fingers curl against Clovis' gear, holding on with whatever he has left.

Referee: "THREE!"

DING DING DING!

The bell sounds.

The building erupts in shock, boos, cheers, and disbelief all colliding at once.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and STILL UTA Hardcore Champion... Eric Dane Jr.!"

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. retains! Eric Dane Jr. has survived Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "And with that, Clovis Black suffers his first singles loss in UTA! It took weapons, a low blow from the depths of hell, a table, a chair, Bobby Dean and Maxx Mayhem accidentally turning ringside into a

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traffic hazard, and one desperate Shooting Star Press, but Dane Jr. did it!"

The referee carefully pulls the UTA Hardcore Championship from ringside and brings it into the ring.

Eric Dane Jr. does not stand to receive it.

He cannot.

He lies on his back beside the wreckage, chest heaving, eyes squeezed shut, one hand reaching blindly until the referee places the championship against him.

Dane clutches it immediately.

Possessively.

Desperately.

Like the belt is the only thing keeping him attached to consciousness.

John Phillips: "Say whatever you want about the methods, and there is plenty to say, but Eric Dane Jr. found a way to keep that championship."

Mark Bravo: "That is the thing about Dane Jr. He is arrogant. He is infuriating. He is reckless. But he is also slippery, cunning, and just tough enough to survive the kind of beating that should have ended him five minutes ago."

Across from him, Clovis Black rolls slowly onto his side.

The loss is official.

His first singles loss in UTA.

And it does not sit on him like defeat.

It sits like something waiting to become violence later.

Clovis pushes one hand into the canvas, but the referee immediately checks on him, trying to keep space between the challenger and the champion.

Clovis' eyes open.

They find Dane.

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Dane sees it and pulls the Hardcore Championship tighter against his chest, still unable to get up.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is conscious, and he knows what happened."

Mark Bravo: "That may be worse for Dane than if Clovis had stayed out."

Outside the ring, Bobby Dean explodes into celebration.

Bobby Dean: "He did it! He did it! Eric did it!"

Bobby honks the Battle Chair horn in celebration.

SFX: honk! honk!

He throws both arms up, immediately realizes the scooter might roll, and grabs the handlebars again.

Bobby Dean: "Still champion! Still champion!"

Inside the ring, Dane turns his head just enough to see Bobby celebrating.

Even through the pain, irritation flashes across his face.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Stop... honking..."

Bobby does not hear him.

Or maybe he does and is too happy to process it.

Bobby Dean: "I knew you could do it!"

Maxx Mayhem, however, is not celebrating.

He remains standing on the back platform of the Battle Chair, one hand still on Bobby's shoulder, eyes fixed on the ring.

Not on Clovis.

Not on the broken table.

On Eric Dane Jr.

Maxx watches the champion clutch the title.

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Watches the way Dane glares at Bobby even after Bobby's accidental presence helped create the chaos Dane needed.

Watches the way Bobby celebrates like this win belongs to both of them, while Dane looks like he wants nothing more than to crawl somewhere Bobby cannot follow.

The hamster wheel is turning.

Mark Bravo: "Look at Maxx."

John Phillips: "That is not the same expression he had when he came down here."

Mark Bravo: "No. That is Maxx Mayhem thinking. And I am not sure the world is properly insured for that."

Bobby keeps celebrating on the scooter, pointing toward Dane in the ring.

Bobby Dean: "That's family right there!"

Maxx slowly looks down at Bobby.

Then back to Dane.

Then to the Hardcore Championship.

The smile that starts to form is small.

Not playful.

Not yet.

Curious.

Dangerous in the way only Maxx Mayhem can be dangerous.

Inside the ring, Eric Dane Jr. finally rolls toward the ropes, still clutching the Hardcore Championship. The referee tries to help him sit up, but Dane shoves him away with one weak arm, refusing assistance even while clearly needing it.

Clovis Black remains on one knee across the wreckage, breathing heavily, the sting of his first singles loss in UTA written across his silence.

John Phillips: "Eric Dane Jr. survives France. Clovis Black suffers his first singles loss in UTA. But look at the scene around this ring. Bobby Dean celebrating. Maxx Mayhem watching. Clovis Black furious. Dane Jr.

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still champion, but barely."

Mark Bravo: "That is not a clean ending, John. That is a fuse being lit in four different directions."

Bobby honks the Battle Chair one more time.

SFX: honk!

Dane winces in the ring like the sound is worse than the table.

Maxx Mayhem keeps watching.

The camera lingers on his face.

The wheel is turning.

Then it cuts back to Dane Jr., still clutching the UTA Hardcore Championship in the wreckage of the main event as we fade to black.

Show Credits

Segment: "Beneath Him" - Written by tony.

Segment: "Prove It" - Written by justin.

Segment: "Introduction" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Too Many Owners" - Written by justin, Ben.

Segment: "Took Your Advice" - Written by Ben, boone, chris.

Match: "Bobby Dean vs. Maxx Mayhem" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Punishment" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Bianca Page vs Emily Hightower" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "International Affair" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Cheater Cheater Pumpkin Eater" - Written by tony.

Segment: "This business don't care how good you are" - Written by Ben, boone, chris.

Match: "Marie Van Claudio vs. Valkyrie Knox" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Field Trip" - Written by justin.

Segment: "Awakening" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Hakuryu vs. Tyger II" - Written by tony.

Segment: "Proving Grounds" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "A Word" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Eric Dane Jr. vs Clovis Black" - Written by Ben.

Results Compiled by the eFed Management Suite