

World Tour: Portugal '26

May 22, 2026 | MEO Arena - Lisbon, Portugal

Introduction

The screen fades in from black.

A sweeping aerial shot of Lisbon fills the broadcast, the city glowing beneath the late evening sky. The camera glides over the Tagus River, catching the lights of the waterfront, the historic architecture, and the modern pulse of Portugal's capital before cutting to the outside of the MEO Arena, where thousands of UTA fans are packed around the building in shirts, flags, replica championships, and homemade signs.

The roar begins before the broadcast ever makes it inside.

A rapid-fire video package kicks in.

Mack & Black stand tall with the UTA Tag Team Championships raised high, only for the footage to cut sharply to Iron Dominion battering opponents with cold, brutal precision. Magnus Wolfe's eyes are narrowed. Gideon Graves cracks his neck. Trey Mack and Clovis Black hold their ground, but the question hangs heavy over the footage: can the champions survive the most dangerous challenge of their reign?

The package shifts.

Kaida Shizuka moves with speed and grace, every strike sharp, every step measured. Across from her, flashes of newcomer Brittany Reid appear in quick cuts: confidence, intensity, and the unmistakable hunger of someone stepping onto the UTA stage with something to prove.

Then Emily Hightower appears, composed and focused, building momentum on the road to International Affair. The image is interrupted by Dahlia Cross, cold-eyed and venomous, twisting limbs, bending opponents, and smiling through the damage. Emily wants another win. Dahlia wants to become the roadblock that stops her cold.

The music swells.

Lindsey Lothario appears next, the United States Championship shining over her shoulder. Her return to action is framed in gold, but Jaxson Ryder cuts through the montage with explosive offense, youthful confidence, and the look of a man who understands exactly what one victory tonight could do for his career.

The video package ends with the words flashing across the screen in red, white, and gold.

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The broadcast cuts live inside the MEO Arena.

A massive roar crashes through the building as pyro erupts from the stage. Red and gold sparks shoot upward in timed bursts, followed by white strobes sweeping over the crowd. The UTA entrance set glows beneath the World Tour graphics, with a giant screen displaying the Portuguese flag waving behind the UTA logo.

The camera moves across the audience, catching fans leaping to their feet. One sign reads, "PORTUGAL IS UTA COUNTRY!" Another says, "MACK & BLACK: PROVE IT AGAIN!" A third simply reads, "Dahlia scares me." Nearby, a group of fans chant along with the music while another section pounds the barricade, already trying to pull the show into a fever pitch.

The shot finally settles at ringside, where John Phillips and Mark Bravo sit behind the commentary desk, the Lisbon crowd roaring behind them.

John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to UTA World Tour: Portugal! We are live from the MEO Arena in beautiful Lisbon, Portugal, and tonight, the road to International Affair rolls through one of the loudest, most electric crowds we have seen on this entire tour!"

Mark Bravo: "John, I have been in loud buildings before. I played in loud stadiums. I have sat next to you while you yelled directly into my ear for two hours. But this place? This place is shaking already!"

John Phillips: "And there is plenty for this crowd to be excited about. Two championships will be defended tonight, including the United States Championship, as Lindsey Lothario returns to action to defend against Jaxson Ryder."

Mark Bravo: "That is not just a title match, John. That is a moment. Lindsey Lothario has the gold, the spotlight, and all the pressure that comes with walking back into action as champion. But Jaxson Ryder? He has nothing to lose and everything to gain. That makes him dangerous."

John Phillips: "We will also see the UTA Tag Team Championships on the line when Mack & Black defend against Iron Dominion. Trey Mack and Clovis Black have fought their way into this reign, but tonight may be their most physically imposing test yet."

Mark Bravo: "May be? John, come on. Iron Dominion is not a test. Iron Dominion is what happens when a final exam grows fists and decides it hates you personally. Magnus Wolfe and Gideon Graves do not just want the titles. They want to take pieces of Mack & Black with them."

John Phillips: "Mack & Black have answered every challenge so far, but tonight they step into the ring with a team that thrives on control, punishment, and intimidation."

Mark Bravo: "And let me say this right now. If Mack & Black walk out of Lisbon still champions, nobody gets to call that reign lucky again. Nobody."

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The camera cuts to another section of the crowd as fans cheer loudly, several holding up replica tag titles while others boo at the mention of Iron Dominion.

John Phillips: "We will also see a major women's division match tonight as Emily Hightower goes one on one with Dahlia Cross. Emily is looking to continue building momentum on the road to International Affair, but Dahlia Cross would love nothing more than to stop that momentum in the cruelest way possible."

Mark Bravo: "Dahlia does not play spoiler like most people play spoiler. She is not sneaking in and stealing a win. She wants to break your rhythm, break your confidence, and maybe bend something the wrong direction while she is at it."

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower has been gaining ground, gaining confidence, and gaining attention. Tonight, she has to prove she can handle someone as calculating and ruthless as Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "That match is going to be nasty. I mean that as a compliment and a warning."

John Phillips: "And in our opening stretch tonight, Kaida Shizuka welcomes newcomer Brittany Reid to singles action here in UTA. Brittany has the chance to make a very strong first impression, but Kaida is not the kind of opponent who lets anyone ease into competition."

Mark Bravo: "First impressions matter, John. Especially in UTA. You step through that curtain, people start judging immediately. The fans judge you. The locker room judges you. The people in the back with clipboards and championship opportunities judge you. Brittany Reid better be ready, because Kaida Shizuka is not a welcome mat."

The broadcast cuts to a wide shot of the ring. The canvas is clean, the ropes are bright under the lights, and the World Tour logo is displayed on the apron. The Lisbon crowd continues to buzz, chanting and clapping as the camera slowly circles the arena.

John Phillips: "Every stop on this World Tour has raised the stakes. Every match has created movement. Every victory and every loss has carried weight. And with International Affair ahead, there is no such thing as a meaningless night anymore."

Mark Bravo: "That is the truth. This is the part of the road where people start getting desperate. Champions want to hold on. Challengers want to cut the line. New arrivals want to get noticed. And the dangerous ones? They start looking for somebody to make an example out of."

John Phillips: "Tonight, Lisbon becomes the center of the UTA universe."

Mark Bravo: "And by the sound of this crowd, Lisbon knows it!"

The fans rise again as another burst of pyro fires from the stage, smaller this time but sharp enough to send a wave of cheers through the building.

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John Phillips: "Championships on the line. Momentum at stake. New faces looking to break through. Dangerous contenders looking to dominate. This is UTA World Tour: Portugal, and we are ready to get started!"

The camera pulls back from the commentary desk and centers on the entrance stage as the arena lights shift, preparing for the first arrival of the night.

Mack & Black vs. Iron Dominion

The camera cuts back from the broadcast desk as the roar inside the MEO Arena swells again, the Lisbon crowd still riding the electricity of the opening pyro. The ring announcer steps into the center of the ring, microphone raised, while the UTA Tag Team Championship graphic burns across the massive screen above the entrance stage.

Ring Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen, the opening contest is scheduled for one fall, and it is for the UTA Tag Team Championship!"

The crowd explodes immediately, a wave of cheers crashing through the arena at the announcement. The camera catches fans rising out of their seats, pointing toward the stage, some holding replica tag belts over their heads, others already booing in anticipation of the challengers.

John Phillips: "We are not easing into this one tonight. UTA World Tour: Portugal begins with championship gold on the line!"

Mark Bravo: "This is how you start a show, John. No appetizers. No warm-up lap. We are going straight into a title fight, and Mack & Black are walking into the biggest physical challenge of their reign."

The arena lights suddenly cut.

For a moment, the MEO Arena is swallowed by darkness.

Then a low industrial hum rolls through the building, deep and ugly, like machinery waking up beneath the floor. The fans react with a growing rumble of boos as red warning lights begin to pulse across the stage. One by one, vertical beams of light flicker on like furnace doors opening in the distance.

A shower of sparks erupts from the stage truss.

The opening riff of "I Stand Alone" by Godsmack slams through the speakers.

The boos become deafening.

John Phillips: "And here come the challengers."

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Mark Bravo: "Listen to this building. Lisbon knows exactly who is walking out here."

Through the falling sparks, Gideon Graves emerges first.

He does not burst onto the stage. He does not posture. He steps through the curtain with the grim, punishing stride of a man clocking in for violence. Six-foot-four and two hundred eighty-five pounds, broad through the shoulders and thick through the arms, Graves looks like he was built from iron plates and bad intentions. His jaw is clenched. His eyes stay fixed on the ring. Heavy tape wraps his fists, and one hand slowly curls into a hammer.

He stops at the top of the ramp.

Then he pounds one fist into the opposite palm.

THUD.

The sound cuts through the music.

John Phillips: "Gideon Graves, the Iron Giant, a steel-mill brute from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Cold, ruthless, and very few words needed."

Mark Bravo: "He looks like he was assembled in a place where they don't have windows. Gideon Graves is not here for a wrestling match. He is here for demolition."

Another white spotlight appears behind Graves, sharper and colder than the red industrial glow around him.

For five seconds, there is no movement from the curtain.

Then Graham Keel steps into view.

Keel stands in that clean white beam with his eyes locked forward, posture rigid but calm. He is not as massive as Graves, but there is a different kind of threat in him. Six-foot-two, two hundred forty-seven pounds, built like a man who knows exactly how the human body is supposed to work and exactly how to make it stop working. There is no wasted movement. No playing to the crowd. No emotion given away for free.

The orchestral undertones of his own presence seem to bleed into the industrial chaos around Graves, turning the entrance into something colder, more deliberate, more unsettling.

John Phillips: "And beside him, Graham Keel. The Hold Architect. Trained under European catch legends, one of the most methodical technicians in UTA."

Mark Bravo: "That man does not fight like a guy trying to win a highlight reel. He fights like he's drafting

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blueprints for your suffering. He finds a wrist, he takes an elbow. He takes an elbow, he starts looking at the shoulder. Then suddenly you're wondering why your fingers went numb."

Graves and Keel stand together at the top of the ramp, two different kinds of danger sharing the same purpose. Graves is blunt force. Keel is calculated pressure. One breaks down the door. The other knows which hinge to remove first.

The screen behind them flashes the words:

IRON DOMINION

The crowd showers them in boos.

Graves starts down the ramp first, claiming the center line with every step. Keel follows at his side, half a pace back, his eyes not on the fans but on the ring itself. The ropes. The corners. The canvas. The champions' battlefield before the champions have even arrived.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack and Clovis Black have been fighting to validate this championship reign every step of the way. But tonight, the champions are dealing with a team that can hurt them in two very different ways."

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes this version of Iron Dominion terrifying. Gideon Graves can throw you through the floor. Graham Keel can turn your arm into a legal argument. There is no safe place in that ring."

A fan near the barricade yells toward Graves as he passes. Graves does not turn his head. He does not blink. He simply lifts one hand and slowly closes it into a fist, as if imagining the voice being crushed inside his palm.

Keel, meanwhile, glances toward another section of the crowd where a group of fans are chanting for Mack & Black. He studies them with the same cold expression he would give a joint out of place. Not angry. Not amused. Just aware.

John Phillips: "This crowd firmly behind the champions already."

Mark Bravo: "Good. They should be. Mack & Black may need every bit of noise in this building tonight."

Graves reaches ringside first. He pauses at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the ring apron. His hand comes down on the steel post with a heavy slap that echoes even through the music. He climbs the steps one at a time, slow and heavy, then steps through the ropes like he is entering a place he intends to ruin.

Keel moves differently. He walks to the opposite side of the ring steps, one hand brushing the top rope as he ascends. He pauses on the apron and looks into the ring, scanning the canvas with quiet precision. Then he steps between the ropes, smooth and economical, landing inside without a flourish.

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John Phillips: "Iron Dominion entering with no wasted motion. No big gestures. No attempt to win over this crowd."

Mark Bravo: "They are not interested in being liked. They're not even interested in being understood. They want the belts, and more importantly, they want Mack & Black to know exactly what it costs to keep them."

Inside the ring, Graves moves to the center and slowly turns toward the hard camera. He lifts his taped fist and pounds it into his opposite palm again.

THUD.

Keel circles behind him, not pacing nervously, but measuring. He steps toward one corner, then the ropes, then back toward center. Every step seems chosen. He rolls one shoulder, flexes his fingers, then clasps his hands behind his back as the boos continue.

John Phillips: "The challengers look composed. Dangerous, but composed."

Mark Bravo: "That's the part I don't like. A team like this should look fired up before a title match. Instead they look prepared. That's worse."

The referee stands near the ropes, keeping a cautious eye on both men. Graves walks past him without acknowledgement. Keel gives the official a brief glance, just enough to make it clear he knows exactly where the rules are and exactly how close he can get to the edge of them.

John Phillips: "Mack & Black won those UTA Tag Team Championships by surviving chaos, pressure, and expectation. But tonight feels different. Tonight feels like a collision with something colder."

Mark Bravo: "Because Iron Dominion doesn't need chaos. They create systems. Gideon slows you down with power. Keel takes away what's left. If Mack & Black get cut in half tonight, this could become a long, miserable night for the champions."

Graves backs into one corner and grabs the top rope with both hands, pulling against it until the cable strains. Keel moves to the adjacent side and rests one arm across the top rope, eyes still fixed on the entrance ramp.

The music begins to fade, but the hostility in the building does not.

The camera moves in tight on Gideon Graves first. He glares toward the stage, expression carved in stone. Then it cuts to Graham Keel, calm and almost clinical, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he is already deciding which champion he wants to dismantle first.

John Phillips: "Iron Dominion waits. The challengers are in the ring."

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Mark Bravo: "And somewhere backstage, Trey Mack and Clovis Black are hearing this reaction, seeing those two in the ring, and realizing the celebration is over. This is title defense time."

Graves leans forward in the corner and mutters something that the cameras barely catch.

Gideon Graves: "Steel bends. I don't."

Keel does not look at his partner. He simply keeps his eyes on the stage.

Graham Keel: "Pressure isn't pain until I decide it is."

The crowd boos harder as Iron Dominion remain still in the ring, two challengers waiting beneath the lights, their focus locked on the entranceway.

The UTA Tag Team Championship graphic flashes again across the screen.

Then the camera pulls wide, framing the challengers in the ring and the empty stage beyond them.

John Phillips: "The challengers have arrived. And next, the champions make their way to the ring."

Inside the ring, Iron Dominion remain planted in their corners, the challengers saying nothing as the sound of the Lisbon crowd rolls around them. Gideon Graves leans forward against the turnbuckles, both taped hands gripping the top rope, his glare fixed on the entrance stage. Graham Keel stands a few feet away, posture straight, eyes calm, his hands flexing once before settling at his sides.

The UTA Tag Team Championship graphic flashes again across the massive screen.

The boos for Iron Dominion begin to twist into anticipation.

John Phillips: "Iron Dominion is in the ring, and now we await the champions. Trey Mack and Clovis Black, Mack & Black, set to defend the UTA Tag Team Championships."

Mark Bravo: "And you said it earlier, John. This is the biggest challenge of their reign. But I'll tell you something else. Mack & Black are not walking in here like underdogs. They are walking in here like champions who have had to fight for every inch of respect they've earned."

John Phillips: "Fifty-one days into their first reign as UTA Tag Team Champions, Mack & Black know exactly what is staring back at them. Raw force from Gideon Graves. Surgical violence from Graham Keel. This will not be an easy night."

Mark Bravo: "No title defense should be easy. That's the price of gold."

The arena lights drop.

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Not into full darkness this time.

They sink into deep purple and gold, washing the stage in color as a heavy bassline begins to thump through the MEO Arena like a heartbeat under concrete. The crowd rises, the reaction loud and immediate, as the screen flickers with quick-cut images of Mack & Black raising the UTA Tag Team Championships, trading power shots, running through opponents, and standing together with the belts hanging from their hands.

The words appear across the screen in bold gold lettering.

MACK & BLACK

The beat hits harder.

Then Trey Mack steps through the curtain.

The UTA Tag Team Championship is strapped around his waist, the gold catching the purple light as he stands at the top of the ramp with that familiar grin across his face. He rolls his shoulders once, loose and confident, then slaps his own chest hard enough for the sound to carry into the front rows.

The crowd answers with a roar.

Trey Mack: "MACK ATTACK!"

The chant catches in pockets immediately, fans repeating it back as Trey bounces on his toes, full of rhythm, full of energy, looking every bit like a two-hundred-ninety-pound wrecking ball wired to sprint.

John Phillips: "There is Trey Mack, The Mack Attack, from Long Beach, California. An agile powerhouse, a man who can hit like a truck and move with shocking speed for someone his size."

Mark Bravo: "Trey Mack is the kind of guy who makes physics nervous. He'll grin at you, bounce around, get the crowd moving, and then suddenly he is two hundred ninety pounds coming through your chest."

Trey turns slightly toward the curtain.

The mood changes.

The purple and gold remain, but a low industrial rumble begins underneath the bassline. The sound grows heavier. Darker. Less celebratory.

Then a freight horn blares through the speakers.

SFX: BWAAAAAAAAAAM!

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Smoke creeps low across the entrance stage.

Clovis Black steps through it.

The other half of the UTA Tag Team Champions comes out with the championship belt draped over one shoulder. Hood up. Sleeveless trench coat hanging from his frame. Eyes locked forward. No smile. No pose. No gesture to the crowd. Just the kind of silence that feels heavier than noise.

Trey's energy fills the stage.

Clovis' presence lowers the temperature around it.

John Phillips: "And there is Clovis Black. Kansas City, Missouri. Six-foot-two, two hundred seventy-three pounds. A runaway locomotive in human form, and perhaps the most physically direct competitor in this entire tag team division."

Mark Bravo: "Clovis Black doesn't make entrances. He arrives like somebody owes him money. You can hear that horn and feel your insurance premiums go up."

Clovis stops beside Trey at the top of the ramp.

The champions stand shoulder to shoulder for a moment, each carrying the title in a way that says something different. Trey wears his like proof of momentum, swagger, and belief. Clovis carries his like a tool he earned by force and intends to keep the same way.

Inside the ring, Gideon Graves steps out of his corner slightly.

Clovis notices.

Neither man looks away.

John Phillips: "Look at that stare. Clovis Black and Gideon Graves. That is a lot of bad intentions in one line of sight."

Mark Bravo: "That is not a stare-down, John. That is two heavy machines recognizing the load limit."

Graham Keel does not move toward the ropes. He watches Trey instead. Calm. Measuring. Already studying the bounce in Trey's footwork, the way the champion shifts his shoulders, the way he carries the belt at his waist.

John Phillips: "And Graham Keel seems much more interested in Trey Mack. The technician looking at the athlete, maybe already thinking about how to take that speed away."

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Mark Bravo: "That's what Keel does. He sees movement and thinks, 'Which joint do I have to ruin to stop that?'"

Trey starts down the ramp first, moving with a loose bounce, pointing to the fans on one side and then the other. He feeds off the sound, nodding along to the chant that continues to rise in waves.

Clovis follows at a slower pace, boots heavy, championship still over his shoulder. Fans lean over the barricade, shouting, reaching, trying to pull a reaction from him.

They get nothing.

Trey slaps a few hands as he passes. Clovis keeps his eyes forward.

John Phillips: "There are no additional members of The Empire with them tonight. No entourage. No protection. No distractions. Just Mack, Black, and the championships they came here to defend."

Mark Bravo: "And honestly, I like that. This is the kind of match where extra bodies only complicate things. If Mack & Black want to prove this reign is real, this is the way to do it. Walk in alone. Walk out with the belts."

Trey stops halfway down the ramp and looks back at Clovis. He says something off-mic, then suddenly drops his shoulders and bursts forward in a short sprint, the big man charging the last few steps before sliding under the bottom rope into the ring.

The crowd erupts as Trey pops up fast, arms thrown wide.

Trey Mack: "MACK ATTACK!"

Iron Dominion do not flinch.

The referee immediately steps between Trey and the challengers, one arm raised toward Graves and Keel, the other toward the fired-up champion.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack bringing that burst of energy straight into the ring, and the official is already making sure this does not start before the bell."

Mark Bravo: "Good luck to the referee tonight. His job is basically standing between four trucks and asking them to use turn signals."

Clovis reaches ringside moments later.

He stops in front of the apron and looks up.

Gideon Graves is now standing near center ring, staring down at him.

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Clovis slowly removes the UTA Tag Team Championship from his shoulder and holds it in one hand. He does not raise it. He does not show it off. He simply keeps his grip around the leather strap, then climbs the steel steps one at a time.

The steps groan beneath him.

At the top, Clovis pauses on the apron.

He and Graves are nearly eye to eye now, separated only by the ropes and the referee's increasingly nervous presence.

John Phillips: "That is the collision waiting to happen. Clovis Black and Gideon Graves. If those two get legal at the same time, this building may feel it."

Mark Bravo: "May? John, the Tagus River might feel it."

Clovis steps through the ropes.

He enters slowly, never taking his eyes off Graves. Trey comes over and stands beside him, the contrast again impossible to miss. Trey bouncing, loose, alive with adrenaline. Clovis still, silent, and severe.

The champions move to the center of the ring.

Trey unfastens his championship from around his waist. Clovis lifts his from his hand. Together, Mack & Black raise the UTA Tag Team Championships above their heads.

The Lisbon crowd roars.

John Phillips: "There they are! The UTA Tag Team Champions, Trey Mack and Clovis Black! Mack & Black defending the gold to open World Tour: Portugal!"

Mark Bravo: "That right there is what Iron Dominion came for. Not applause. Not respect. That gold."

Across the ring, Graves glares at the titles with open hostility. Keel looks at them differently, his expression almost detached, as if the belts are not trophies but objectives on a board.

The referee steps forward and asks for the championships.

Trey lowers his belt first, handing it over with a grin but keeping one hand on the strap for just a second longer.

Trey Mack: "You keep that warm. We're getting it right back."

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The referee takes it, then turns toward Clovis.

Clovis looks down at the official.

There is a pause.

Then Clovis hands over the second championship without a word.

Mark Bravo: "I would like everyone to appreciate that the referee just successfully took a title belt from Clovis Black and lived."

John Phillips: "A brave moment for our official here in Lisbon."

The referee raises both UTA Tag Team Championships high above his head.

The building responds again, louder this time, as the belts shine beneath the lights. The camera moves from the championships to Mack & Black, then to Iron Dominion, then back to the titles hanging over all four men like the only thing keeping this from becoming a fight before the introductions are even complete.

John Phillips: "That is what this is all about. The UTA Tag Team Championship. Mack & Black won those titles at Victory and have fought to hold onto them ever since. Tonight, they defend against perhaps the most punishing team they have faced yet."

Mark Bravo: "The champions have power. The challengers have power. The champions have momentum. The challengers have cruelty. This is going to get ugly fast."

The official hands the championships to the timekeeper at ringside.

Trey backs into his corner, rolling his shoulders, still feeling the crowd. He points toward one side of the arena, then the other, drawing more noise from the Lisbon fans.

Clovis removes the sleeveless trench coat in one sharp motion and passes it through the ropes to an attendant without looking. He turns back toward Iron Dominion, his face unchanged.

Graves pounds one fist into his opposite palm.

THUD.

Keel rolls his neck once and steps back toward his corner.

John Phillips: "The champions are here. The challengers are ready. We are moments away from the opening bell."

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Mark Bravo: "Mack & Black came alone. Iron Dominion came ready. And those titles just left the champions' hands. Now they have to earn them all over again."

Trey leans toward Clovis in the corner and says something only his partner can hear. Clovis gives the smallest nod.

Across the ring, Graham Keel speaks quietly to Gideon Graves, gesturing once toward Trey, then toward Clovis. Graves does not answer with words. He only stares forward, breathing slowly through his nose.

The referee calls both teams closer, trying to restore order before the match begins.

The MEO Arena rises with anticipation.

John Phillips: "Tag Team Championship action opens World Tour: Portugal. Mack & Black defend against Iron Dominion. And it starts next."

The referee stands between both teams, one hand extended toward Mack & Black and the other toward Iron Dominion. The official speaks quickly, loudly enough to be heard by the men in the ring, but not quite loud enough to cut through the thunder building inside the MEO Arena.

None of them are looking at him.

Trey Mack is bouncing in place in the champions' corner, rolling his shoulders, eyes moving between Graham Keel and Gideon Graves. Beside him, Clovis Black stands motionless, both hands resting on the top rope, his stare fixed almost entirely on Graves.

Across the ring, Keel calmly adjusts his wrist tape. Graves cracks his neck once to the left, once to the right, and then steps forward.

John Phillips: "You can feel the tension before the bell. These are four very different athletes, but every one of them understands what this match means."

Mark Bravo: "And every one of them knows this is not going to be pretty. You do not put Mack & Black across from Iron Dominion and expect clean headlocks and polite applause."

The referee asks each corner who will start.

Trey immediately steps forward, tapping his own chest.

Trey Mack: "I got it."

Clovis glances toward him. No argument. No protest. Just a brief look, then the powerhouse champion steps out through the ropes and takes his place on the apron.

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Across the ring, Graham Keel steps forward for Iron Dominion.

Gideon Graves looks almost disappointed.

Keel says something to him without turning his head.

Graham Keel: "Let him move first."

Graves slowly backs toward the apron, still glaring across the ring at Clovis Black.

John Phillips: "It will be Trey Mack starting for the champions, Graham Keel starting for the challengers."

Mark Bravo: "That tells you something about Iron Dominion's plan right away. Keel does not want this to start as a car crash. He wants to make Trey think, make him reach, make him slow down."

Trey grins slightly and takes two steps toward the center of the ring.

Keel does not grin back.

The referee checks both men, then turns toward the timekeeper.

The bell rings.

DING DING DING!

The crowd erupts as the UTA Tag Team Championship match officially begins.

John Phillips: "And we are underway! The UTA Tag Team Titles are on the line to open World Tour: Portugal!"

Mark Bravo: "This is a tone-setter for the whole night, John. Somebody walks out of this building with gold. Somebody else walks out wondering what went wrong."

Trey Mack bounces on the balls of his feet, circling to his left, shoulders loose, hands up. Keel circles more slowly, his posture lower, eyes moving from Trey's shoulders to his hips to his knees. He is not watching the man's face. He is watching the machinery.

Trey claps once, loud and sharp, trying to bring the crowd up with him.

Trey Mack: "Come on, Lisbon!"

The crowd answers with a rising cheer.

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Keel steps in.

Trey steps in with him.

They lock up in the center of the ring, collar and elbow, and Trey immediately uses the weight advantage to drive forward. Keel gives ground, but not helplessly. He turns his shoulder just enough, lets Trey push him three steps back, then slides his grip down toward the wrist.

John Phillips: "Keel already looking for the arm."

Mark Bravo: "That is what he does. Give him a wrist and he starts drafting a whole disaster plan."

Trey feels it and yanks his arm back, shoving Keel off with enough force to send the challenger back toward the ropes. Keel catches himself before rebounding, resets, and gives the smallest nod.

Trey grins wider.

Trey Mack: "You felt that, huh?"

Keel steps out from the ropes without answering.

They circle again.

Trey offers another lock-up, but Keel dips under this time, catching the wrist and twisting into a tight standing arm wringer. Trey's shoulder turns with the pressure, and Keel immediately steps closer, trying to eliminate the space Trey needs to power out.

John Phillips: "This time Keel gets the wrist, and this is where he is so dangerous."

Mark Bravo: "He is not just holding the arm. He is already asking questions. How flexible is the elbow? How much pressure can the shoulder take? How fast does Trey panic?"

Trey winces, but he does not panic. He rolls forward, tucks through the pressure, pops back to his feet, and reverses into a wristlock of his own. The crowd pops as Keel's arm is suddenly twisted downward.

Trey pulls Keel close and leans in with a grin.

Trey Mack: "I can learn stuff too."

Keel's expression does not change.

He steps through, turns under Trey's grip, and reverses the wrist again, this time snapping a short European uppercut into Trey's jaw at the end of the motion.

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CRACK.

Trey stumbles back a half-step, more surprised than hurt.

John Phillips: "Sharp uppercut from Graham Keel!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not emotional. That was mathematical."

Trey rubs his jaw and nods, the grin fading slightly. He steps back in faster. Keel reaches for the arm again, but Trey swats the hand away and blasts him with a heavy body shot.

THUD.

Keel folds slightly.

Trey follows with a clubbing forearm across the upper back, then another, then grabs Keel by the wrist and fires him into the ropes.

Keel rebounds.

Trey drops down.

Keel steps over him and hits the opposite ropes.

Trey pops up fast.

Keel comes back.

Trey explodes forward with a running crossbody, crashing into Keel and driving him hard to the canvas.

The crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Running crossbody by Trey Mack! Two hundred ninety pounds in motion!"

Mark Bravo: "That is exactly what Keel wanted to avoid. Trey Mack building speed is a public safety issue."

Trey rolls through to his knees, feeling the moment, and slaps the mat once before rising. Keel rolls toward the ropes, clutching his ribs, but Trey stays on him. He pulls Keel up, whips him hard toward the champions' corner, and follows in with a heavy corner splash.

Keel takes the full impact and stumbles out of the corner.

Trey hits the ropes again.

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Rolling senton.

The ring shakes as Trey lands across Keel's chest.

John Phillips: "Rolling senton! Trey Mack has come out hot!"

Mark Bravo: "This is not the pace Graham Keel wanted. Keel wanted a chess match. Trey just flipped the table and sat on it."

Trey hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Keel kicks out.

Trey rises quickly and reaches down, but Keel grabs the front of his tights and pulls him throat-first into the middle rope. Trey snaps backward, coughing, and Keel rolls away toward Iron Dominion's corner.

John Phillips: "Keel creates an opening the hard way!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not pretty, but it was effective. Sometimes the best counter is just making the other guy breathe wrong."

Keel crawls toward his corner and tags Gideon Graves.

The Lisbon crowd buzzes immediately.

Graves steps over the middle rope and into the ring.

Trey is still near the ropes, one hand on his throat, getting back to his feet. He turns around and sees Graves coming.

The two meet near center ring.

Graves swings first with a massive forearm.

Trey ducks underneath, hits the ropes, and comes back with a shoulder block.

Graves barely moves.

Trey looks up at him.

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Graves glares down.

Mark Bravo: "That did not work."

John Phillips: "Trey Mack just hit Gideon Graves with a shoulder block, and Graves barely gave ground."

Trey nods, as if accepting the challenge.

He hits the ropes again.

Second shoulder block.

Graves shifts back one step, but stays up.

Trey points to the crowd, then hits the ropes a third time with more speed.

Graves suddenly surges forward and cuts him in half with a big boot.

The impact drops Trey instantly.

John Phillips: "Big boot from Graves! Trey Mack got turned inside out!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the danger. Trey wanted collision, and Graves said, 'Fine, but I pick the intersection.'"

Gideon Graves stands over Trey Mack, looking down at the champion with cold contempt. He reaches down, grabs Trey by the head, and drags him up with both hands. Trey fires a body shot. Graves absorbs it. Trey throws another. Graves clubs him across the back with a forearm that drops Trey to one knee.

Clovis Black grips the tag rope in the champions' corner.

His expression does not change, but his shoulders seem to tighten.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black watching this closely. Trey Mack may need to get back to his corner."

Mark Bravo: "And that is where the real fun starts. I want Clovis and Graves in there. I want to see what happens when two wrecking balls decide the other one is in the way."

Graves pulls Trey fully upright and whips him hard into Iron Dominion's corner. Trey hits back-first and staggers out.

Graves catches him.

Overhead belly-to-belly suplex.

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Trey crashes across the canvas and rolls toward the ropes, arching in pain.

John Phillips: "Massive overhead belly-to-belly! Gideon Graves just launched one half of the champions!"

Mark Bravo: "Trey Mack is not a small man. Graves just moved him like furniture."

Graves stalks after Trey and drags him back by the ankle before he can roll too far. He drops a heavy knee across Trey's ribs, then another across the shoulder. Trey grimaces, trying to push him away, but Graves presses one forearm across his jaw and forces him flat.

Graves covers.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Trey powers a shoulder up.

Graves does not argue. He simply rises, pulls Trey up again, and drives him back into Iron Dominion's corner.

Keel tags himself in.

Graves holds Trey's arm out, stretching it across the top rope. Keel steps through and drives a precise kick into Trey's exposed shoulder.

Trey snarls and pulls away, but Keel immediately grabs the wrist and twists.

John Phillips: "And here comes the isolation. Power from Graves, precision from Keel."

Mark Bravo: "This is the nightmare. Graves dents the car. Keel checks the alignment."

Keel wrenches Trey's arm and pulls him down to one knee. Trey tries to stand, but Keel steps over the arm and snaps his weight downward, forcing Trey's shoulder toward the mat. Trey rolls to relieve the pressure, but Keel stays attached, transitioning smoothly into a kneeling armbreaker position.

Trey shouts in pain for the first time.

The referee drops down to check.

Referee: "Trey, you good?"

Trey Mack: "I'm good! I'm good!"

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Clovis steps through the ropes halfway, but the referee immediately turns and warns him back.

Referee: "Clovis! Back to the corner!"

Clovis stares at the official.

The official repeats the warning, less confidently this time.

Referee: "Back to the corner!"

Clovis slowly steps back out onto the apron.

Mark Bravo: "That referee has more courage than I do. I would have just said, 'Yes sir,' and let him do whatever he wanted."

John Phillips: "But that moment gave Graham Keel even more time on the arm."

Keel twists the wrist again and drags Trey closer to Iron Dominion's side of the ring. He tags Graves back in.

Graves steps through the ropes and delivers a brutal clubbing blow directly into Trey's exposed shoulder.

Trey drops to the mat, clutching the arm.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack is in trouble. The champions are being cut in half early."

Mark Bravo: "And this is the test. We know Mack & Black can hit hard. We know they can overwhelm teams. But can they survive when a team like Iron Dominion takes their rhythm away?"

Graves pulls Trey up and shoves him chest-first into the turnbuckles. Trey turns around just as Graves charges.

Corner lariat.

The impact crushes Trey against the pads.

Trey stumbles out, barely staying upright.

Graves scoops him and drops him across one knee with a pendulum backbreaker.

Trey rolls to the canvas, back arching, one arm still tucked close to his body.

John Phillips: "Backbreaker from Graves! Iron Dominion has taken complete control!"

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Mark Bravo: "They have Trey in the wrong corner, working the arm, working the back, slowing down the fastest heavyweight in the match. That is not an accident. That is a game plan."

Graves covers again, forearm grinding across Trey's face.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Trey kicks out again, this time with more urgency.

The crowd rallies, clapping in rhythm.

Clovis Black extends his hand from the champions' corner.

Trey turns his head toward him.

The distance might as well be a mile.

John Phillips: "Trey needs the tag. He needs Clovis Black in this match."

Mark Bravo: "And look at Clovis. He is not yelling. He is not begging. He is just waiting for the opportunity to become a problem."

Graves drags Trey up again and lifts him onto one shoulder, looking toward the champions' corner as if making sure Clovis is watching.

Then Graves drives Trey down with a thunderous powerslam.

The ring shakes.

Clovis' hand tightens around the tag rope.

John Phillips: "Huge powerslam! And Graves stared right at Clovis Black before delivering it!"

Mark Bravo: "That was a message. That was absolutely a message."

Graves rises slowly and steps toward the champions' corner.

He points one taped finger at Clovis.

Gideon Graves: "Soon."

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Clovis does not respond.

He only leans forward slightly.

Behind Graves, Trey Mack begins to stir.

John Phillips: "Graves may be taking his eye off Trey Mack."

Mark Bravo: "That is dangerous. Trey is hurt, but Trey is never out of motion for long."

Graves turns back and reaches down.

Trey suddenly fires up from the mat with a desperate right hand to the body.

Then another.

Then a third.

Graves absorbs them, but Trey keeps punching, each shot digging deeper into the ribs.

The crowd rises with every strike.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack fighting back!"

Mark Bravo: "Body shots! That is the way! You cannot knock the wall down if you do not crack the bricks!"

Trey gets to one knee.

Graves clubs him across the back.

Trey drops, but immediately fires another shot into the ribs.

Graves reaches for him again.

Trey suddenly explodes upward with a spinning back elbow that catches Graves clean on the jaw.

Graves staggers backward.

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Spinning back elbow! Graves is rocked!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the opening! That is the window!"

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Trey turns toward his corner.

Clovis extends his hand.

Keel drops from the apron and rushes around the floor toward the champions' side.

John Phillips: "Keel is coming around!"

Keel reaches for Clovis' ankle from the floor.

Clovis sees him.

Keel freezes half a second too late.

Clovis steps down from the apron and turns toward him.

The crowd roars as Keel immediately backs away, hands up, not out of fear exactly, but out of calculation. He wanted disruption. He did not want Clovis loose on the floor.

Mark Bravo: "Bad math, Graham! Bad math!"

John Phillips: "Keel tried to prevent the tag, but Clovis Black saw him coming!"

Inside the ring, Trey crawls toward the corner.

But Clovis is now on the floor.

Graves shakes off the elbow and charges.

Trey lunges toward the empty corner, realizing too late that his partner is not there.

Graves grabs Trey by the ankle and yanks him backward to the center of the ring.

John Phillips: "No tag! No tag! Keel's distraction worked just enough!"

Mark Bravo: "That is why Iron Dominion is dangerous. Even when the plan goes sideways, it still hurts you."

Clovis climbs back onto the apron as Keel retreats around the ring.

Trey kicks at Graves with his free leg, catching him once in the chest, then again near the jaw. Graves loses his grip.

Trey scrambles up.

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Graves lunges.

Trey ducks under a lariat and dives toward the corner.

Clovis reaches out.

The tag connects.

The arena explodes.

John Phillips: "Tag made! Clovis Black is legal!"

Mark Bravo: "Here we go! Here we go!"

Clovis Black steps through the ropes.

Gideon Graves stops in the middle of the ring.

For the first time in the match, the noise around them seems to drop behind the moment.

Clovis walks forward.

Graves walks forward.

They meet in the center of the ring, chest to chest, neither man giving an inch.

John Phillips: "This is what Lisbon wanted to see! Clovis Black and Gideon Graves, legal at the same time!"

Mark Bravo: "Everybody check the foundation under this building."

Graves says something under his breath.

Clovis does not answer.

Graves shoves him.

Clovis barely moves.

The crowd roars.

Clovis shoves Graves back.

Graves takes one step backward, then immediately comes forward with a forearm.

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Clovis answers with one of his own.

THUD.

Graves fires again.

THUD.

Clovis fires back.

THUD.

The two big men begin trading heavy forearms in the center of the ring, each shot landing with a sickening crack, neither man willing to back down.

John Phillips: "Listen to those shots!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not wrestling, that is two guys trying to see whose skull voids the warranty first!"

Graves lands a forearm that turns Clovis' head.

Clovis slowly turns back.

Graves glares.

Clovis steps forward and blasts Graves with a bell clap.

Graves staggers, hands going briefly to his ears.

Clovis hits the ropes with shocking speed.

Running body block.

Graves stumbles backward into the ropes but does not fall.

Clovis hits the opposite ropes.

A second running body block.

This one knocks Graves down to one knee.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black has Graves down to a knee!"

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Mark Bravo: "That is not easy! That is like making a bank vault kneel!"

Clovis backs up, eyes fixed on Graves.

Keel suddenly slides into the ring from behind.

Trey Mack sees him and tries to warn his partner from the apron.

Trey Mack: "Clovis!"

Keel clips Clovis behind the knee with a sharp chop block.

Clovis drops to one knee.

The referee immediately turns on Keel, ordering him back out, but the damage is done.

John Phillips: "Cheap shot by Graham Keel! Clovis Black was building momentum!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not random. Keel saw the engine starting and went right for the tire."

Keel exits quickly, hands raised as if innocent.

Graves rises, grabs Clovis by the head, and drives a brutal knee into his face.

Clovis rocks backward but stays on one knee.

Graves grabs him again and tries to pull him up.

Clovis suddenly grabs Graves by the throat with one hand and the waistband with the other.

The crowd rises.

Clovis powers up.

Overhead belly-to-belly suplex.

Gideon Graves crashes hard onto the canvas.

The building explodes.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black just threw Gideon Graves! He threw him!"

Mark Bravo: "That is two hundred eighty-five pounds of Iron Giant getting launched! Portugal may have just

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shifted three inches west!"

Clovis rises slower now, favoring the leg Keel clipped. He turns and looks directly at Graham Keel on the apron.

Keel gives him nothing back.

No fear.

No reaction.

Just the same calm calculation.

Clovis turns back toward Graves.

Graves is already pushing himself up, one hand on the mat, jaw clenched, fury building behind his eyes.

John Phillips: "This match has turned physical in a hurry, and we are only getting started."

Mark Bravo: "We knew it would be violent. What we did not know was which team would survive the first collision."

Clovis reaches down for Graves.

Graves suddenly drives his shoulder into Clovis' midsection, pushing him backward toward Iron Dominion's corner. Clovis hammers down with forearms to the back, but Graves keeps driving forward, forcing him against the turnbuckles.

Keel tags himself in by slapping Graves on the shoulder.

Graves buries one last shoulder into Clovis' ribs before stepping away.

Keel enters and immediately kicks the back of Clovis' leg again.

Clovis drops slightly, one hand grabbing the top rope.

John Phillips: "Again to the leg! Graham Keel has identified the target."

Mark Bravo: "That is how you deal with Clovis Black. You do not try to outmuscle him. You take away the base. You make the locomotive run on one rail."

Keel grabs Clovis' wrist and tries to twist into an arm control, but Clovis shoves him off hard. Keel hits the mat and rolls through quickly, popping back to his feet.

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Clovis charges out of the corner.

Keel sidesteps.

Clovis' bad leg catches slightly under him, slowing the turn.

Keel darts behind and chop blocks the leg again.

Clovis drops to both knees this time.

The crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "Keel is dissecting the leg of Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "And listen, nobody likes it, but it is smart. Clovis cannot throw you if he cannot stand under you."

Trey Mack leans over the ropes, shouting toward his partner.

Trey Mack: "Come on, big man! Get up!"

Keel grabs Clovis' leg and twists sharply into a grounded hold, trapping the ankle and turning the knee inward. Clovis immediately reaches for the ropes, but Keel drags him back half a step and drops his weight across the joint.

Clovis grimaces for the first time.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black is in real trouble now. Graham Keel is doing exactly what he does best."

Mark Bravo: "Pressure is not pain until he decides it is. Well, he just decided."

Clovis plants both hands on the canvas and begins pushing himself up despite Keel's grip.

Keel's eyes widen slightly.

Clovis gets to one knee.

Then to one foot.

The crowd begins to rise with him.

Keel tightens the hold, trying to drag him down.

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Clovis turns slowly, reaches down, and grabs Keel by the back of the head.

Keel releases immediately and scrambles away before Clovis can fully seize him.

Mark Bravo: "That was survival instinct. Keel got out because he felt the hand close. That is when bad things happen."

Keel backs toward his corner and tags Graves back in.

Graves enters as Clovis pushes himself fully upright, favoring the leg but refusing to show anything more than irritation.

The two big men stare each other down again.

Then Graves charges.

Clovis charges too.

Both men collide in the center of the ring with simultaneous shoulder blocks.

Neither goes down.

The crowd erupts.

They hit the ropes at the same time.

They collide again.

This time both stagger backward.

Trey Mack is stretching his hand out from the corner.

John Phillips: "Clovis needs to make the tag! That leg has been compromised!"

Mark Bravo: "But pride is talking right now, John. Pride and two very large men who do not believe in reverse."

Graves swings a lariat.

Clovis ducks under, but the turn is slower because of the leg.

Graves catches him on the rebound and lifts.

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Spinebuster.

Clovis is driven hard into the mat.

John Phillips: "Iron Drop! Graves planted Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "That might do it!"

Graves covers, hooking the leg deep.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Trey Mack dives in and breaks up the pin with a crashing senton across Graves' back.

The crowd roars as all four men are suddenly in motion.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack saves the championship reign!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not a breakup. That was a full-body emergency response!"

Keel enters quickly and grabs Trey from behind, trying to wrench the arm he worked earlier. Trey fights him off with a back elbow, then another, but Keel ducks the third and clips Trey's shoulder with a precise uppercut.

The referee tries to restore order, shouting for Trey and Keel to get out of the ring.

Graves rolls toward his corner, jaw tight, while Clovis turns onto his side, breathing hard, one hand on his leg.

John Phillips: "This match is already threatening to break down. The referee has his hands full."

Mark Bravo: "Threatening? John, it has one foot over the cliff and the other foot on a banana peel."

Trey and Keel are forced back to their corners, both men still jawing without fully turning away from the ring. Graves gets to his feet first and tags Keel back in.

Keel enters and moves immediately toward Clovis' leg again.

But Clovis swings from the mat and catches him with a heavy right hand to the ribs.

Keel stumbles.

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Clovis crawls toward his corner.

Trey reaches out.

The crowd starts clapping again.

John Phillips: "Clovis trying to get to Trey Mack! The champions need a reset!"

Mark Bravo: "This is where tag team wrestling becomes torture. The hand is right there. The partner is right there. And every inch feels like a mile."

Keel grabs Clovis' ankle.

Clovis kicks him away with the free leg.

Keel rolls backward and charges again.

Clovis lunges.

The tag is made.

Trey Mack explodes over the top rope and into the ring.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack is legal again!"

Keel gets up and Trey runs through him with a shoulder block.

Graves steps through the ropes.

Trey ducks a big boot, hits the ropes, and comes back with a flying forearm that sends Graves stumbling backward into the corner.

Keel rises again.

Trey scoops him and slams him hard in the center of the ring.

The crowd surges.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack cleaning house!"

Mark Bravo: "That is what happens when Trey gets a second gear! Everybody move!"

Trey points to the corner where Graves is still recovering.

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He charges.

Corner splash to Graves.

Graves slumps against the turnbuckles.

Trey turns and sees Keel pulling himself up in the opposite corner.

The grin returns.

Trey charges across the ring.

Cannonball in the corner.

Keel gets crushed.

John Phillips: "Cannonball! Cannonball by Trey Mack!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the big man flying moment! Graham Keel just got flattened!"

Trey drags Keel out from the corner, adrenaline pouring through him. He hooks him for the Mack Truck.

The crowd rises, sensing the finish.

John Phillips: "Trey may be looking for Mack Truck!"

Keel slips down behind him and immediately grabs the arm, twisting into a desperate hammerlock.

Trey turns with the pressure, but Keel kicks the back of his knee, dropping him low enough to prevent the lift.

Graves charges from the corner.

Clovis sees it from the apron.

Clovis enters without waiting for a tag.

The referee shouts immediately.

Referee: "Clovis, out! Out!"

Clovis ignores him and steps directly into Graves' path.

The two collide again with heavy forearms.

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The match breaks open.

John Phillips: "And now all four men are in! The referee has lost control!"

Mark Bravo: "I do not blame him! I would have lost control during the entrances!"

Clovis and Graves trade shots near one side of the ring while Trey and Keel battle near the other. Trey finally rips his arm free and blasts Keel with a spinning back elbow. Keel stumbles into the ropes.

Graves drives a knee into Clovis' bad leg, then tries to whip him into the corner.

Clovis reverses.

Graves hits the turnbuckles.

Clovis charges in with a corner avalanche splash.

Graves absorbs the impact and drops to a seated position in the corner.

John Phillips: "Avalanche splash from Clovis Black!"

Mark Bravo: "Graves is down! Graves is down!"

Keel sees it and charges toward Clovis, but Trey cuts him off with a running crossbody that sends both men tumbling through the ropes and crashing to the floor.

The crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack takes Graham Keel to the outside!"

Mark Bravo: "Two hundred ninety pounds through the ropes! That is not a dive, that is a traffic incident!"

Inside the ring, Clovis turns back toward Graves.

Graves is pulling himself up in the corner, breathing hard.

Clovis reaches down and yanks him out by the arm.

A violent short-arm lariat connects.

Graves drops hard.

John Phillips: "The Whistle! Clovis hit The Whistle!"

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Mark Bravo: "Graves just got folded!"

Clovis drops to one knee, his damaged leg slowing him from making an immediate cover. He grimaces, forcing himself back up, then reaches for Graves again.

On the outside, Keel shoves Trey shoulder-first into the barricade.

Trey staggers.

Keel turns toward the ring.

John Phillips: "Keel is back up on the outside! Clovis may not see him!"

Keel climbs onto the apron as Clovis pulls Graves up.

Clovis turns his head.

Keel hesitates again.

This time, Clovis reaches over the top rope and grabs Keel by the throat.

The crowd explodes.

Mark Bravo: "He caught him!"

Keel's eyes flash, and he snaps Clovis' arm down across the top rope, using the rope as leverage to break the grip. Clovis staggers backward, clutching the arm.

Graves rises behind him.

Graves grabs Clovis around the waist.

Clovis throws an elbow back.

Then another.

Graves loses the grip.

Trey Mack slides back into the ring behind Keel and yanks him off the apron by the ankle, sending him face-first into the edge of the ring.

Keel drops to the floor.

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John Phillips: "Trey Mack just took Keel out of the equation!"

Inside the ring, Clovis turns back toward Graves.

Graves charges.

Clovis swings for a big boot, but Graves catches the leg and drives forward, forcing Clovis backward into the ropes.

The referee gets caught too close and has to dive out of the way.

Graves releases the leg and delivers a brutal headbutt.

Clovis staggers.

Graves hooks him.

High-angle jackknife powerbomb attempt.

John Phillips: "Grave Maker! Graves is looking for Grave Maker!"

Clovis blocks the lift.

Once.

Twice.

Trey Mack climbs back onto the apron, shouting to Clovis.

Trey Mack: "Fight it! Fight it!"

Clovis powers out, back body dropping Graves over the top rope.

Graves crashes hard to the floor.

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Graves to the outside! Clovis Black survives!"

Mark Bravo: "That was almost a new champion moment. That was inches away!"

Clovis drops to one knee, breathing heavily, his bad leg clearly bothering him now. Trey reaches out from the apron.

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Clovis looks at him.

Then makes the tag.

John Phillips: "Tag to Trey Mack!"

Trey climbs through the ropes, sees Graves on the floor, and turns toward Keel, who is dragging himself up near the apron.

Trey grabs Keel by the head and pulls him back into the ring.

Keel stumbles to his feet.

Trey boots him in the midsection.

He hauls him up.

The crowd rises.

John Phillips: "Mack Truck! Trey is looking for Mack Truck!"

Keel twists at the last possible second, sliding down behind Trey and grabbing the damaged arm again. He tries to pull Trey into the Lancashire Lock, hooking and turning, but Trey widens his stance and refuses to go down.

Mark Bravo: "Keel is trying to trap him! He is trying to turn Trey inside out!"

Trey reaches back with his free hand and grabs Keel by the head.

He snapmares him forward.

Keel rolls through to his feet.

Trey charges.

Keel ducks.

Trey hits the ropes.

Graves reaches from the floor and grabs Trey's ankle.

Trey stumbles forward.

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Keel catches him.

Russian leg sweep.

Trey hits the mat hard.

John Phillips: "Graves from the outside! Keel capitalizes!"

Mark Bravo: "Iron Dominion keeps finding ways to stay one step ahead."

Keel floats over and covers, hooking the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Trey kicks out.

Keel immediately transitions to the arm, trying again to trap Trey before he can build momentum. Trey rolls, fights, and reaches for the ropes.

Clovis steps down from the apron and stalks toward Graves on the floor.

Graves turns and sees him coming.

The two begin trading shots outside the ring, each blow landing harder than the last.

John Phillips: "Clovis and Graves are fighting on the outside now!"

Mark Bravo: "Of course they are! The ring was not enough room for that much violence!"

Inside the ring, Keel twists Trey's arm and tries to cinch in the Lancashire Lock, but Trey refuses to let the legs get trapped. He kicks free, rolls to one knee, and drives his shoulder into Keel's midsection.

Keel doubles over.

Trey rises.

Pop-up powerslam.

The crowd explodes as Keel is driven into the mat.

John Phillips: "Pop-up powerslam! Trey Mack got all of it!"

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Mark Bravo: "Cover him! Cover him right now!"

Trey hooks both legs.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Graves reaches in from the floor and drags Keel's leg onto the bottom rope.

The referee sees it and stops the count.

Referee: "Rope break! Rope break!"

The crowd boos furiously.

John Phillips: "Gideon Graves saved the match for Iron Dominion!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not pretty, but that was veteran tag team awareness. Ugly awareness, but awareness."

Clovis grabs Graves from behind on the floor and hurls him into the barricade.

The impact rattles the front row.

Trey gets to his feet inside the ring, frustrated but focused. He looks toward Clovis, who is now brawling with Graves near the timekeeper's area.

Keel is still down.

Trey turns back toward him and drags him up by the wrist.

Keel suddenly drops his weight and pulls Trey forward, sending him shoulder-first into the turnbuckle post through the middle ropes.

Trey cries out and spills backward to the mat.

John Phillips: "Shoulder into the post! That is the arm Keel has targeted all match!"

Mark Bravo: "He went right back to the blueprint. Damage, remember, repeat."

Keel crawls to Trey and grabs the arm, rolling him away from the ropes. He hooks the wrist, threads his leg through, and starts turning for the Lancashire Lock again.

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Trey fights desperately, kicking with his free leg, but Keel is relentless.

On the outside, Clovis sees it.

He tries to slide into the ring.

Graves grabs him by the bad leg and yanks him back to the floor.

Clovis turns with rage and blasts Graves with a forearm.

Graves answers with a headbutt.

Both men stagger.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack may be trapped here! Clovis cannot get to him!"

Mark Bravo: "Keel is so close! He is so close to getting that thing locked!"

Keel turns the angle.

Trey's face twists in pain.

The referee drops down.

Referee: "Trey! Do you submit?"

Trey Mack: "No!"

Keel wrenches harder.

Graham Keel: "Pressure."

He pulls again.

Graham Keel: "Pain."

Trey's free hand hovers above the mat for a terrifying second.

The crowd begins shouting, clapping, stomping, begging the champion to hold on.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack is in the center of the ring! The Tag Team Titles are in serious jeopardy!"

Mark Bravo: "He has got nowhere to go!"

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Trey clenches his fist.

He plants his palm on the mat instead of tapping.

Then he starts pushing.

Slowly.

Powerfully.

Keel's eyes widen as Trey begins lifting his own body against the hold, forcing the angle to change.

Trey gets one knee under him.

Then the other.

Keel hangs on, but Trey roars and powers upward, carrying Keel's grip with him.

John Phillips: "Look at Trey Mack! Look at the power!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not technique. That is refusing to lose!"

Trey turns, hooks Keel by the waist, and drops backward.

Keel's hold breaks as Trey crushes him beneath his weight.

Both men are down.

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Trey escaped! Somehow, some way, Trey Mack escaped!"

Mark Bravo: "But how much damage was done? That arm might be hanging on by a rumor."

Outside the ring, Graves drives Clovis backward toward the ring steps.

Clovis reverses and sends Graves shoulder-first into the steel.

Graves crashes hard and drops to a knee.

Clovis leans against the apron, breathing heavily, still favoring the leg.

Inside the ring, Trey crawls toward his corner.

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Clovis pulls himself up onto the apron.

Keel crawls toward Graves' corner, but Graves is still outside near the steps.

The crowd rises again.

John Phillips: "Both legal men crawling! Trey toward Clovis, Keel toward a corner with nobody home!"

Mark Bravo: "This is where the match swings!"

Trey reaches.

Clovis reaches.

The tag is made.

Clovis Black enters again.

Keel gets to his feet and sees him coming.

For the first time, Keel's calm cracks.

Just a little.

Clovis charges despite the bad leg and runs through Keel with a massive lariat.

Keel flips inside out.

John Phillips: "Clovis Black nearly took Graham Keel out of his boots!"

Mark Bravo: "That was anger with legs!"

Keel staggers back up.

Clovis grabs him.

Blackout Slam.

Keel is driven hard into the mat.

Clovis covers.

Referee: "One!"

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Referee: "Two!"

Graves breaks it up, diving in from the side and hammering Clovis across the back.

John Phillips: "Graves breaks it up! Iron Dominion survives again!"

Trey Mack re-enters and tackles Graves backward into the ropes.

Graves and Trey tumble through the middle rope to the floor, crashing near the barricade.

Inside the ring, Clovis slowly rises, dragging Keel with him.

The crowd senses the end again.

Clovis yanks Keel in by the arm.

The Whistle.

Short-arm lariat connects with brutal force.

Keel collapses to the mat.

John Phillips: "The Whistle connects again! Keel may be out!"

Mark Bravo: "Finish him! Finish him now!"

Clovis reaches down, pulling Keel up again with cold, direct purpose.

He sets him.

The crowd rises.

John Phillips: "Clovis may be looking for Freight Line!"

Before Clovis can fully hit the killshot, Keel drops and grabs the bad leg, twisting sharply at the knee. Clovis buckles, and Keel rolls through, pulling Clovis down into a desperate leg entanglement.

Clovis slams a fist into the mat, more angry than hurt, but Keel keeps twisting.

Mark Bravo: "Keel went back to the leg! He had no choice!"

Outside the ring, Trey sends Graves into the barricade again, but Graves fires back with a big boot that drops Trey near the floor.

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Graves turns toward the ring.

Keel is still hanging onto Clovis' leg.

Clovis starts powering out.

Graves slides in.

Clovis kicks Keel away just as Graves charges.

Clovis ducks a lariat from Graves.

Graves rebounds.

Trey Mack suddenly slides back in and meets Graves with a huge running crossbody.

Both men crash to the mat and roll toward the ropes.

John Phillips: "Trey Mack out of nowhere!"

Mark Bravo: "He just saved Clovis from another collision!"

Keel stumbles up.

Clovis catches him.

One hand grips the wrist.

A violent jerk pulls Keel in.

Another short-arm lariat.

Keel staggers but somehow stays on his feet.

Clovis hits the ropes.

Freight Line.

The impact turns Keel inside out.

John Phillips: "FREIGHT LINE! FREIGHT LINE BY CLOVIS BLACK!"

Mark Bravo: "That is it! That has to be it!"

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Clovis drops into the cover.

Trey, still on the mat, sees Graves trying to crawl toward them. Trey lunges and grabs Graves around the waist, holding him just long enough.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Mack & Black retain! Mack & Black retain the UTA Tag Team Championships!"

Mark Bravo: "What a fight! What a fight to open the show!"

Clovis Black rolls off Graham Keel and sits on the mat for a moment, breathing hard, one hand immediately going to the leg that Keel spent half the match trying to dismantle. Trey Mack releases Gideon Graves and collapses backward near the ropes, clutching his shoulder and grinning through the pain.

Ring Announcer: "Here are your winners, and still UTA Tag Team Champions... Mack & Black!"

The referee retrieves the UTA Tag Team Championships from ringside and brings them into the ring. Trey gets to one knee and accepts his title with his good arm, pressing the faceplate against his chest. Clovis slowly stands, taking his belt with a cold nod before draping it over his shoulder.

John Phillips: "They were tested in every possible way. Trey Mack's arm, Clovis Black's leg, the power of Gideon Graves, the precision of Graham Keel, but the champions survive."

Mark Bravo: "And that word matters. Survive. They did not stroll through Iron Dominion. They survived them. But survival with the gold still in your hands? That is championship business."

Outside the ring, Gideon Graves sits against the barricade, fury etched across his face. He stares into the ring at Clovis Black, his chest heaving, one hand gripping the barricade so tightly his knuckles whiten.

Graham Keel rolls toward the ropes, blinking hard, still trying to gather himself after the Freight Line. He looks less angry than analytical, as if even in defeat he is replaying the match, searching for the exact moment the structure failed.

Inside the ring, Trey Mack pulls himself up beside Clovis Black.

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Trey raises his championship high.

Clovis raises his a beat later, not for the crowd, but almost as an answer to Graves.

The Lisbon crowd roars as the champions stand tall, battered but unbroken.

John Phillips: "Mack & Black came to Portugal alone, walked into the biggest challenge of their reign, and they are leaving this opening contest still UTA Tag Team Champions."

Mark Bravo: "And nobody gets to call that reign lucky. Not after this. Not after Iron Dominion."

Trey turns toward Clovis and bumps the side of his title against Clovis' championship. Clovis looks at him for a second, then gives the smallest nod.

No smile.

No celebration beyond what is necessary.

But the message is clear.

They are still here.

They are still champions.

And the night in Lisbon has started with a war.

No More Cuts

Woman's V.O.: "I've been doing this for a long time."

Shaky handheld footage. Colors blown slightly warm with age.

Two children in oversized headgear circle nervously.

The whistle blows.

One quick level change.

A rear waistlock.

An outside trip.

The other child hits the mat flat.

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Before the adults in the background fully react, a half nelson is already threaded and the referee is slapping the mat.

CUT TO:

Rolling green hills.

Morning fog over fencing.

Goats wandering through wet grass.

Rows of aging cheese wheels.

Milk bottles sweating in a cooler.

A farm hand stands behind a goat, one rear leg trapped securely between her thighs while she shoes the hoof with practiced efficiency.

The same woman straddles a goat's back, one arm around its neck while another works a syringe full of medicine inside its mouth.

The woman looks on as an adorable blonde tyke of about 4 or 5 straddles a kid's back, trying to get it to accept a bottle.

Woman's V.O.: "Before I wrestled people, I wrestled goats."

CUT TO:

Tape pulled tight around a wrist.

Then fingers.

Then another hand.

Woman's V.O.: "The best way to keep something from fighting back? I figured it out pretty early. It's to keep it from moving."

A beat.

Woman's V.O.: "And honestly? Being stronger doesn't hurt either."

CUT TO BLACK.

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Woman's V.O.: "So yeah. I loved wrestling."

Quick cuts.

A thick-legged blonde teenager blasting through a double leg on an undersized opponent. A snap mat return. A body folded flat beneath heavy hips. Old gym acoustics echoing through cheap camcorder audio.

Woman's V.O.: "They couldn't stop me in middle school."

Another clip, same teen -- rear waistlock, outside trip, half nelson threaded almost simultaneously with the landing. The referee's hand is already hitting the mat while the opponent is still trying to understand where the ceiling went.

Woman's V.O.: "They couldn't stop me in high school either."

A wrestler sprawls hard on the blonde's shot attempt. She traps the leg anyway, sits through, and begins folding the girl backward into an ugly high stack. The trapped wrestler kicks violently, neck compressed, while the blonde calmly settles lower and tightens the hold inch by inch.

CUT TO BLACK

Woman's V.O.: "My name is Kirsty McKinney."

CUT TO:

Clear modern footage for the first time.

Kirsty standing in a wrestling room in a pale blue singlet, white boots laced tight, wrists taped. Calm. Still. Looking directly into the camera without really acknowledging it.

Woman's V.O.: "I wasn't good at wrestling. I wasn't even great."

CUT TO:

A bodylock lift.

A mat return.

A leglace.

Woman's V.O.: "I wasn't even a prodigy. Or generational."

CUT TO:

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A Nelson pin threaded so tight the opponent's shoulders seem glued down.

A wrestler gets folded into a surfboard, legs kicking helplessly.

Woman's V.O.: "I was better than that."

CUT TO:

More collegiate footage now.

Cleaner.

Sharper.

More clinical.

Text appears in the foreground. Pins continue in the background.

Freshman Year: 34-0. An opponent's face turns crimson in the grips of a twister.

Sophomore Year: 36-0. A tight cradle is applied, the mat is slapped. The cradle is released, the opponent stays crumpled on the mat, clutching her stomach.

Woman's V.O.: "Undefeated. Never taken down. Only scores anybody got were escapes."

More text.

Junior Year: 39-0. A takedown is instantly reversed into a double overhook pin. A power stack applied so tightly that the opponent tries to tap out.

Woman's V.O.: "The Olympics were calling. But I was getting too big for 137."

CUT TO:

Campbellsville training footage.

Kirsty sitting exhausted against a wall drinking water.

Woman's V.O.: "No, literally. Too much muscle. The performance was great. The cuts kept getting worse. I was sick half the time."

CUT TO:

A towel over her head.

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Hands shaking slightly while tape is peeled from fingers.

Kirsty asleep sitting upright against a locker room wall, a gallon water jug beside her.

Woman's V.O.: "But I was still winning."

CUT TO:

Modern footage again.

Kirsty in the blue singlet.

Woman's V.O.: "Senior year? Still undefeated, but some of 'em made me work for it."

CUT TO:

A hard sprawl.

The opponent keeps driving anyway and manages to force Kirsty out of bounds.

No points.

Woman's V.O.: "Then there was this one match. The cut was bad. The opponent was good."

CUT TO:

Kirsty trapped in the leg entanglement, her neck trapped in the crook of a flexed arm.

But one elbow still jammed stubbornly beneath her body, keeping the shoulder off the mat.

The scoreboard reads:

2-7.

Woman's V.O.: "Hey, I never said I was invincible."

The referee calls for a break, repositions Kirsty in the down position.

Woman's V.O.: "Maybe almost."

CUT TO:

The whistle.

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Kirsty suddenly explodes into motion.

A violent sit-out, a spin, a bodylock secured from nowhere.

Kirsty drives upward violently and topples the opponent backward.

Her legs wrap around the hips. Her ankles cross, her thighs flex violently, the trapped wrestler visibly yelps in pain as Kirsty's lower body compresses her like a vice.

Woman's V.O.: "But I've done the adversity thing too."

Kirsty leans her full weight forward. She methodically traps one arm under her own, then the other, then brings her own arms together, her back muscles rippling, locking them in place. Denying leverage. Denying escape.

Woman's V.O.: "Because adversity's just another opponent to be dominated."

The referee slaps the mat, signalling the fall, but Kirsty does not release.

The referee shakes her shoulder, and only then does she finally let go and rise to her feet.

She turns her back on the opponent and walks away.

Woman's V.O.: "I was sick after that match. They tried moving me up to 152. It... didn't go well."

A stockier opponent sprawls heavy across her upper back and drives her flat to the mat, face down.

A bit later, the opponent's hand is raised. The scorecard reads 4-2.

Woman's V.O.: "Only match I ever lost. Big fuckin' asterisk. But she did beat me."

CUT TO BLACK.

Woman's V.O.: "So. Back to the cuts."

CUT TO:

Early morning.

Dim locker room lighting.

A digital scale.

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Sweatpants.

Hoodie.

Dry lips.

Kirsty sitting against the wall wrapped in towels, staring at nothing.

Woman's V.O.: "And then it happened."

Blurred movement.

Voices suddenly sharper.

The image tilts sideways abruptly.

Someone catching her before her head hits the floor.

A plastic water bottle rolling across concrete.

CUT TO BLACK.

Silence.

Woman's V.O.: "I passed out waiting for the scale."

A beat.

Woman's V.O.: "And that was it. Doctors said no more cuts. That meant no Olympics. No medals. No podiums. No shaking hands with Rulon Gardner and Matt Ghaffari."

A faint dry amusement enters her voice.

Woman's V.O.: "Lifetime record 151-1. Points differential 738-21, and a third of those were from one fuckin' woman. Not a damn thing to show for it. Campbellsville let me finish out the year and graduate. And that was it for wrestling."

CUT TO BLACK.

Woman's V.O.: "Kinda. See, there's this thing called professional wrestling..."

CUT TO:

Pyro exploding across an arena. Mountains of muscle throwing bodies. Masked wrestlers flying through the air. Centerfold beauties throwing roundhouse kicks.

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Woman's V.O.: "Name's ironic. They don't know the first fuckin' thing about wrestling."

CUT TO:

Kirsty in a professional wrestling ring for the first time.

Her legs are cinched brutally around another wrestler's head and trapped arm in a legscissor cradle. One leg kicks frantically against the canvas while his face darkens red from the pressure.

Kirsty rests her chin lazily against one hand and stares directly into the camera looking catastrophically bored while the referee counts the fall.

Woman's V.O.: "They did have one thing going for them, though-"

The referee's hand slaps the mat.

CUT TO BLACK.

Woman's V.O.: "They were willing to pay me to prove it."

CUT TO:

A luchadora caught in a leg lace.

Instead of rolling through the hold traditionally, Kirsty suddenly yanks upward hard on the trapped ankle.

The scream comes instantly.

The frantic tap somehow comes even faster.

Woman's V.O.: "And I enjoyed proving it. Turned out I was pretty fuckin' good at it too."

CUT TO:

A wrestler attempts an armdrag, and ends up face down in an arm ride.

CUT TO:

Rear waistlock lift, to front slam, to legscissor cradle. Again the disdainfully bored look into the camera during the count.

Woman's V.O.: "Also? In professional wrestling, I was allowed to hurt people."

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CUT TO:

Kirsty sprawled across a man's back with a bulldog choke cinched tight.

A waistlock lift transitioned midair into a vicious wheelbarrow suplex.

A canvas reading ICW. Kirsty has a man in silver trunks with star designs on them trapped in a complicated back mount and leg entanglement. Her arms wrap around his head and neck and twist, and keep twisting...

The wrestler pounds the mat frantically in agony while Kirsty's expression never changes at all.

Woman's V.O.: "I've actually been in professional wrestling for a few years now."

CUT TO:

Kirsty slowly circling the ring after a match.

Bodies scattered around the canvas.

Crowd noise washing over her.

She looks almost amused now. Almost.

Woman's V.O.: "I've started finding it tolerable."

A faint smirk pulls briefly at the corner of her mouth.

CUT TO:

A wrestler charges. Kirsty catches her clean and launches into a tight bridging German suplex.

Another opponent dragged out to the apron before Kirsty spikes her with a brutal over-the-shoulder DDT against the ring edge.

CUT TO BLACK.

Woman's V.O.: "And honestly?"

CUT TO:

Rear shot.

Kirsty standing just behind an entrance curtain.

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Bright light spilling around the edges.

Thousands of voices roaring somewhere beyond it.

Woman's V.O.: "The small ponds were fine for a while, but I've squeezed everything out of them that I'm going to get."

CUT TO:

Close-up.

Just Kirsty's face now.

Tired eyes.

Athlete's posture.

A private little smirk that looks less happy than dangerous.

Woman's V.O.: "I'll never make it to the Olympics."

A beat.

Woman's V.O.: "But I will make it to the UTA."

CUT TO:

Another legscissor cradle already fully secured. The trapped wrestler's face dark red, one leg kicking uselessly against the canvas, Kirsty staring down the camera with detached contempt.

Woman's V.O.: "And just because I had to give up my five-ring dreams..."

Her legs compress tighter. The trapped wrestler's thrashing suddenly becomes frantic, a scream forcing its way out through compressed lungs.

Woman's V.O.: "...doesn't mean I can't put a ring around your fuckin' collar."

And somehow, the noose tightens yet again.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

A graphic appears.

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KIRSTY MCKINNEY

COMING SOON TO UTA

First Class

The broadcast cuts away from ringside to a camera posted near the loading area of the MEO Arena.

At first, there is nothing especially unusual. Crew members move equipment cases through the corridor. A production assistant speaks quietly into a headset. Security stands near a side entrance, watching the flow of traffic backstage.

Then the door opens.

And the entire mood changes.

Maxwell Jett steps into the building first.

The UTA Championship is slung over one shoulder, gleaming beneath the harsh backstage lighting. Unlike earlier promotional appearances, Jett is not dressed like a man simply passing through. He looks dressed to compete, ring boots already on, wrist tape visible, posture sharp and deliberate.

Behind him, Jacoby Jacobs and Darran Darrington enter together, The Rich Young GRAPPLRZ carrying themselves with the usual First Class arrogance. Jacoby has a designer bag over one shoulder and a grin already loaded with bad intentions. Darran trails just behind, sunglasses still on indoors, looking around the backstage area like the building has failed inspection.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute. Is that Maxwell Jett?"

Mark Bravo: "That is the UTA Champion, and he is not alone. First Class just arrived in Lisbon."

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett and The Rich Young GRAPPLRZ are not scheduled to be here tonight."

Mark Bravo: "That has never stopped Maxwell Jett from deciding a show needed him."

A nearby staff member steps toward Jett, surprised, clipboard in hand.

Staff Member: "Mr. Jett, we weren't told you were arriving tonight."

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Jett stops walking.

Slowly, he looks down at the clipboard.

Then at the staff member.

Maxwell Jett: "That's adorable."

Jacoby laughs immediately.

Jacoby Jacobs: "He thought the clipboard mattered."

Darran Darrington: "That's lower-management confidence right there."

Jett adjusts the UTA Championship on his shoulder and steps closer to the staff member with a smile that is all teeth and no warmth.

Maxwell Jett: "I am the UTA Champion. I do not ask permission to arrive. I improve the property value by entering the building."

The staff member says nothing, wisely stepping back.

Jett continues forward, First Class falling into place behind him.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett looks ready for something. Ring gear, championship in hand, and First Class with him."

Mark Bravo: "That is the part I do not like. Jett does not show up unscheduled in gear unless he wants everyone asking why."

As they move down the hall, a few wrestlers and crew members turn to watch. Jacoby gives one of them a lazy wave. Darran points toward a stack of catering trays and shakes his head in disgust.

Darran Darrington: "This is dinner?"

Jacoby Jacobs: "That is why everybody here looks tired."

Jett does not slow down.

He keeps walking with the championship resting against his shoulder, eyes forward, smirk fixed in place.

The camera follows at a slight distance as First Class turns down the corridor toward the locker room area.

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John Phillips: "Again, we have received no word that Maxwell Jett was scheduled for tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And yet here he is, dressed to compete, walking around with that title like he owns the building."

Jett stops just before disappearing around the corner.

He turns back toward the camera.

The smirk widens.

Maxwell Jett: "Try not to look so surprised."

He taps the UTA Championship once.

Maxwell Jett: "Champions do what they want."

Then Maxwell Jett turns away, Jacoby and Darran following close behind as First Class disappears deeper into the arena.

John Phillips: "An unscheduled arrival from Maxwell Jett and First Class. What exactly is the UTA Champion planning tonight?"

Mark Bravo: "Whatever it is, John, I promise you Maxwell Jett thinks it is brilliant."

The camera lingers on the empty corridor for a second before the broadcast cuts away.

Kaida Shizuka vs. Brittany Reid

The camera returns to ringside inside the MEO Arena, where the Lisbon crowd is still buzzing from the war that opened the night. The ring crew has cleared the last traces of championship chaos from ringside, but the energy has not settled. If anything, the first match has only sharpened the building.

John Phillips: "What a way to open World Tour: Portugal. Mack & Black survive Iron Dominion, and now we turn our attention to the women's division."

Mark Bravo: "And we are about to see one of the newest faces in UTA, Brittany Reid. The Killer Bee has wasted absolutely no time making noise since she arrived."

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid made her debut against Bianca Page in Italy and scored what many considered a major upset. Since then, her name has been tied to Bianca Page in one way or another, including last week in France when Brittany confronted Bianca backstage after another questionable victory."

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Mark Bravo: "That was Brittany being Brittany. Sunshine, bows, big smile, and then suddenly she is accusing Bianca Page of cheating right to her face like she is asking where somebody hid the snacks."

John Phillips: "And that confrontation did not go unnoticed. Brittany has already proven she has heart, athleticism, and absolutely no fear when it comes to speaking up, but tonight is another kind of test. Tonight, she goes one on one with Kaida Shizuka."

Mark Bravo: "And Kaida is not Bianca Page. She is not coming in with the same ego, the same pageantry, or the same need to make everything about herself. Kaida is sharp, dangerous, and if Brittany gets too distracted by the crowd, Kaida can turn this into a painful lesson real fast."

The lights in the arena begin to dim.

A soft buzz travels through the crowd, different from the dangerous rumble that preceded Iron Dominion and different from the championship roar that followed Mack & Black. This time, there is curiosity. Excitement. The kind of anticipation that comes when the fans know something bright and chaotic is about to hit the stage.

For one second, the entrance ramp is dark.

Then the first hard beat of "Catch Me If You Can" by BabyMetal cuts through the arena.

A green spotlight slices through smoke at the top of the stage.

On the next beat, a cannon of green and black confetti explodes outward, showering the entranceway in a burst of color.

The Lisbon crowd pops immediately.

Through the confetti, Brittany Reid appears.

Twin ponytails bounce beneath big pom-pom bows, her green, black, and white cheerleader-inspired gear gleaming under the spotlight with HORNETS across her chest. She is all motion before she even takes a step, shoulders bouncing to the beat, hands clapping along, smile bright enough to cut through the haze.

John Phillips: "And here she comes! From Charlotte, North Carolina, The Killer Bee, Brittany Reid!"

Mark Bravo: "This girl walks out here like somebody loaded a glitter cannon with espresso."

Brittany throws both arms wide at the top of the ramp and looks out over the MEO Arena with wide-eyed delight.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh, Portugal! Holy sh*t, hiiiiii!"

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The crowd cheers louder, and Brittany reacts like every decibel is personally meant for her. She clasps both hands over her heart, bouncing in place, then points to a group of fans near the barricade holding up a sign that reads, "KILLER BEE CLUB."

Her eyes light up.

Brittany Reid: "That is, like, soooooo freakin' cute!"

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid brings a background in cheerleading and gymnastics, and we have already seen how that translates into the ring. Constant motion, springboards, hurricanranas, sudden counters, and that infectious confidence."

Mark Bravo: "She is five-foot-one, one hundred five pounds, and somehow wrestles like gravity sent her a strongly worded letter and she ignored it."

Brittany begins jogging down the ramp in rhythm with the music.

Step. Clap.

Step. Clap.

She slaps hands with fans on one side, then darts across to the other, reaching out to a young girl in the front row wearing green bows in her hair. Brittany stops just long enough to squeeze her hand and point at the bows with total sincerity.

Brittany Reid: "Twinsies! OH-EM-GEE, I love your bows so damn much!"

The girl beams. Brittany laughs, blows a quick kiss to the section, then continues down the ramp.

John Phillips: "That connection with the fans has come almost instantly for Brittany. There is something genuine about the way she embraces this stage."

Mark Bravo: "And that is what makes her dangerous and vulnerable at the same time. She loves the people. She loves the noise. She wants to make every moment a performance. That can give her wings, but against someone like Kaida, it can also leave openings."

John Phillips: "Brittany is still very new to UTA. A win over Bianca Page in her debut put people on notice, but she is learning quickly that every week here presents a different challenge."

Mark Bravo: "Exactly. Beating Bianca Page was huge, especially because Bianca did not exactly take that with grace. Then Brittany called her out for cheating in France, and you could see right there that Brittany may be bubbly, but she is not naïve when it comes to right and wrong. She will call you out while smiling, and that might be even more irritating."

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Three paces from the ring, Brittany plants her feet.

She snaps into a compact cartwheel, hands hitting the apron cleanly as her legs whip through with gymnastic precision. She lands facing the ring with no wasted motion, drawing another cheer from the Lisbon fans.

John Phillips: "Look at the control!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not a stumble into a cool landing. That was trained. That was polished. That was the kind of thing you try once in your backyard and then explain to the emergency room."

Brittany pivots smoothly on the apron and steps through the ropes in one fluid movement. The green spotlight tightens around her as she bounces once inside the ring, then races toward the nearest corner.

She climbs with quick, confident steps until she is balanced on the turnbuckle.

Facing the crowd, Brittany hits a bright cheerleader pose, arms wide, chin lifted, smile perfect. The fans respond with a louder cheer, and Brittany holds the pose for two beats before pointing out across the arena.

Brittany Reid: "Let's freakin' goooo, Lisbon!"

The crowd answers, and Brittany practically vibrates with excitement.

John Phillips: "She is soaking this in, and why not? Just a few weeks into her UTA career, Brittany Reid is already finding herself in important matches on the World Tour."

Mark Bravo: "And she is doing it with a smile, which I both respect and do not understand. If I had Kaida Shizuka coming out next, I would not be smiling. I would be checking my dental plan."

Brittany dips slightly on the turnbuckle.

Then she launches into a tight, controlled forward flip dismount.

She lands on both feet in the center of the ring, chest up, arms out, steady as if finishing a routine in front of judges.

The MEO Arena pops again.

John Phillips: "Beautiful dismount by Brittany Reid!"

Mark Bravo: "That is ridiculous. She landed that like the mat apologized for being in her way."

Brittany turns the landing into immediate crowd work, pacing toward the ropes and pointing to signs. She

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blows a kiss toward the upper deck, then mimes taking a quick selfie with a group near the barricade. She leans back against the ropes and cups a hand to her ear, asking for more noise.

The fans give it to her.

She laughs, bouncing in place, then skips backward toward the center of the ring.

Brittany Reid: "Okay, okay, I am, like, totally obsessed with this place already!"

John Phillips: "That energy has been her calling card. Brittany Reid is a bright personality, but do not mistake that for a lack of toughness. She is the youngest of five, grew up with four older brothers, and learned early how to fight from underneath."

Mark Bravo: "That is the thing people are going to keep learning about her. She looks like she wandered out of a pep rally, but then the bell rings and suddenly she is springboarding into your face. The nickname is Killer Bee for a reason. Cute until she stings you."

The camera catches Brittany in the corner now, one leg stretched against the middle rope as she begins to settle herself. She shakes out her arms, rolls her shoulders, and takes a breath.

The smile is still there.

But the bounce slows.

Her eyes shift toward the entrance stage.

John Phillips: "And you can see the focus beginning to set in. Brittany Reid knows this is not a showcase. This is a fight."

Mark Bravo: "She can wave, wink, blow kisses, and do the whole sparkle routine all she wants. But when Kaida Shizuka comes through that curtain, Brittany better be ready to wrestle, because Kaida is not here to be part of the highlight reel."

The music begins to fade.

Brittany takes one more look around the MEO Arena and gives the crowd a final wave. Then she turns fully toward the stage, hands on the top rope, ponytails resting over her shoulders as her expression becomes more competitive.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid is in the ring. The Killer Bee is ready. And next, she faces Kaida Shizuka."

The camera holds on Brittany in the corner, still bright, still smiling, but now with her eyes fixed forward as the lights begin to shift for her opponent.

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Brittany Reid remains in her corner as the green-and-black energy of her entrance fades into the rolling noise of the MEO Arena. She bounces once on her toes, then twice, ponytails swaying as she keeps her eyes on the entrance stage.

The smile is still there.

But now it is smaller.

Sharper.

She knows who is coming.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid has already made an impression in UTA, but tonight she faces someone very different from Bianca Page. Kaida Shizuka is not about pageantry. She is not about ego. She is about precision, discipline, and damage."

Mark Bravo: "And that is a rough matchup for Brittany. Brittany wants motion. Brittany wants speed. Brittany wants to turn this into a highlight reel. Kaida wants to make one clean cut and watch the whole routine fall apart."

The lights begin to fade.

Slowly, the brightness drains out of the arena until the ring is surrounded by an indigo glow, deep and cold, like dusk settling across still water. The crowd lowers into a tense murmur, the playful reaction from Brittany's entrance replaced by something quieter and more alert.

A low taiko drum rolls through the building.

Once.

Then again.

The sound is not loud at first, but it carries weight. Each strike seems to echo through the floor, through the barricades, through the ribs of the fans closest to the entrance ramp.

Then "kusa (?-ikusa-)" by WagakkiBand begins to rise through the arena speakers.

The screen above the entrance stage shifts to a field of dark indigo and pale pink. Cherry-blossom petals drift across the image, falling slowly in contrast to the sharp beat beneath them.

John Phillips: "And here comes The Silent Blade."

Mark Bravo: "Listen to the difference. Brittany's entrance felt like somebody opened the windows. Kaida's

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feels like somebody closed the door behind you."

A curtain of cherry-blossom petals begins to fall from above the entranceway.

Through it steps Kaida Shizuka.

She does not burst through the curtain. She does not acknowledge the boos beginning to rise from the crowd. She simply appears within the falling petals, composed and still, her eyes forward, her expression unreadable.

Kaida stands at the top of the ramp in silence for a long beat. Her posture is straight, shoulders relaxed, hands low. There is no wasted motion in her body. No need to perform for the crowd. No attempt to match Brittany's brightness. If Brittany's entrance was a spark, Kaida's is a blade held in moonlight.

John Phillips: "Kaida Shizuka, from Osaka, Japan. A former kendo prodigy turned fighter, and one of the most measured strikers in UTA."

Mark Bravo: "Measured is the word. She does not throw just to throw. She does not move just to move. Every kick, every elbow, every grip, every choke has a reason. That is scary."

Kaida lowers one hand to her side and slowly draws a faux katana from its sheath.

The gesture is deliberate. Ceremonial. Not theatrical in the way Bianca Page might make something theatrical, but ritualistic. Her eyes never leave the ring as she extends the blade outward, then angles it down with precise control.

Inside the ring, Brittany watches closely, her hands resting on the top rope.

For the first time since arriving, she is not waving.

She is studying.

John Phillips: "You can see Brittany Reid processing the atmosphere here. This is not the same kind of opponent, not the same kind of energy."

Mark Bravo: "Good. She better process fast. Kaida is not going to be charmed by bows and cartwheels. Kaida is going to look at Brittany's neck, her arm, her base, and start picking targets."

Kaida brings the faux katana slowly across her body, then lowers her head in a controlled bow.

The petals continue to fall behind her.

When she rises, the expression has not changed.

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Cold.

Stoic.

Empty of anything Brittany can play off of.

Kaida begins her walk down the ramp.

Each step is measured. Not slow for drama, but controlled by discipline. She does not look toward the fans leaning over the barricade. She does not react when they boo. A few try to reach out, but she passes without acknowledging them, eyes still fixed on the ring and the woman waiting inside it.

John Phillips: "Kaida Shizuka has competed in high-pressure environments, and she carries herself with that bushido-inspired focus every time she walks to the ring."

Mark Bravo: "And she is dangerous because she is not emotional. You can't bait her easily. Brittany likes to draw reactions. She likes to get opponents frustrated, make them chase, make them miss. Kaida does not chase. Kaida cuts."

Brittany shifts in her corner and tries to loosen herself back up, rolling her shoulders and bouncing lightly. She gives the crowd a quick smile, but her eyes keep returning to Kaida.

Brittany Reid: "Okay. Like, super freakin' intense. Totally noted."

The camera catches the line, and a few fans near ringside laugh. Brittany smiles at them for half a second, but even that fades as Kaida continues forward, unbothered.

John Phillips: "Brittany trying to keep herself loose, but there is an undeniable intimidation factor to Kaida Shizuka."

Mark Bravo: "And it's not size. It's not volume. It's quiet. That's what gets people. You throw all your personality at someone and they give you nothing back? That makes the room feel smaller."

Kaida reaches the bottom of the ramp and pauses at ringside.

She looks up at the ring.

Then, before touching the steps, she lowers the faux katana and hands it off to a ringside attendant without looking away from Brittany.

She turns toward the steel steps.

One step.

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Then another.

At the top, she pauses on the apron.

Kaida looks down.

With complete calm, she wipes the soles of her boots against the apron.

John Phillips: "That is part of Kaida's routine. Always wiping the soles before entering the ring. Always treating the ring like a place that demands respect."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, and then she gets in there and starts kicking people in the thigh like they owe her money. Respectful violence. Very confusing. Very effective."

Kaida steps through the ropes.

She enters cleanly and walks toward the center of the ring without taking her eyes off Brittany. The referee instinctively steps closer, not because Kaida has done anything wrong, but because her presence makes every inch of distance feel important.

Brittany steps out of her corner a little.

Kaida stops.

The two women face each other from across the center of the ring.

The contrast is striking.

Brittany Reid, bright green and black, ponytails, bows, athletic bounce, the warmth of the crowd still clinging to her like electricity.

Kaida Shizuka, indigo calm and controlled silence, every motion clean, every breath measured, a fighter who seems to have already chosen the first target before the bell has even rung.

John Phillips: "What a visual. Brittany Reid, one of the brightest new personalities on the roster, standing across from Kaida Shizuka, The Silent Blade."

Mark Bravo: "One woman makes chaos pretty. The other makes pain quiet."

Kaida gives Brittany one small bow.

It is formal. It is respectful in shape.

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But there is nothing warm in it.

Brittany hesitates for half a second, then returns the bow quickly, slightly awkwardly, with a little extra cheerleader polish at the end because she cannot help herself.

Brittany Reid: "Um, okay! Such good manners!"

Kaida's expression does not change.

Mark Bravo: "Nothing. Not even a blink."

John Phillips: "Kaida Shizuka is not here for banter. She is here for competition."

Kaida turns and walks to her corner. She places both hands lightly on the top rope and lowers her head for a moment, breathing slowly. The indigo light begins to fade as her music dies under the building noise.

Brittany returns to her own corner, rolling one ankle, shaking out her wrists, trying to keep the spark alive without letting it burn too wild.

The referee moves to the center and checks first with Brittany.

Brittany nods, still smiling, though her eyes are focused now.

Then the referee checks with Kaida.

Kaida gives one small nod.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid's speed and innovation against Kaida Shizuka's strikes and submissions. This is going to be a fascinating clash of styles."

Mark Bravo: "And Brittany better learn quick. Kaida targets the arm or the neck, slows the pace, and hits hard enough to make your highlight reel turn into evidence."

The camera cuts tight to Brittany.

She takes a deep breath and whispers something to herself.

Brittany Reid: "Fast feet. Big smile. Don't get murdered. Easy."

The camera cuts to Kaida.

She stands motionless in the opposite corner.

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No words.

No smile.

No visible emotion.

The referee raises his hand.

John Phillips: "Kaida Shizuka is in the ring. Brittany Reid is ready. The bell is next."

The referee stands between Brittany Reid and Kaida Shizuka, one hand slightly raised as he checks both corners one final time. The MEO Arena buzzes with anticipation, still carrying the energy of Brittany's bright arrival and the chill of Kaida's silent entrance.

Brittany bounces lightly in her corner, shaking out her hands, ponytails swaying over her shoulders. She rolls her neck once, then gives the crowd a quick little wave, trying to pull the energy back toward herself before the bell.

Across the ring, Kaida Shizuka does not move.

She stands with both hands low, shoulders relaxed, eyes locked on Brittany. No wasted motion. No reaction to the crowd. No visible interest in the noise surrounding them.

John Phillips: "There is such a contrast between these two competitors. Brittany Reid is all motion, all energy, all heart on her sleeve. Kaida Shizuka is controlled, focused, and almost impossible to read."

Mark Bravo: "That might be the biggest challenge for Brittany right away. She feeds off reactions. She likes to get opponents moving, talking, chasing, biting on her speed. Kaida looks like she could watch a building fall over and just calmly check her watch."

The referee looks to the timekeeper.

The bell rings.

DING DING DING!

Brittany immediately comes out with a quick hop-step, clapping her hands once to wake the crowd up.

Brittany Reid: "Okay! Let's go!"

The Lisbon fans answer with a cheer, and Brittany smiles wider, circling to her left with fast, light footwork.

Kaida steps out more slowly.

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She does not circle as much as she angles. One step forward. One step slightly to the side. Her eyes do not leave Brittany's center line, reading her shoulders and hips instead of chasing the bounce in her feet.

John Phillips: "Brittany looking to stay light early. She knows she cannot stand still against Kaida."

Mark Bravo: "And Kaida knows Brittany does not want to stand still, so she is not chasing her. She is cutting off space. There is a difference."

Brittany darts forward with a quick hand feint.

Kaida barely reacts.

Brittany pulls back, eyebrows lifting as if impressed despite herself.

Brittany Reid: "Okay, wow. Like, super statue mode."

A few fans laugh near ringside, but Kaida gives her nothing. Brittany circles again, this time with a bit more speed. She dips low, then springs back upright, trying to draw Kaida into a reach.

Kaida takes one step forward.

Brittany backs off immediately, then claps again to reset herself.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid trying to bait Kaida into overcommitting, but Kaida is refusing to give her that opening."

Mark Bravo: "That is discipline. Brittany is used to making people react to the sparkle. Kaida is not biting on the sparkle."

The two finally close distance.

Brittany reaches for a collar-and-elbow tie-up, but Kaida shifts at the last moment and catches the wrist instead. The movement is clean and quick, turning Brittany's arm outward before Brittany can fully settle her feet.

Brittany's smile flickers as Kaida twists into a standing wristlock.

John Phillips: "Kaida gets control of the wrist first."

Mark Bravo: "And that is exactly where Brittany does not want to be. If Kaida starts taking away an arm, Brittany loses springboards, balance, rotation, all the stuff that makes her dangerous."

Kaida cranks the wrist once, then steps closer, applying pressure through the elbow and shoulder. Brittany

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drops into a quick forward roll to relieve the pressure, pops back up, and reverses with a wristlock of her own.

The crowd cheers the escape.

Brittany brightens immediately.

Brittany Reid: "Tada!"

Kaida looks at her trapped wrist.

Then at Brittany.

Then, without changing expression, Kaida steps through, rotates under the grip, and reverses again. This time she pulls Brittany in close and snaps a shoot kick into the thigh.

SMACK.

Brittany yelps and hops back, clutching her leg.

Brittany Reid: "Ow! Okay, freakin' rude!"

John Phillips: "That kick landed flush to the thigh!"

Mark Bravo: "And listen to Brittany. She can joke all she wants, but that one hurt. Kaida just sent the first warning shot."

Kaida steps forward again, measured and calm. Brittany circles away faster now, shaking out the leg and trying to make sure it still responds the way she needs it to.

The crowd claps for her, trying to pull her back into rhythm.

Brittany nods along with the claps and gives them a brave little smile.

Brittany Reid: "I'm good! Totally good! Leg still attached!"

Kaida closes the distance once more.

Brittany moves first this time, darting in with a quick arm drag attempt. Kaida plants and blocks the initial throw, but Brittany keeps moving, switching angles mid-motion and snapping Kaida over with a second effort that finally sends The Silent Blade to the mat.

The Lisbon crowd pops.

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John Phillips: "There is Brittany's speed! She had to adjust in motion, but she got Kaida over!"

Mark Bravo: "That was nice. First plan did not work, so she made a second plan before her feet hit the ground. That is the kind of improvisation that makes Brittany dangerous."

Kaida rolls through and returns to one knee immediately.

Brittany springs back to her feet and throws both hands up, encouraging the crowd.

Kaida rises slowly.

No anger.

No frustration.

Just a slight adjustment of the shoulders.

John Phillips: "Kaida taken down, but not rattled."

Mark Bravo: "That might bother Brittany more than getting yelled at. She got the move, got the reaction, and Kaida still looks like she is waiting for a bus."

Brittany notices it too. She tilts her head, then gives Kaida an exaggerated thumbs up.

Brittany Reid: "Super save! Like, very spooky, but great!"

Kaida steps forward again.

Brittany moves quickly, hitting the ropes and rebounding with a burst of speed. Kaida turns her hips, preparing for the attack, but Brittany ducks under a reaching arm, hits the opposite ropes, and comes back faster.

Kaida drops low for a sweep.

Brittany cartwheels over it cleanly, landing on her feet to a cheer from the crowd.

Kaida turns.

Brittany leaps.

Tilt-a-whirl head scissors.

Kaida is sent rolling across the mat and toward the ropes.

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John Phillips: "Beautiful head scissors by Brittany Reid! That gymnastic background on full display!"

Mark Bravo: "There it is. She turned Kaida's measured approach into a track meet for about five seconds, and that is where Brittany lives."

Brittany pops up again and pumps both fists, feeding off the sudden wave of cheers.

Kaida reaches the ropes and uses them to pull herself upright.

Brittany charges, perhaps a little too eager now.

Kaida sees her coming.

At the last second, Kaida ducks low and pulls the top rope down.

Brittany reacts fast enough to stop herself from flying over. She catches the top rope with both hands, swings her legs through the gap, and lands safely on the apron.

The crowd cheers the save.

John Phillips: "Great body control by Brittany! She avoided a dangerous spill to the floor."

Mark Bravo: "That is the cheer and gymnastics background right there. Most people go flying into the barricade. Brittany just turned disaster into a balance beam."

Brittany grins from the apron and points to her own feet.

Brittany Reid: "Stuck the landing like always!"

Kaida does not give her time to enjoy it.

The Silent Blade turns and fires a sudden rolling elbow through the ropes.

Brittany ducks just in time, the strike cutting through the space where her head had been.

Brittany responds with a quick shoulder through the ropes into Kaida's midsection, then grabs the top rope and springs upward.

She launches back into the ring with a springboard crossbody.

Kaida rolls through the impact.

Both women tumble, but Kaida uses the momentum to come up on top, trapping Brittany's arm and pressing

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a forearm across her jaw.

Referee: "One!"

Brittany kicks out quickly and scrambles away to one knee.

John Phillips: "Kaida rolled through! Brittany hit the springboard, but Kaida turned it into a cover!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the danger. Brittany can hit the flashy offense, but Kaida is always thinking about the next hold, the next counter, the next way to turn your momentum into her control."

Brittany gets back up, eyes wide now. She laughs once, partly from nerves, partly from excitement, and points at Kaida.

Brittany Reid: "Okay! You are, like, super good at being terrifying!"

Kaida rises to her feet.

Still silent.

The two women reset near the center of the ring, Brittany breathing quicker now, Kaida controlled and steady. The crowd buzzes louder, sensing the early feeling-out process beginning to sharpen into something more serious.

John Phillips: "Fast start from Brittany Reid, but Kaida Shizuka is already showing how quickly she can turn defense into control."

Mark Bravo: "This is exactly the kind of match Brittany needs and fears at the same time. She gets to show the world how fast she is. But Kaida only needs one opening to start cutting pieces away."

Brittany Reid backs toward the ropes, clapping once to pull the Lisbon crowd back into rhythm with her. She is breathing faster now, but the smile keeps trying to fight its way back onto her face. Across from her, Kaida Shizuka advances with that same quiet, deliberate patience.

Kaida does not rush.

She does not need to.

Brittany circles again, trying to stay light on her feet after the earlier kick to the thigh. She shakes the leg once, then bounces in place as if testing whether the spring is still there.

John Phillips: "This is where Brittany Reid has to be careful. She has had success when she has kept the match moving, but Kaida Shizuka has already found ways to stop that momentum and force Brittany into

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contact."

Mark Bravo: "And that kick to the thigh matters. Brittany can smile through it, joke through it, sparkle through it, whatever she wants. But if that leg starts slowing down, all those flips and springboards get a whole lot harder."

Brittany darts in quickly, feinting high before reaching for Kaida's wrist. Kaida turns her hand away and fires a shoot kick toward the same thigh.

This time, Brittany hops back before it lands clean.

Brittany Reid: "Nope! Learned that one!"

The crowd laughs and cheers.

Kaida's expression does not change.

She steps in again, faster this time, and Brittany moves with her, ducking under a reaching arm. Brittany hits the ropes and comes back low, looking for a head scissors transition, but Kaida catches her around the waist before she can fully rotate.

The crowd gasps.

Kaida plants.

Snap Saito suplex.

Brittany is thrown hard, landing high across the shoulders and upper back before rolling toward the corner in a heap.

John Phillips: "Snap Saito suplex! Kaida Shizuka caught Brittany in motion and dumped her hard!"

Mark Bravo: "That is exactly what Kaida wants. Brittany leaves the ground, Kaida finds the waist, and suddenly the highlight reel becomes a crash report."

Brittany rolls onto her stomach, eyes wide, one hand reaching behind her neck. The impact clearly shook her. Kaida rises smoothly and walks toward her, not with urgency, but with certainty.

Brittany tries to crawl toward the ropes, but Kaida catches the wrist and drags her back toward center.

John Phillips: "And now Kaida going right back to control."

Mark Bravo: "She is not going to let Brittany reset. That is the whole point. The longer Brittany gets to

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breathe, the more likely she turns this back into motion."

Kaida traps Brittany's arm against the mat with one knee, then reaches across the jaw, testing the angle for a choke. Brittany kicks her legs immediately, twisting her hips and slipping partly sideways before Kaida can fully cinch it in.

Kaida adjusts, moving with her.

Brittany rolls again.

Kaida shifts again.

The exchange becomes less flashy and more urgent, Brittany fighting not to be trapped while Kaida calmly eliminates escape routes one by one.

John Phillips: "Kaida may be looking for the early stages of that Sakura Clutch, that grounded cross-arm triangle choke with the body scissors."

Mark Bravo: "And if she gets that thing locked, Brittany is in serious trouble. She is fast. She is flexible. She is tough. But trapped in the center with Kaida wrapped around your neck? That smile disappears fast."

Brittany plants one foot against the mat and kicks backward, catching Kaida in the shoulder. It creates just enough room. Brittany rolls free and scrambles toward the ropes.

Kaida follows immediately and swings a kick toward the ribs.

Brittany ducks under it and pops up behind her.

She leaps onto Kaida's shoulders.

Victory roll.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Kaida kicks out and rolls backward to one knee.

Brittany springs up, pointing at the referee with wide eyes.

Brittany Reid: "That was, like, super close, right?"

The referee holds up two fingers.

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Brittany nods quickly.

Brittany Reid: "Okay! Cool! Love progress!"

John Phillips: "Brittany almost stole one there!"

Mark Bravo: "That is what makes her dangerous. She can look like she is just trying to survive, then suddenly she has your shoulders down."

Kaida rises and moves in again, sharper now. Brittany tries to beat her to the punch with a quick dropkick, but Kaida sidesteps. Brittany hits the mat, rolls through, and comes back up near the corner.

Kaida rushes in.

Brittany gets both boots up.

Kaida catches them.

For a split second, Brittany's eyes go huge.

Brittany Reid: "Ah crap."

Kaida pulls Brittany off the corner and drops her flat onto the mat. Brittany lands hard, but instantly kicks upward with both legs, catching Kaida in the chest and pushing her back.

Brittany kips up with a cheerleader snap and immediately staggers half a step from the earlier damage to the thigh.

John Phillips: "Brittany tried to kip up, but that leg is bothering her!"

Mark Bravo: "Kaida saw it too."

Kaida closes in with a sudden shoot kick to the thigh.

SMACK.

Brittany drops to one knee, grimacing.

Brittany Reid: "Okay, ow, ow, ow, super mean sequel!"

Kaida steps behind and grabs Brittany around the neck and arm, trying to drag her backward into control. Brittany throws a quick elbow behind her. Kaida absorbs it. Brittany throws another. Kaida releases just enough to reposition and fires a rolling elbow of her own.

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Brittany ducks at the last possible second.

Kaida spins through.

Brittany pops behind her and grabs the head.

She runs toward the ropes, springing off the middle strand for Slice of Heaven.

But Kaida shoves her off mid-rotation.

Brittany lands on her feet, stumbles, and turns around straight into a tiger feint knee through the ropes as Kaida uses the corner angle to swing her body and crack the knee into Brittany's jaw.

Brittany drops to the mat.

John Phillips: "Tiger feint knee by Kaida Shizuka! Brittany may be out!"

Mark Bravo: "That hit clean. That hit real clean."

Kaida hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Brittany kicks out.

The Lisbon crowd pops as Brittany rolls onto her side, blinking hard and clutching her jaw.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid stays alive!"

Mark Bravo: "She kicked out, but look at her. Kaida is starting to pile up damage now. Thigh, neck, jaw. That is not random."

Kaida gets to one knee and looks down at Brittany.

For a moment, she simply studies her.

Then Kaida slowly rises, reaches down, and pulls Brittany up by the wrist.

Brittany's legs wobble slightly beneath her. Kaida notices and immediately steps in with another sharp kick to the thigh.

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Brittany cries out and drops forward, catching herself against Kaida's shoulder.

Kaida hooks the head.

She lifts for another Saito-style throw.

Brittany flips through it.

She lands behind Kaida, stumbling on the bad leg but staying upright.

Kaida turns.

Brittany snaps a sudden Super Duper Kick upward, throwing her whole bodyweight into it and leaving her feet just enough to reach Kaida's mouth.

The kick connects.

Kaida staggers backward into the ropes.

John Phillips: "Super Duper Kick! Brittany caught Kaida!"

Mark Bravo: "She had to launch everything into that! That was desperation and accuracy at the same time!"

Brittany collapses to one knee after the kick, grabbing her thigh again. Kaida hangs against the ropes, dazed for the first time in the match.

The crowd begins clapping for Brittany.

Slow at first.

Then louder.

Brittany looks out at them and nods, breathing hard.

Brittany Reid: "Okay... yep... still attached... still cute... still fighting."

She pushes herself up, limping slightly, and charges toward Kaida.

Kaida tries to counter with a back body drop, but Brittany lands on the apron again. She grabs the top rope, springs up, and comes back in with a springboard hurricanrana.

Kaida is taken over and rolled through toward center.

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John Phillips: "Springboard hurricanrana! Brittany is finding that second wind!"

Mark Bravo: "But can she keep it going on one good leg? That is the question."

Brittany scrambles toward the corner, the crowd rising with her. She climbs to the middle rope first, then looks back at Kaida, who is starting to stir.

Brittany points to the top.

The Lisbon crowd cheers louder.

John Phillips: "Brittany may be thinking big here."

Mark Bravo: "She better think quick. Kaida is already moving."

Brittany starts climbing to the top rope, but the damaged leg slows her just enough.

Kaida rises and rushes forward.

She strikes Brittany's thigh with a sharp kick while Brittany is perched on the turnbuckle.

Brittany yelps and drops into a seated position on the top rope.

Kaida climbs to the second rope, immediately looking to hook her for a dangerous attack.

John Phillips: "Kaida has Brittany trapped up top!"

Mark Bravo: "This is bad. This is real bad."

Kaida hooks Brittany around the head and arm, trying to pull her forward.

Brittany fights back with a shot to the ribs.

Another.

Then a quick headbutt that catches Kaida more by surprise than force.

Kaida drops backward to the mat, landing on her feet but stumbling a step.

Brittany steadies herself on the top rope, breathing hard.

The crowd rises.

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Then the reaction suddenly changes.

It begins near the entrance aisle.

A wave of boos moving through the arena before the camera even finds the reason.

John Phillips: "Wait a second."

Mark Bravo: "Oh, come on."

The camera cuts toward the ramp.

Bianca Page steps out onto the stage.

No robe. No grand entrance. No Ace Andrews visible beside her. Just Bianca, dressed immaculately enough to make it clear she had no intention of blending into the background, standing at the top of the ramp with a smile that is as cold as it is satisfied.

The Lisbon crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page is here."

Mark Bravo: "Of course she is. Brittany Reid beat Bianca Page in Italy, called her out in France, and Bianca Page has the emotional maturity of a cracked mirror."

Brittany, still perched on the top rope, turns her head toward the ramp.

Her eyes widen.

Brittany Reid: "Seriously?! Like, right now?!"

Bianca lifts one hand and gives Brittany a tiny, mocking wave.

Bianca Page: "Hi, sweetheart."

The distraction costs Brittany a second too long.

Kaida rushes forward, springs to the second rope, and cracks Brittany with a sharp forearm to the jaw.

Brittany nearly falls backward off the turnbuckle, but grabs the top rope with both hands and barely saves herself.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page's presence just gave Kaida Shizuka the opening!"

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Mark Bravo: "Brittany cannot let Bianca get in her head! Not with Kaida standing in the ring!"

Kaida climbs again, hooking Brittany around the head.

Bianca starts down the ramp slowly, clapping with exaggerated politeness.

Bianca Page: "Don't mind me. I just wanted a better view of the fluke."

Brittany hears it.

Her face changes.

The bright smile drops away, replaced by a flash of real anger.

Brittany Reid: "It was not a fluke!"

Kaida pulls harder, trying to drag Brittany off the top rope.

Brittany suddenly fires a short kick downward into Kaida's chest.

Kaida drops from the ropes, landing hard on her feet and stumbling backward.

Brittany remains seated up top, now caught between the opponent in the ring and Bianca Page advancing from the aisle.

The referee turns toward Bianca and points sharply toward the back.

Referee: "Stay back! You are not part of this match!"

Bianca stops near the bottom of the ramp and places a hand over her chest in exaggerated innocence.

Bianca Page: "Me? I'm just watching. Is that illegal now?"

John Phillips: "Bianca Page has no business being out here."

Mark Bravo: "No, but she knows exactly what she is doing. She does not have to touch Brittany. She just has to make Brittany look at her."

Kaida shakes off the kick and turns back toward Brittany.

Brittany looks from Bianca to Kaida.

For a second, everything slows.

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Then Brittany chooses the match.

She leaps from the top rope.

Springboard-style missile dropkick from the corner angle, both feet catching Kaida in the chest and sending The Silent Blade crashing backward to the mat.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid refocuses and takes Kaida down!"

Mark Bravo: "That was important. She had every reason to stare at Bianca, and she still chose the fight."

Brittany lands hard and immediately grabs at her thigh again, the earlier damage continuing to slow her. She crawls toward Kaida and hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Kaida kicks out.

Bianca smiles at ringside, applauding with slow, insulting claps.

Bianca Page: "So close. Again."

Brittany pushes herself up to one knee and glares toward Bianca.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh, couldn't be be a bitch somewhere else?!"

The crowd cheers the line, but Kaida is already rising behind Brittany.

John Phillips: "Brittany has to stay on Kaida!"

Brittany turns around just in time as Kaida charges.

Kaida throws Silent Flash, the spinning back-kick aimed straight at Brittany's face.

Brittany ducks.

The kick cuts through air.

Kaida spins through and resets.

Brittany leaps for The Hornet's Sting.

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Kaida shoves her off before Brittany can fully catch the cutter.

Brittany lands on her feet, stumbles from the thigh, and backs toward the ropes nearest Bianca.

Bianca steps closer to the apron.

The referee sees it and moves toward her again.

Referee: "Back up! I am ordering you to the back right now or I am stopping this match!"

Bianca raises both hands, but her smile gives her away.

Bianca Page: "You cannot be serious right now."

Referee: "To the back. Now. Or this match does not continue."

The Lisbon crowd reacts loudly, a mix of boos at Bianca and a cheer of approval for the referee actually drawing a line. Bianca stares up at him, jaw tight, clearly running the calculation.

Then, with visible contempt, she turns and walks back up the ramp.

She does not hurry. Every step is slow and deliberate, the walk of someone making it clear this departure is on her terms, even when it is not. A few fans jeer her from behind the barricade. Bianca ignores them. She disappears through the entrance, and the ramp sits empty behind her.

John Phillips: "The referee has ejected Bianca Page from ringside, and she had no choice but to comply."

Mark Bravo: "She hated every step of that walk. You can tell. But she is not going to let a disqualification hand Brittany the win. That is not how Bianca operates."

Kaida approaches from behind Brittany, measuring her for the Rising Dragon.

She darts sideways before Kaida can fully grab her from behind, slipping under Kaida's reaching arm and rolling toward the center of the ring. Kaida turns smoothly, adjusting without panic, while Brittany pops up to one knee and immediately pushes herself back to her feet.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid knew Kaida was coming. She had to feel that pressure behind her."

Mark Bravo: "That is survival instinct right there. She got caught between Kaida and Bianca's mouth, and somehow she still found the exit."

Kaida advances, looking to close the distance again. Brittany fires a quick kick toward Kaida's leg, not with much power, but enough to make The Silent Blade stop and reset for half a second.

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Brittany uses that half-second.

She hits the ropes.

Kaida steps into her path.

Brittany ducks a clothesline, handsprings forward, and rebounds off the opposite side with a sudden dropkick that catches Kaida in the chest.

Kaida stumbles backward into the ropes.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid still has that burst! Even with the damage to the thigh, she is finding ways to move!"

Mark Bravo: "Short bursts. That is the key now. She cannot run a marathon on that leg, but she can still sprint through traffic."

Brittany scrambles up and looks toward the ramp again, expecting Bianca to still be there.

But the ramp is empty.

There is no Bianca Page at the bottom of the aisle.

No white and gold figure standing with smug satisfaction near the stage.

No Ace Andrews.

Nothing.

Brittany blinks.

Brittany Reid: "Wait, where did she--"

The boos start before the camera catches her.

They rise from the lower bowl, near the guardrail on the hard camera side, a sudden wave of hatred moving through the crowd as fans turn, point, and lean away from someone forcing her way into view.

John Phillips: "Wait a second. Wait a second, she is not on the ramp."

Mark Bravo: "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

The camera swings toward the crowd.

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There she is.

Bianca Page has come through the audience.

Not in full entrance mode. Not with the robe, the lights, the pageantry, or the carefully choreographed elegance. This is different. This is meaner. Bianca pushes her way to the guardrail, dressed immaculately but moving with none of the polished ceremony she usually demands. Her face is tight, her eyes locked on Brittany, and the crowd around her boos with open hostility as security tries to keep fans from crowding too close.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page came through the crowd! She has made her way to the guardrail!"

Mark Bravo: "That is not scouting, John. That is stalking with better wardrobe."

Bianca grips the top of the guardrail with both hands and leans over it, screaming toward the ring.

Bianca Page: "You thought I was done with you? You thought one lucky night made you special?"

Brittany turns fully now, her attention completely pulled toward Bianca.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh, seriously?! You came through the crowd? That is, like, so much effort just to be annoying!"

Bianca's expression hardens.

Bianca Page: "You are a joke! You are a novelty! You are a cheer routine with a contract!"

The crowd boos louder, some fans near Bianca shouting back at her. Bianca ignores them. Her entire focus is on Brittany.

Bianca Page: "You do not belong in my division!"

Brittany's face changes.

The smile disappears again.

Her jaw tightens.

And that is exactly what Bianca wanted.

John Phillips: "Bianca Page is trying to get into Brittany Reid's head again, and it is working!"

Mark Bravo: "Brittany has to turn around. She has to turn around right now."

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Kaida Shizuka is already behind her.

John Phillips: "Kaida may be lining up that pop-up high-angle knee!"

Mark Bravo: "And Bianca is right there at the guardrail. This is getting dangerous for Brittany."

Brittany glances once toward Bianca.

Bianca leans over the guardrail just enough to whisper loudly.

Bianca Page: "You don't belong here."

Brittany's jaw tightens.

Kaida reaches for her from behind.

The crowd shouts a warning.

Brittany's eyes flick forward.

She knows Kaida is there.

She also knows Bianca is close.

For a moment, the Killer Bee is trapped between the Silent Blade and the woman who refuses to let Italy go.

Brittany takes one breath.

Then she moves.

Brittany takes one breath.

Then she moves.

The Silent Blade rushes in and blasts Brittany across the upper back with a rolling elbow.

Brittany drops to her knees, the impact snapping through her body.

John Phillips: "Kaida capitalizes! Brittany took her eyes off the match!"

Mark Bravo: "And that is what Bianca wanted. She did not have to touch her. She just had to make Brittany look."

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Kaida grabs Brittany by the wrist and pulls her up into a sharp knee to the midsection. Brittany folds forward, and Kaida immediately catches her around the head and arm.

Snap Saito suplex.

Brittany crashes hard into the mat and rolls toward the ropes closest to Bianca's side of the building.

Bianca laughs from behind the guardrail.

Bianca Page: "There she is! There is the real Brittany Reid!"

Kaida does not look toward Bianca. She stays with the match, dragging Brittany away from the ropes by the ankle before dropping a knee across the back of Brittany's neck.

John Phillips: "Kaida Shizuka is staying focused, and Brittany Reid is in real trouble now."

Mark Bravo: "That is the difference. Bianca is chaos outside the ring. Kaida is discipline inside it. Brittany is getting attacked from both directions, mentally and physically."

Brittany reaches for the ropes, one hand stretching, fingers opening and closing. Kaida catches the arm and twists it behind Brittany's back, pressing her down chest-first into the canvas.

Brittany cries out as Kaida steps over and tries to pull her into another grounded control.

Referee: "Brittany, do you submit?"

Brittany Reid: "No! No, no, no!"

Bianca leans farther over the guardrail, shouting as loudly as she can.

Bianca Page: "Tap! Do what everyone already knows you should do!"

Brittany hears it and slaps the mat with her free hand.

Not tapping.

Trying to push herself up.

Brittany Reid: "I am not tapping because you yelled at me, you absolute discount princess!"

The crowd pops for the insult, but Kaida tightens the hold and shifts her weight, forcing Brittany's shoulder down again.

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John Phillips: "Brittany still has fight, but Kaida is grinding her down."

Mark Bravo: "And the longer this goes, the more Bianca gets to keep chirping from the guardrail. Brittany has to find a way out of both problems."

Kaida pulls Brittany up by the wrist and whips her toward the corner. Brittany hits hard, her damaged thigh buckling slightly as her back meets the turnbuckles.

Kaida charges.

Rope-hung double stomp attempt.

Brittany moves at the last second, dropping through the ropes and landing on the apron. Kaida catches herself on the ropes, avoiding a bad landing, then turns sharply as Brittany grabs the top rope and tries to spring back in.

Bianca screams again from the guardrail.

Bianca Page: "Look at me when I am talking to you!"

Brittany hesitates on the apron.

Just enough.

Kaida steps in and kicks the middle rope upward, snapping it into Brittany's ribs.

Brittany gasps and drops from the apron to the floor.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid is down to the floor! Kaida has taken firm control of this match thanks in part to Bianca Page's distraction!"

Mark Bravo: "And now Brittany is on the same side as Bianca. That is not good. That is not good at all."

Brittany lands near the barricade, one hand on her ribs, the other on her thigh. She pushes to one knee and looks up.

Bianca is right there, only the guardrail separating them.

The crowd surges around the moment, shouting, booing, phones raised as Brittany pulls herself upright.

The referee immediately moves to the ropes and begins warning Bianca from inside the ring.

Referee: "Back away from her! Back away from the rail!"

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Bianca ignores him.

Brittany steps closer, breathing hard, her face flushed with pain and frustration.

Brittany Reid: "What is your problem? Like, genuinely! Did I ruin your whole week by telling the truth?"

Bianca leans over the rail, eyes full of contempt.

Bianca Page: "You embarrassed me."

Brittany blinks, almost incredulous.

Brittany Reid: "No, sweetie, I beat you. Those are, like, different verbs."

The crowd cheers.

Bianca's hand tightens around the guardrail.

Bianca Page: "You got lucky. You do flips. You smile. You squeal. They cheer because they think you are cute. That does not make you competition."

Brittany steps closer until she is almost nose to nose with Bianca over the rail.

Brittany Reid: "Then why are you in the crowd screaming at me during someone else's match?"

That lands.

The fans around Bianca react immediately, a loud wave of approval breaking out as Bianca's expression flickers with anger.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid confronting Bianca Page at the guardrail, and she just asked the question everyone is thinking."

Mark Bravo: "Bianca hates that. She hates that because Brittany is right. If Brittany is such a joke, why can't Bianca leave her alone?"

Bianca raises her hand like she might try to slap Brittany over the guardrail, but security leans in from the aisle side and the referee points again from the ring.

Referee: "Do not touch her! Bianca, do not touch her!"

Brittany does not back away.

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Brittany Reid: "Go ahead. Like, prove my point some more."

Bianca's eyes narrow.

Behind Brittany, Kaida Shizuka has exited the ring.

Kaida drops silently to the floor and begins moving toward Brittany from behind. There is no rush in her face, but there is speed in her steps. She sees Brittany exposed. Distracted. Angry.

John Phillips: "Kaida is on the floor now. Brittany does not see her!"

Mark Bravo: "This is a terrible place for Brittany to be. Bianca in front, Kaida behind. She is in the wrong sandwich."

The crowd begins shouting warnings.

Brittany hears the shift.

Not the words at first.

Just the change in sound.

Her eyes flick toward the fans beside Bianca, who are all pointing past her shoulder.

Bianca sees Kaida coming and smiles.

Bianca Page: "Turn around."

Brittany's expression changes.

Not panic.

Realization.

Kaida rushes in from behind, launching forward with a sharp strike aimed at Brittany's back and neck near the guardrail.

Brittany drops and rolls out of the way at the last possible second.

Kaida's momentum carries her forward.

The strike misses Brittany completely.

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And Kaida Shizuka crashes straight into Bianca Page over the guardrail.

The impact is brutal.

Kaida's forearm and shoulder smash into Bianca's upper chest and jaw, knocking Bianca backward into the crowd-side security lane. Bianca's head snaps back, her arms flailing as fans scatter and security immediately rushes in.

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Kaida hit Bianca! Kaida hit Bianca by mistake!"

Mark Bravo: "Bianca's plan just blew up in her face! Literally! She got clocked!"

Bianca collapses behind the guardrail, stunned and furious, one hand clutching at her face while security forms a quick wall between her and the ringside area.

Kaida staggers off the impact, one hand catching the top of the barricade as she realizes what happened.

Brittany is already moving.

She springs up from the floor and grabs Kaida by the wrist, using every bit of adrenaline she has left to yank Kaida away from the guardrail and send her shoulder-first into the edge of the apron.

Kaida hits hard and drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "And Brittany Reid has an opening now!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the turning point! Bianca tried to ruin this match, and she just handed Brittany the biggest chance of the night!"

Brittany leans against the barricade for half a second, looking over at Bianca through the security wall.

Bianca is still dazed, still angry, still trying to sit up.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh... karma is, like, so athletic!"

The Lisbon crowd roars.

The referee is shouting from inside the ring now, ordering both competitors back in while continuing his count.

Referee: "Four!"

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Brittany turns away from Bianca and grabs Kaida, rolling her under the bottom rope.

Referee: "Five!"

Brittany slides in after her, still favoring the leg, still clutching at her ribs, but suddenly alive again.

Kaida pushes up to one knee, shaken from the apron collision and the missed attack at the rail.

Brittany grabs the ropes and pulls herself upright.

John Phillips: "Brittany has to capitalize now. She may not get another opening like this."

Mark Bravo: "This is where the match either ends or Kaida gets her balance back. Brittany has to go now."

Kaida rises and turns toward Brittany.

Brittany bursts forward with the bad leg screaming beneath her.

Kaida swings a desperate rolling elbow.

Brittany ducks under.

She catches Kaida's head in one smooth, sudden motion.

The Hornet's Sting.

The Diamond Cutter snaps Kaida face-first into the mat.

John Phillips: "Hornet's Sting! Brittany hit it!"

Mark Bravo: "Cover her! Cover her!"

Brittany rolls Kaida over and hooks the leg.

The crowd counts with the referee.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Kaida kicks out just before three.

The arena gasps.

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John Phillips: "Kaida kicks out! Kaida kicks out of The Hornet's Sting!"

Mark Bravo: "I thought that was it! Brittany thought that was it!"

Brittany sits up, eyes wide, both hands briefly on her head.

Then she looks toward the corner.

The crowd realizes what she is thinking before she fully moves.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid may have to go bigger."

Mark Bravo: "On that leg? After everything Kaida has done to it?"

Brittany nods to herself, crawling toward the corner. She pulls herself up by the ropes, limping badly now, but the fire is back in her eyes.

Outside the ring, Bianca Page is being held back by security, one hand still on her jaw, screaming through the pain and humiliation.

Bianca Page: "No! No, no, no! Get up, Kaida!"

Brittany hears her.

She looks over her shoulder from the turnbuckles.

Brittany Reid: "This one's for you too, babe!"

The crowd erupts as Brittany starts climbing.

Kaida lies near center ring, stirring but not yet aware enough to stop her.

Brittany reaches the top rope, one hand gripping the post, the bad leg trembling beneath her.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid is going to the top! She is thinking Queen Bee!"

Mark Bravo: "Double-rotation moonsault. If she hits it, this place is going to explode. If she misses it, she may not get up."

Brittany steadies herself.

Bianca screams from behind the guardrail.

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The crowd rises.

Kaida still has not moved far enough.

Brittany takes one more breath.

Then she launches.

Brittany Reid leaves the top rope.

For one suspended second, the MEO Arena seems to hold its breath.

Her body turns once.

Then again.

The Queen Bee.

Brittany lands across Kaida Shizuka with the full force of the double-rotation moonsault, the impact driving the air from both women as the ring shakes beneath them.

John Phillips: "Queen Bee! Queen Bee connects!"

Mark Bravo: "She hit it! On one good leg, she hit the Queen Bee!"

Brittany bounces slightly off the impact and rolls onto her side, clutching her ribs and thigh for a fraction of a second. The pain nearly steals the cover from her.

Then instinct takes over.

She throws herself back across Kaida's body, hooking both legs as tightly as she can.

The crowd rises with the referee's hand.

Referee: "One!"

Bianca Page screams from behind the guardrail, still being held back by security.

Bianca Page: "No!"

Referee: "Two!"

Kaida's shoulder twitches, but Brittany tightens the cradle, squeezing every bit of remaining strength into the

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pin.

Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid wins! Brittany Reid wins in Portugal!"

Mark Bravo: "Bianca Page tried to ruin it, Kaida made the mistake, and The Killer Bee just turned the whole thing into another win!"

Brittany rolls off Kaida and collapses onto her back, both arms spread wide across the canvas, chest rising and falling rapidly. Her face twists with pain first, then disbelief, then that bright, exhausted smile that has quickly become familiar to UTA fans.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... Brittany Reid!"

The crowd cheers louder as Brittany sits up, one hand pressed against her thigh, the other raised shakily into the air. The referee moves in and helps her to her feet, lifting her wrist as "Catch Me If You Can" begins to hit through the arena speakers again.

Brittany hops once on the bad leg and immediately regrets it, wincing as she steadies herself against the referee.

Brittany Reid: "Okay, bad idea! Still cute, though!"

The camera cuts to Bianca Page behind the guardrail.

Bianca is furious.

Her hair is slightly disheveled from the accidental shot by Kaida. One hand is still pressed against her jaw, her eyes locked on Brittany with absolute venom. Security keeps her from climbing the rail, but Bianca points toward the ring like she is making a promise.

Bianca Page: "This is not over! Do you hear me? This is not over!"

John Phillips: "Bianca Page tried to insert herself into this match, and it backfired spectacularly. Kaida Shizuka accidentally took Bianca out at the guardrail, and that gave Brittany Reid the opening she needed."

Mark Bravo: "That is the beautiful thing about wrestling karma, John. Sometimes it takes weeks. Sometimes it comes flying at you in the shape of Kaida Shizuka's forearm."

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Inside the ring, Kaida Shizuka rolls to one side, still dazed from the Hornet's Sting and Queen Bee combination. She slowly pushes herself to one knee, her expression as stoic as ever, but her body tells the story. The missed attack at ringside cost her control. Brittany took advantage. The match was gone before Kaida could correct the mistake.

Brittany turns toward Kaida, still breathing hard.

For a second, she hesitates.

Then she gives Kaida a small, respectful nod.

Kaida looks up at her.

No smile.

No anger.

Just a cold, unreadable stare.

Then Kaida slowly lowers her head in the faintest return of acknowledgment before rolling under the bottom rope and dropping to the floor.

John Phillips: "There is a measure of respect from Brittany Reid after a very hard-fought match."

Mark Bravo: "And Kaida might not like the result, but she knows what happened. She made one mistake on the floor. Brittany made her pay for it."

Brittany turns back toward the guardrail.

Bianca is still there, still furious, still pointing, still shouting over security and the fans around her.

Brittany limps toward the ropes closest to Bianca, one hand on her thigh, the other gripping the top rope. She leans over just enough to look directly at her.

Brittany Reid: "Omigosh, you are now, like, zero-for-two at ruining my life. That is literally so embarrassing for you!"

The Lisbon crowd explodes with laughter and cheers.

Bianca's face hardens further.

Bianca Page: "You are going to regret this."

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Brittany gives her a bright, exhausted smile and a tiny finger wave.

Brittany Reid: "Put it in your diary!"

Mark Bravo: "I love this kid. I do. She is going to get herself hurt, but I love this kid."

John Phillips: "Brittany Reid continues to build momentum in UTA, and the issue with Bianca Page is only getting more personal."

Security finally begins guiding Bianca away from the guardrail, though she resists every step, still shouting back toward the ring. The fans around her rain boos down while a few point at their jaws, mocking the shot she took from Kaida by mistake.

Bianca swats at the air, disgusted by all of them, before disappearing back into the aisleway through the crowd.

In the ring, Brittany climbs carefully onto the middle turnbuckle. The earlier bounce is gone, replaced by a tired, careful climb, but the smile remains. She raises both arms in a cheerleader pose, then winces and grabs her thigh again.

Brittany Reid: "Worth it!"

The crowd cheers again.

John Phillips: "A huge win for Brittany Reid, who had to deal with Kaida Shizuka's precision, a damaged leg, and an unwanted appearance from Bianca Page."

Mark Bravo: "And she still found a way. That is the story. Brittany Reid is still new here, but every week she keeps proving she is not just bright colors and big energy. She can take a beating, think on her feet, and when somebody opens the door, she flies right through it."

Brittany steps down carefully from the turnbuckle and limps across the ring, still waving to the fans. The referee checks on her leg, but she gives him a quick thumbs up.

Brittany Reid: "Totally fine! Mostly fine! Like, eighty-seven percent fine!"

The camera catches Kaida Shizuka at ringside beginning her walk up the ramp, one hand briefly touching her jaw as she glances back toward the ring. Her expression remains unreadable, but there is no mistaking the frustration in the pause.

Brittany watches her go, then looks again toward the section where Bianca disappeared.

The smile fades just slightly.

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Not gone.

Just tempered.

Because Brittany Reid may have won the match.

But Bianca Page made sure the issue is far from over.

John Phillips: "The Killer Bee survives The Silent Blade, and Bianca Page may have just made an enemy who is not going away quietly."

Mark Bravo: "And if Bianca thought Brittany was annoying before, wait until Brittany has a win, momentum, and a reason to keep buzzing around her."

Brittany's music continues as she gives the Lisbon crowd one last wave, then limps toward the ropes, still smiling through the pain while the fans chant her name.

The broadcast fades from the ring on Brittany Reid standing tall, one hand raised, the other pressed against her aching thigh, victorious in Portugal.

Concern

The camera cuts backstage.

Emily Hightower sits alone on a production crate near the gorilla position, tightening fresh tape around her wrists. Bruising still lingers around one shoulder from last week, while a monitor overhead quietly plays highlights from earlier in the show. Stagehands and crew members move through the hallway around her, but nobody really bothers her.

A few seconds later, Sol Azteca steps into frame.

Black hoodie. Gear bag over one shoulder. Mask on, as always.

She slows when she notices Emily sitting there alone.

Sol Azteca: "You okay?"

Emily gives a short laugh through her nose without looking up.

Not amused.

Just tired.

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Emily Hightower: "Yeah."

She pulls the tape tighter around her wrist.

Emily Hightower: "Learned my lesson."

Sol leans lightly against the nearby wall, studying her for a second.

Sol Azteca: "That does not sound like you."

Emily finally looks up at her.

Emily Hightower: "Maybe you don't know me as good as you think you do."

The hallway goes quiet between them for a moment after that.

Not hostile.

Just heavier than their last conversation.

Sol nods slightly, accepting the shot without pushing back immediately.

Sol Azteca: "Maybe."

A small shrug.

Sol Azteca: "But I know what I watched last week."

Emily looks away again, focusing back on the tape around her wrist.

Sol Azteca: "You wrestled really good."

That actually gets Emily to glance back up again.

Sol motions vaguely toward the monitor overhead.

Sol Azteca: "For the first part of that match especially. You looked calmer."

Another small shrug.

Sol Azteca: "More like yourself."

Emily stares at her for another second before shaking her head lightly.

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Emily Hightower: "And what'd that get me?"

Sol Azteca: "It almost got you a win."

Emily Hightower: "Almost don't mean shit around here."

That line comes out faster than Emily probably intended.

More bitter.

More frustrated.

Sol notices it immediately but keeps her voice calm.

Sol Azteca: "No. But it still mattered."

Emily stands from the crate now, rolling one shoulder carefully before grabbing her water bottle off the floor beside her.

Emily Hightower: "See, that's the thing."

She twists the cap loose.

Emily Hightower: "You still think this place works like that."

Sol Azteca: "Works like what?"

Emily takes a drink first before answering.

Emily Hightower: "Like if you're good enough, eventually everything balances out."

She shakes her head.

Emily Hightower: "My dad spent my whole life tellin me this business eats decent people alive."

A pause.

Emily Hightower: "And last week?"

Emily looks down at the bottle in her hand for a second before continuing.

Emily Hightower: "He was right about one thing."

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Sol stays quiet, listening.

Emily Hightower: "Nobody came to save me."

That line hangs in the hallway for a second.

And for the first time since walking over, Sol's expression shifts slightly behind the mask.

Not disagreement.

Concern.

Emily notices it.

Emily Hightower: "Everybody always says they got your back in this business till things actually go bad."

Sol Azteca: "I do not think that means you stop trusting people."

Emily Hightower: "No?"

Emily gives another tired laugh.

Emily Hightower: "Cause right now trustin people seems like a really good way to get your ass kicked."

That lands harder than Emily intended.

You can tell immediately after she says it.

Sol notices too.

But she still does not get defensive.

Sol Azteca: "I know."

Emily looks surprised by how quickly Sol admits it.

Sol Azteca: "But I also know you are changing the way you wrestle because of it."

Emily's expression tightens slightly.

Sol Azteca: "You are angrier now."

A pause.

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Sol Azteca: "And I do not think that is helping you either."

Emily stares at Sol for another second before grabbing her bag off the floor.

Emily Hightower: "Maybe bein nice ain't helped me much either."

That one sounds closer to David again.

Sol hears it immediately.

This time she does not hide the concern in her voice.

Sol Azteca: "That sounds more like him than you."

Emily's jaw tightens.

Not because she disagrees.

Because she knows exactly what Sol means.

Emily Hightower: "Maybe I am just tired of everybody thinkin they know who I'm supposed to be."

A pause.

Emily looks toward the entrance to gorilla, then back at Sol.

Emily Hightower: "Tonight, if I win..."

Her voice lowers slightly.

Emily Hightower: "I need it to be mine."

The tension hangs there for another second before somebody offscreen calls for Emily's match.

Emily starts walking toward gorilla before stopping beside Sol for half a second.

Emily Hightower: "I know you're tryin."

She says it sincerely.

But there is distance there now.

Emily disappears down the hallway toward the arena while Sol stays where she is, watching her go with

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growing concern.

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.

Voiceover: "In UTA, championships are not handed out."

Clips flash across the screen in rapid succession.

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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 Knox 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 impact shots from the World Tour.

Voiceover: "At International Affair, UTA presents the most dangerous match in company history."

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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."

A shot of champions looking over their shoulders.

Voiceover: "No challenger is guaranteed."

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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.

Voiceover: "Most leave with nothing."

A final graphic appears.

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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.

Dahlia Cross vs. Emily Hightower

The broadcast returns to ringside inside the MEO Arena, where the Lisbon crowd is still restless after the emotional backstage exchange between Emily Hightower and Sol Azteca. The ring has been reset, the referee stands near the ropes, and the lights begin to shift toward a deep purple glow.

John Phillips: "Welcome back to Portugal. And Mark, after what we just saw backstage, this next match feels even heavier than it already did."

Mark Bravo: "Emily Hightower is carrying a lot into this one, John. Last week she tried to win on her own and got robbed. Earlier tonight, Sol Azteca tried to reach her, but I don't know if Emily is in a place where she wants to be reached."

John Phillips: "And unfortunately for Emily, she is not walking into an easy matchup. Dahlia Cross is a cruel, methodical technician who loves exploiting pain, hesitation, and emotion."

Mark Bravo: "That is the worst kind of opponent for somebody whose emotions are already running hot. Dahlia Cross will not just attack your arm. She will attack the reason you extended it."

The house lights drop lower.

Purple lights begin to flash in slow, slinking pulses across the stage. A trip-hop rhythm crawls through the arena speakers, low and smoky, as the entrance screen fills with violet smoke curling around thorned vines.

"Venom" by Little Simz begins to pulse through the MEO Arena.

The crowd boos as Dahlia Cross steps through the curtain.

She appears beneath the purple light with a violet scarf dragging loosely from one hand, her chin tipped down, her eyes lifted toward the ring. The look on her face is not rage. It is amusement. The kind of quiet amusement that makes every cheer against her feel like something she is studying for later use.

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John Phillips: "Here comes Dahlia Cross, The Violet Viper, from Manchester, England."

Mark Bravo: "Look at her. She knows exactly what kind of night this is for Emily Hightower, and I guarantee she cannot wait to make it worse."

Dahlia begins her walk down the ramp slowly, almost lazily, dragging the violet scarf behind her like she is already trailing poison across the floor. Fans near the barricade boo and shout, but she barely acknowledges them. When one fan leans too close, Dahlia turns her head just enough to sneer, then continues on.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross is an elite mat grappler with a nasty streak. She manipulates joints, targets weak limbs, and she does not respect clean breaks."

Mark Bravo: "That is putting it politely. Dahlia smiles while choking people. She does not just want to win. She wants you to know exactly when she decided you were done."

Dahlia reaches ringside and pauses near the steps. She twirls the scarf once around her wrist, then lets it fall away into the hands of a ringside attendant without looking at them.

She climbs the steps slowly and steps onto the apron, turning her head toward the crowd with a faint, wicked smile. The boos rise again.

Dahlia bends through the ropes and enters the ring, then walks to the center. She rolls one wrist, then the other, flexing her fingers as if already deciding which joint she intends to take home.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross has said before that she studies pain for fun, and tonight Emily Hightower is giving her plenty to study."

Mark Bravo: "Emily's shoulder was bruised from last week. Her pride was bruised worse. Dahlia is going to test both."

Dahlia backs into her corner, one arm draped over the top rope. Her music fades as she leans her head back against the turnbuckle, eyes fixed on the entrance stage.

For a moment, the arena waits.

Then the lights warm.

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

The crowd reaction changes immediately, cheers rising through the MEO Arena, but there is uncertainty woven into them now. This is not the same uncomplicated reaction Emily Hightower might have gotten weeks ago. The fans want to believe in her. They are not entirely sure where she is standing anymore.

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At the top of the stage, headlights flare across the entrance set.

Emily Hightower steps through the curtain.

She does not come out smiling.

She does not slap the stage, fire herself up, or throw her arms wide to invite the roar.

She walks out with her jaw set, wrists taped, shoulders squared, and a look in her eyes that feels colder than usual. The all-American smile is nowhere to be found. This is not full Hightower cruelty yet, but there is something harder in her posture. Something less forgiving.

John Phillips: "There is Emily Hightower. And you can see it already, Mark. She looks different tonight."

Mark Bravo: "She looks like somebody who has been thinking all week about what almost got taken from her. Not just the match. The meaning of the match."

A few steps behind Emily, David Hightower emerges.

Calm. Still. Eyes forward.

Then Buck Hightower steps out beside him, restless and tight-jawed, shoulders rolling like he is already fighting the urge to walk straight to the ring.

Dakota Hightower comes last, quieter than Buck, her expression softer but watchful. She scans the ring, then Dahlia, then Emily, reading all of it.

John Phillips: "And there are David, Buck, and Dakota Hightower. Once again, the family is here."

Mark Bravo: "Here, yes. But look where they are stopping."

Emily takes two steps forward, then pauses.

Behind her, David stops near the stage edge.

Buck stops too, though every part of him looks like he hates it.

Dakota remains beside them, hands low, eyes still on Emily.

Emily glances back over her shoulder.

David gives her nothing but a small, unreadable nod.

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Emily turns forward again.

Then she walks to the ring alone.

John Phillips: "Same visual as last week. The Hightowers are present, but they are not coming to ringside. They are not getting directly involved."

Mark Bravo: "And that makes this feel like another test. Emily wants the win to be hers. David is letting her find out what that costs."

Emily moves down the ramp without touching the hands reaching over the barricade. She hears the cheers, but she does not feed off them the same way. Her attention is fixed almost entirely on Dahlia Cross.

Dahlia watches from the ring with a slow, poisonous smile.

Dahlia Cross: "Rough week, love?"

Emily hears it as she reaches ringside.

She stops at the bottom of the ramp and looks up at Dahlia.

Emily Hightower: "Ring the bell and find out."

The crowd reacts to the edge in Emily's voice. Dahlia's smile widens slightly, like she has already found the bruise she wants to press.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross trying to get under Emily's skin before the match even begins."

Mark Bravo: "And Emily answered, but listen to that answer. That was not calm confidence. That was a warning."

Emily climbs onto the apron and steps through the ropes. She does not look back toward the stage right away. She walks straight to her corner and grips the top rope with both hands, leaning forward, breathing through her nose.

The camera cuts back to the stage.

David Hightower stands with his arms folded.

Buck paces one step to the left, then stops, then paces one step back.

Dakota watches Emily closely, her expression difficult to read. Concern is there, but so is recognition. She can see the change too.

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John Phillips: "David looks calm. Buck looks restless. Dakota looks like she is watching Emily more than the match itself."

Mark Bravo: "Because this is not just about whether Emily wins. It is about how she wins, how she handles it, and what version of herself walks out the other side."

The referee steps into the center and checks with Dahlia first.

Dahlia slowly extends both arms, smiling as if the official's instructions are more of a polite suggestion than anything she intends to obey.

The referee turns to Emily.

Emily gives one short nod.

No words.

No smile.

The referee looks to the timekeeper.

The bell rings.

DING DING DING!

John Phillips: "And we are underway. Emily Hightower versus Dahlia Cross."

Mark Bravo: "This may tell us more about Emily Hightower than any match she has had so far."

Dahlia steps out of her corner with both hands low, circling slowly. Emily comes out faster than expected, closing the distance immediately.

Dahlia lifts one hand for a cautious tie-up.

Emily does not take it.

She drives a heavy forearm straight into Dahlia's jaw.

The crowd pops as Dahlia staggers back a step, surprised more than badly hurt.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower starting with a forearm, and that is exactly what we mean when we say she looks different."

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Mark Bravo: "No feeling-out process. No clean wristlock. No patience. She just hit Dahlia in the mouth."

Dahlia touches her jaw, then smiles.

Dahlia Cross: "There she is."

Emily steps in again and throws another forearm. Dahlia ducks this one, slips behind, and catches Emily by the wrist, twisting quickly into a hammerlock. Emily grunts as Dahlia torques the shoulder, immediately targeting the lingering damage from last week.

John Phillips: "Dahlia right to that shoulder. That bruising was visible earlier tonight, and Dahlia Cross noticed."

Mark Bravo: "Of course she noticed. Dahlia sees pain the way most people see blinking signs."

Dahlia wrenches the arm higher. Emily turns with it, grimaces, and backs Dahlia toward the ropes with pure force. The referee calls for a break as Dahlia's back meets the strands.

Referee: "Break! Emily, break!"

Emily does not release immediately.

She holds the pressure, jaw tight, shoulder trembling against the torque.

Referee: "One! Two! Three!"

Emily finally breaks at three and a half, stepping back only after the official gets between them.

John Phillips: "Emily was slower to break clean there."

Mark Bravo: "That is what I am watching. She is still within the rules, but she is pushing the edges harder tonight."

Dahlia smirks through the ropes and raises both hands as if Emily is the unreasonable one.

Dahlia Cross: "Temper."

Emily rushes back in.

Dahlia drops low and catches her with a leg sweep, taking Emily off her feet. Emily hits the mat and immediately starts to sit up, but Dahlia snaps forward with a single-leg dropkick to the side of Emily's shoulder.

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Emily rolls onto her side, clutching the arm.

John Phillips: "Dahlia baits the aggression, then punishes the shoulder again."

Mark Bravo: "That is exactly why emotions are dangerous against Dahlia Cross. She wants you to overcommit. She wants you angry enough to make a straight line out of yourself."

Dahlia grabs Emily's wrist and twists it hard against the mat, kneeling beside her. Emily clenches her teeth and plants one boot, trying to push up. Dahlia shifts her knee across Emily's shoulder blade and pulls back on the arm, forcing a sharp cry of pain from Emily.

The camera cuts to the stage.

Buck leans forward immediately, fists clenched.

Dakota's eyes narrow.

David does not move.

John Phillips: "There is the first real look at the Hightowers. Buck wants to move already."

Mark Bravo: "But he won't. Not unless David lets him, and David is not letting him. Emily asked for this. They are making her live in it."

Emily looks up the ramp for half a second.

Just half a second.

David remains still.

Buck remains held back by nothing but the family's decision.

Dakota watches, quieter than the others, but her eyes stay locked on Emily's face.

Emily's expression hardens.

She plants her free hand on the mat and begins powering up under Dahlia's grip.

John Phillips: "Emily looked to the ramp, and again, nobody moved."

Mark Bravo: "That is becoming part of the match. Every time she looks, they are still there. Close enough to see. Too far away to save her."

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Dahlia tries to keep the hold, but Emily gets to one knee, then both feet. Dahlia keeps the wrist and twists again, but Emily steps into her and blasts her with a short headbutt.

Dahlia stumbles backward.

Emily follows with a second headbutt that sends Dahlia into the corner.

The referee steps in, warning Emily immediately.

Referee: "Watch the head, Emily!"

Emily Hightower: "I'm watchin it."

Emily drives a shoulder into Dahlia's midsection.

Then another.

Then a third, harder than the first two.

Dahlia folds forward, the smile briefly wiped from her face. Emily backs away only when the referee's count reaches four.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower is rougher tonight. There is no question."

Mark Bravo: "And not evil. Not yet. But hardened? Absolutely. She is wrestling like somebody trying to prove she does not need anyone, even if she has to break something to do it."

Emily grabs Dahlia by the wrist and whips her hard across the ring. Dahlia hits the opposite corner back-first. Emily charges in with a corner splash, crushing Dahlia against the buckles.

Dahlia stumbles out.

Emily hits the ropes.

Big boot.

Dahlia goes down hard.

John Phillips: "Hit And Run! Emily connects with the splash and the big boot!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the power and the grit. That is what Emily can do when she gets rolling."

Emily drops into the cover, hooking the leg tightly.

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Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Dahlia kicks out.

Emily sits up immediately, frustration flashing across her face.

The kickout bothered her more than it should have.

John Phillips: "Dahlia kicks out, and look at Emily's reaction."

Mark Bravo: "That is the emotion running hot. She is closer than last week already, but every time Dahlia survives, Emily takes it personally."

Emily pulls Dahlia up by the hair before correcting herself and grabbing the wrist instead. The referee catches the brief hair pull and warns her.

Referee: "Emily, watch the hair."

Emily shoots him a look.

Emily Hightower: "I fixed it."

Dahlia uses that tiny distraction to drive a palm thrust into Emily's throat.

Emily staggers backward, coughing.

John Phillips: "Palm thrust to the throat by Dahlia! The referee was checking Emily and Dahlia struck right through the opening."

Mark Bravo: "Dahlia Cross does not care about fair. She cares about timing."

Dahlia rises, grabs Emily by the damaged arm, and yanks her shoulder-first into the turnbuckle pad. Emily hits with a grunt, and Dahlia immediately follows her in, pressing one knee across Emily's throat in the corner.

Then she smiles.

Referee: "Dahlia! Out of the corner!"

Dahlia keeps the knee there, one hand holding the top rope, the other lightly brushing Emily's hair away from her face like the whole thing is intimate and cruel.

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

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

Dahlia Cross: "She walked into me."

The crowd boos heavily.

Emily slumps slightly in the corner, one hand at her throat, the other holding the shoulder.

She looks toward the ramp again.

David watches.

Buck paces in place.

Dakota looks like she wants to say something, but does not.

None of them move.

John Phillips: "Emily is struggling now, and once again, the Hightowers are watching from a distance."

Mark Bravo: "David is not saving her. Buck is not saving her. Dakota is not saving her. That is the point. That is the test. And you can see Emily realizing it every time she looks up that ramp."

Dahlia turns Emily out of the corner and snaps her down with a leg sweep, then floats over quickly into a grounded kimura attempt. Emily immediately tries to roll, but Dahlia grapevines the leg and starts isolating the arm.

John Phillips: "Dahlia may be looking for Violet Vice early!"

Mark Bravo: "If she gets that grounded kimura with the leg grapevine fully set, Emily's shoulder may not survive it."

Emily grits her teeth, reaches out with her free hand, and claws toward the ropes.

Dahlia smiles as she pulls back on the arm.

Dahlia Cross: "Tap fast, darling."

Emily's face twists with pain.

She looks at the ropes.

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Then up the ramp.

David does not move.

Buck's jaw tightens.

Dakota watches Emily's hand, almost willing it toward the ropes.

Emily stops looking at them.

She plants her boots.

Then she starts dragging both herself and Dahlia toward the bottom rope by force.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower is pulling both of them toward the ropes! That is raw strength!"

Mark Bravo: "That is country strong, junkyard stubborn, and emotionally unstable in a helpful direction!"

Emily reaches.

Dahlia pulls back.

Emily snarls and lunges one more inch.

Her fingertips catch the bottom rope.

Referee: "Rope break! Dahlia, break the hold!"

Dahlia does not release.

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

Dahlia breaks at four, rolling away with that same cruel smile.

Emily pulls herself closer to the ropes, breathing hard, anger now replacing pain.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross using every bit of that count."

Mark Bravo: "And Emily saw it. You can see it in her face. Every shortcut Dahlia takes is pushing Emily closer to something she may not be able to pull back from."

Dahlia stands and shakes out her hands, circling Emily while the crowd boos. Emily pulls herself up with the ropes, eyes narrowed, breathing heavy through her nose.

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Dahlia steps in to grab the arm again.

Emily suddenly bites her hand.

The crowd gasps and pops at the same time as Dahlia screams and yanks backward.

John Phillips: "Emily just bit Dahlia Cross!"

Mark Bravo: "Well, she is The Junkyard Bitch. That warning is printed right there on the label."

The referee immediately gets between them, warning Emily sharply.

Referee: "Emily! You cannot bite her!"

Emily wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist, not apologizing.

Emily Hightower: "She put her hand there."

Dahlia backs away, clutching her hand, furious now. The amusement is not gone, but it is sharper. More venomous.

Dahlia Cross: "You little animal."

Emily steps away from the ropes.

Emily Hightower: "Yeah."

She lunges forward.

Dahlia tries to slip out, but Emily catches her around the waist and drives her backward into the corner with a hard shoulder. Dahlia's spine hits the buckles, and Emily immediately unloads with short, heavy body shots.

One.

Two.

Three.

The referee starts counting again, but Emily keeps throwing until four, each shot more forceful than the last.

John Phillips: "Emily is pushing every count tonight."

Mark Bravo: "That is the difference. Last week she wrestled clean and controlled early. Tonight, every break

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is late. Every shot has a little more behind it. She is not gone yet, but she is closer to the edge than she wants to admit."

Emily finally backs away, breathing hard, eyes locked on Dahlia.

Dahlia slumps in the corner, one hand on the ropes, the other still shaking out the bitten fingers.

Emily glances once more toward the stage.

David watches without expression.

Buck nods faintly now, approving of the roughness.

Dakota notices Buck's nod, then looks back at Emily with concern.

John Phillips: "Buck did not move, but he saw that. And I think he liked it."

Mark Bravo: "David may be testing Emily, but Buck is feeling that Hightower blood wake up in her. Dakota, though? I am not sure she likes where this is going."

Emily turns back to Dahlia and closes in again.

The match is still hers to win.

But every second is starting to look less like proof of independence and more like a fight for what kind of Hightower Emily is willing to become.

Emily closes in again, but Dahlia Cross is no longer smiling like she was at the start.

The bite changed something.

Not enough to make Dahlia panic.

Enough to make her meaner.

Emily reaches into the corner, grabbing Dahlia by the wrist to pull her out. Dahlia suddenly hooks the top rope with her free arm, stops her own momentum, and drives a back elbow into Emily's mouth during the break.

The shot lands sharp and quick, hidden just enough by the angle of the referee's body.

John Phillips: "Back elbow by Dahlia Cross, and I am not sure the referee saw how cleanly that caught Emily in the mouth."

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Mark Bravo: "Dahlia does not respect breaks. That was on the scouting report in bold letters."

Emily staggers backward, touching her lip. Her fingers come away with a faint smear of red.

Dahlia notices.

The smile returns.

Dahlia Cross: "There we are."

Emily looks at the blood on her fingers.

Then at Dahlia.

Then she charges.

Dahlia is ready. She ducks low and catches Emily with a drop-toe-hold, sending her throat-first across the middle rope. Emily snaps against the cable, and Dahlia immediately drops her weight across Emily's upper back, pressing her down against the strand.

Referee: "Dahlia! Off the ropes!"

Dahlia leans in close behind Emily's ear.

Dahlia Cross: "You are making this very easy."

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

Dahlia releases at four, hands raised, all innocence and venom. Emily drops off the rope and rolls onto her side, coughing hard as the crowd boos.

John Phillips: "Again Dahlia uses the full count, and again Emily's emotion put her in position to be punished."

Mark Bravo: "That is the story right now. Emily is stronger. Emily is meaner tonight. But Dahlia is using that heat against her."

The camera cuts to the stage.

Buck Hightower takes half a step forward, jaw tight, hands flexing at his sides. David does not even need to touch him. Buck stops himself and looks back at Emily, nostrils flaring.

Dakota stands slightly behind them, her eyes narrowed in concern. She is not watching Dahlia now. She is

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watching Emily's reactions. Every flare of anger. Every late break. Every look toward the stage.

John Phillips: "Buck is fighting himself up there."

Mark Bravo: "He wants to help. Or hurt somebody. With Buck, those two things probably feel real similar."

Back in the ring, Dahlia drags Emily up by the wrist and twists the damaged arm again. Emily fires a forearm with her free hand. Dahlia absorbs it, keeps the arm, and snaps another kick into Emily's shoulder.

Emily drops to one knee.

Dahlia steps around her, pulling the wrist across her own body and planting one boot beside Emily's hip.

John Phillips: "Dahlia continuing to attack that arm and shoulder. She wants to take away Emily's power, take away the bull hammer elbow, take away Total Loss if she can."

Mark Bravo: "And maybe take away Emily's patience while she's at it. Dahlia is attacking the shoulder and the temper."

Dahlia yanks Emily forward, forcing her face-down to the mat, then steps over the arm and bends it back in a modified armbar. Emily immediately reaches for the ropes, but Dahlia shifts her hips and drags her just far enough away.

Emily slams her free fist into the canvas.

Once.

Twice.

Not tapping.

Fighting.

Referee: "Emily, do you submit?"

Emily Hightower: "No!"

Dahlia bends the arm farther and leans close enough for Emily to hear her over the noise.

Dahlia Cross: "Maybe your family knows better than to help you."

Emily's eyes snap open.

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That one gets through.

She plants her knee under herself and starts rising despite the hold. Dahlia's smile fades again as Emily powers upward, arm still trapped, shoulder screaming.

John Phillips: "Dahlia just mentioned the Hightowers, and look at Emily!"

Mark Bravo: "Bad idea. You can poke the wound, but if you poke too hard, the dog bites."

Emily gets to one foot.

Then the other.

Dahlia still has the arm, trying to twist the pressure back down.

Emily turns suddenly and uses her free hand to grab Dahlia by the hair.

Referee: "Emily! Hair!"

Emily ignores him for one full second and hurls Dahlia forward by the head and arm, sending her skidding across the mat.

The crowd reacts with a mixed roar. Cheers for the comeback, a little uncertainty for the roughness.

John Phillips: "Emily used the hair there. She heard the official, and she did not let go right away."

Mark Bravo: "That is the line, John. She is not across it yet, but she is walking along it with both boots."

Dahlia scrambles up near the ropes, holding the back of her head.

Emily rushes forward and catches her with a running shoulder tackle that sends Dahlia spilling through the middle rope and out to the apron, but not to the floor.

Dahlia clings to the rope, trying to pull herself up.

Emily steps through the ropes onto the apron with her.

John Phillips: "Emily following Dahlia to the apron now. This is dangerous territory."

Mark Bravo: "Nothing good happens on the apron except people realizing the mat inside the ring is not as hard as they thought."

Dahlia crawls toward the corner post, trying to create space. Emily grabs her by the wrist and pulls her up.

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Dahlia suddenly snaps Emily's damaged arm down across the top rope, using the cable like a trap.

Emily cries out, stumbling forward on the apron.

Dahlia steps in behind her and yanks the arm again, trying to pull Emily shoulder-first into the ring post.

Emily blocks it with her boot against the post.

Dahlia tries again.

Emily blocks again, then twists and slams a short elbow into Dahlia's ribs.

Dahlia doubles over.

Emily hooks her around the waist.

The crowd rises.

John Phillips: "Emily may be thinking suplex on the apron!"

Mark Bravo: "Bad shoulder, bad position, bad intentions. This could go wrong fast."

Dahlia fights it, grabbing the top rope with both hands. Emily tries to muscle her up, but the damaged shoulder gives out just enough for Dahlia to slip free.

Dahlia drops behind Emily and yanks her arm backward across the top rope again.

Emily bends forward in pain.

Dahlia grabs the same arm, hops down to the floor, and snaps it violently over the rope from below.

Emily falls backward off the apron and tumbles to the floor.

John Phillips: "Apron arm yank! Dahlia Cross just dragged Emily off the apron by that damaged arm!"

Mark Bravo: "That was nasty. That was surgical. That was Dahlia Cross."

Emily lands hard on the ringside floor, clutching the shoulder and rolling toward the barricade. Dahlia stands over her, shaking out her own ribs, then looks up toward the ramp.

The Hightowers are still there.

Buck takes another step forward.

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This time David turns his head slightly, just enough.

Buck stops.

Dahlia laughs.

Dahlia Cross: "Good boy."

Buck's eyes flare, and the crowd reacts as he nearly breaks his own restraint. Dakota steps subtly in front of him, not physically blocking him, but placing herself in his line of sight.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross just took a verbal shot at Buck Hightower."

Mark Bravo: "That is playing with matches in a gas station. But Dahlia knows the rules of this family test right now. She knows they are not supposed to move."

Dahlia turns back toward Emily and pulls her up by the bad arm. Emily winces, but she suddenly drives Dahlia spine-first into the edge of the apron.

Dahlia gasps, but Emily keeps hold of her.

Emily drives her into the apron a second time.

Then a third.

The referee is counting from inside the ring now.

Referee: "Three!"

Emily grabs Dahlia by the back of the head and shoves her under the bottom rope, breaking the count. Emily follows after, sliding in with more urgency than grace.

John Phillips: "Emily gets it back inside, and that may be smart. The longer this match stays on the floor, the more Dahlia can use the environment."

Mark Bravo: "And the more Emily has to see her family watching from up there, doing nothing. That has to be eating her alive."

Dahlia starts to rise near center ring. Emily comes in with a hard kick to the ribs, then another. Dahlia tries to catch the third, but Emily turns it into a rough knee strike that drops Dahlia back to both knees.

Emily hits the ropes.

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Dahlia ducks low for a sweep.

Emily leaps over it, lands behind her, and grabs both arms.

John Phillips: "Emily has the arms hooked!"

Burn Out.

The tornado double-arm DDT plants Dahlia hard into the mat.

The MEO Arena surges to its feet.

John Phillips: "Burn Out! Emily hit Burn Out!"

Mark Bravo: "That might be it!"

Emily rolls Dahlia over and hooks the leg, pressing her weight down with both arms despite the pain in her shoulder.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Dahlia kicks out.

Emily freezes for a second, staring at the referee.

The crowd gasps.

John Phillips: "Dahlia Cross kicks out of Burn Out!"

Mark Bravo: "And there it is again. Look at Emily's face."

Emily's breathing becomes heavier. She sits on her knees, one hand gripping her shoulder, the other clenched into a fist.

She looks at the referee.

Then toward Dahlia.

Then up the ramp.

David stands calm as stone.

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Buck paces like a caged dog.

Dakota's eyes stay fixed on Emily, concern deepening.

John Phillips: "Emily was inches away. The crowd believed it. I think Emily believed it."

Mark Bravo: "And now the emotion is spiking again. That was a believable win, John. That could have been hers right there."

Emily pushes herself up, slower now, anger and pain mixing across her face. Dahlia rolls toward the ropes, one hand at the back of her neck, the other near her jaw.

Emily reaches down to pull Dahlia up.

Dahlia suddenly grabs the waistband of Emily's gear and yanks her forward, sending Emily throat-first into the middle rope again.

Emily snaps backward, coughing.

Dahlia rolls to the side, still hurt, but aware enough to find an opening.

John Phillips: "Dahlia creates separation the ugly way."

Mark Bravo: "She is desperate now. That was not pretty mat work. That was survival."

Dahlia pulls herself up using the ropes while Emily tries to rise near center ring. The referee checks on Emily's throat for a brief second.

That is all Dahlia needs.

She slides one hand into her boot tape, then thinks better of it when the referee turns back too quickly.

Instead, she steps forward and drives a palm thrust toward Emily's throat again.

Emily catches the wrist.

The crowd pops.

Dahlia's eyes widen.

Emily twists Dahlia's fingers backward in a nasty finger crank.

John Phillips: "Finger crank! Emily caught the hand!"

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Mark Bravo: "That is old Hightower mean right there!"

Dahlia drops to one knee, crying out as Emily bends the fingers back. The referee warns Emily immediately, but Emily keeps the pressure, leaning down close to Dahlia's face.

Referee: "Emily, watch the fingers!"

Emily Hightower: "She likes joints, right?"

Emily releases only after the warning becomes a count, then pulls Dahlia into a short-arm forearm that knocks her backward.

Dahlia stumbles into the ropes and rebounds.

Emily loads the elbow.

John Phillips: "Ode To My Father! Emily may be looking for the bull hammer elbow!"

She swings.

Dahlia ducks under at the last second and slips behind Emily.

Dahlia hooks the head and arm.

Black Dahlia.

The snap fisherman's neckbreaker with the double-knee spike catches Emily hard, dropping her to the mat in a sudden, brutal shift.

John Phillips: "Black Dahlia! Dahlia Cross hit Black Dahlia!"

Mark Bravo: "She caught her! Emily went for the knockout and Dahlia made her pay!"

Dahlia crawls into the cover, hooking the far leg and pressing her forearm across Emily's face.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out.

The MEO Arena erupts.

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John Phillips: "Emily Hightower kicks out!"

Mark Bravo: "And that was not family. That was not help. That was Emily Hightower digging out of a huge shot by herself."

Dahlia sits up now, frustration finally visible. She looks at the referee and holds up three fingers. The referee shows two.

Emily rolls toward the ropes, one hand on her neck, the other still tucked close to her damaged shoulder.

The camera cuts again to the stage.

Dakota exhales, relieved but still tense. Buck nods harder now, practically vibrating with energy.

David's expression does not change.

John Phillips: "Again, no movement from the Hightowers. They watched Emily kick out of Black Dahlia, and they stayed exactly where they said they would stay."

Mark Bravo: "This is the closest Emily has been to proving the point, John. She is closer than last week. Dahlia has thrown shortcuts, limb work, cheap shots, and a major setup at her, and Emily is still alive."

Dahlia stands slowly and begins dragging Emily toward the center by the damaged arm. Emily groans, but Dahlia keeps pulling, folding the arm under and stepping over into position.

John Phillips: "Dahlia may be trying for Violet Vice again!"

Mark Bravo: "If she gets that kimura with the grapevine, Emily's shoulder is done."

Dahlia drops down and starts to trap the arm.

Emily rolls before Dahlia can fully lock it in, using momentum to stack Dahlia's shoulders to the mat.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Dahlia kicks out and scrambles up, startled.

Emily rises too, slower but still there.

Dahlia rushes forward with a single-leg dropkick to the bad shoulder.

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Emily sidesteps.

Dahlia hits the mat and rolls through to her feet.

Emily catches her on the turn.

Release German suplex.

Dahlia folds over hard and lands near the corner.

John Phillips: "Release German by Emily Hightower!"

Mark Bravo: "Dahlia got dumped!"

Emily falls to one knee after the throw, the shoulder again bothering her. But this time she does not look to the ramp right away.

She looks to Dahlia.

Then to the corner.

Then the crowd.

They start to rise with her.

John Phillips: "This crowd feels it. Emily Hightower may be closing in."

Mark Bravo: "This could be the moment. This could be the clean proof she wanted."

Emily grabs Dahlia and pulls her up, tucking her head between her thighs.

The crowd gets louder.

John Phillips: "She is looking for Total Loss!"

Emily starts to lift for the powerbomb.

Her shoulder trembles.

Dahlia suddenly rakes across Emily's eyes.

The referee is on the opposite side and misses it.

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Emily drops Dahlia and stumbles backward, blinded.

John Phillips: "Eye rake! Dahlia went to the eyes!"

Mark Bravo: "And the referee missed it! Dahlia just saved herself from Total Loss!"

Dahlia drops to her knees and rolls under the bottom rope to the floor, gasping for air and clutching her neck.

Emily wipes at her eyes, staggering near the center of the ring.

The referee moves toward Emily, checking on her vision.

Dahlia crawls along the floor toward the timekeeper's side.

She looks up the ramp once.

The Hightowers see her.

Buck's head tilts.

Dakota steps forward half a pace.

David remains still.

Dahlia reaches under the ring skirt.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute. What is Dahlia doing?"

Mark Bravo: "Nothing good. Nothing good at all."

Dahlia pulls out a steel chair.

The crowd boos immediately.

The referee still has his back turned, checking Emily's eyes and trying to keep her from swinging blindly.

Emily does not see the chair.

On the ramp, the Hightowers do.

Buck takes a full step forward now.

Dakota moves too, concern flashing across her face.

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David lifts one hand.

Buck stops.

Dakota stops.

They do not move.

John Phillips: "The Hightowers see the chair. They all see it."

Mark Bravo: "And they are still not moving. This is the cost. This is the test. Emily said she wanted it alone."

Dahlia slides back into the ring with the chair, keeping it low against her body. The referee is still turned toward Emily, who is blinking hard, trying to clear her vision.

The threat is real.

Dahlia rises behind Emily, steel chair gripped in both hands.

She lifts it.

And from the crowd side, a sudden rush of movement breaks through the front row.

John Phillips: "Wait! Through the crowd!"

Sol Azteca vaults the barricade.

No music.

No announcement.

No official involvement.

She hits the ringside floor and slides under the bottom rope as the crowd erupts in shock.

Mark Bravo: "That's Sol! Sol Azteca is here!"

Dahlia swings the chair toward Emily.

Sol gets there first.

She grabs the chair from behind, ripping it backward with both hands and pulling it out of Dahlia's grip before the steel can crash into Emily's skull.

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The chair clatters loudly as Sol stumbles back with it.

John Phillips: "Sol Azteca just took the chair away! Dahlia was about to hit Emily Hightower!"

Mark Bravo: "She saw what the Hightowers saw, and she moved when they didn't!"

The referee turns at the sound and sees Sol standing in the ring with the chair in her hands.

His eyes go wide.

Referee: "Sol! What are you doing? Get out! Get out of the ring!"

Sol immediately lowers the chair and tries to explain, pointing toward Dahlia.

Sol Azteca: "She had it! She was going to use it!"

Emily turns.

Her eyes are clear enough now to see Sol.

Sol with the chair.

The referee yelling.

Dahlia still in the ring.

The crowd roaring.

And the exact thing Emily said she did not want.

Someone else involved.

Emily's face changes instantly.

John Phillips: "Look at Emily. Look at Emily's reaction."

Mark Bravo: "That is not relief."

Sol sets the chair down quickly and raises her hands, still trying to make clear she is not attacking Emily, not helping Dahlia, not trying to steal anything.

Sol Azteca: "Emily, I was--"

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Emily Hightower: "What are you doing?"

Sol freezes.

The referee grabs the chair and kicks it toward the ropes, still ordering Sol out.

Dahlia, desperate and furious, sees the opening.

She lunges behind Emily and rolls her up, grabbing a handful of tights.

John Phillips: "Dahlia from behind! Roll-up!"

The referee drops down.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Emily kicks out hard, sending Dahlia forward into the ropes.

Sol is still being ushered back toward the edge of the ring, but Emily is already on her feet, anger now fully awake.

Dahlia rebounds off the ropes.

Emily turns.

Ode To My Father.

The bull hammer elbow lands flush.

Dahlia drops like the strings have been cut.

John Phillips: "Ode To My Father! Emily caught Dahlia!"

Mark Bravo: "That elbow was clean! That was all Emily!"

Emily does not hesitate. She pulls Dahlia up, tucks her in, and powers through the damaged shoulder with a roar.

Total Loss.

The powerbomb folds Dahlia into the pin.

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John Phillips: "Total Loss! Emily hit Total Loss!"

The referee slides into position.

Sol is now outside the ropes, stepping down toward the floor with the chair no longer in her hands.

Emily's eyes are not fully on Dahlia.

They are on Sol.

But the cover is tight.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The crowd erupts, but the reaction is tangled. Cheers for Emily's win. Confusion over Sol's involvement. Boos for Dahlia's chair attempt. A mess of emotion crashing over the ring all at once.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower wins! Emily Hightower beats Dahlia Cross!"

Mark Bravo: "She did it. She got the win. But John..."

John Phillips: "But Sol Azteca's involvement changed the finish. Even if Sol stopped Dahlia from using that chair, Emily Hightower is not going to see this as the clean moment she needed."

Emily remains on her knees over Dahlia for a second after the count, breathing hard, sweat running down her face. The referee reaches for her wrist, but Emily does not rise with him immediately.

Her eyes are locked on Sol.

Sol stands near the barricade now, hands low, chair no longer in reach. She looks relieved that Emily is not hurt.

And worried because Emily is staring at her like something has broken.

The camera cuts to the ramp.

David Hightower watches without expression.

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Buck's jaw is tight, his eyes moving between Emily and Sol.

Dakota stands quieter, visibly reading the damage in the moment.

John Phillips: "This was the win Emily wanted. But it does not feel the way it should."

Mark Bravo: "And that is exactly the kind of crack David Hightower has been waiting for."

Emily slowly rises as the referee raises her hand.

She barely allows it.

Dahlia rolls under the bottom rope, clutching her jaw and shoulder, furious and dazed, leaving before anything else can happen.

Emily won.

But the celebration never arrives.

Only Sol at ringside.

Only the Hightowers on the ramp.

Only the feeling that the victory came with something poisoned underneath it.

Proving Grounds

The broadcast fades from the chaos of the night into black.

For a moment, there is no crowd.

No arena.

No commentary.

Just the low hum of an empty training facility.

A single overhead light clicks on.

Boone Mercer stands alone in one corner of a wrestling ring, wrists half-taped, head lowered, breathing slow through his nose.

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Cut.

Darren Valiant sits in a dark interview chair, elbows on his knees, hands folded, staring at the floor like he is rehearsing an answer he already knows needs to sound true.

Cut.

Scott Stevens stands with a black contract folder in one hand.

Scott Stevens: "This was never about finding someone who looked good for one week."

Quick flashes begin to hit.

Darren Valiant in Episode One, clean, polished, confident.

Boone Mercer early in the season, arms folded, skeptical of the cameras, skeptical of the process, skeptical of nearly everyone around him.

Roxie Raze hearing her elimination and holding herself together with sheer force of will.

Jace Van Ardent nodding through disappointment.

Tatum Quinn standing tall even as the final two moved on without her.

Melissa Cartwright: "Eight arrived believing they had a case."

Cut to the empty Proving Grounds house.

Unmade space where bags used to sit.

A quiet kitchen table.

A hallway that feels too large now.

Melissa Cartwright: "Two are left to prove it."

Cut to Boone in the ring, running the ropes once, then stopping in the center. He plants both boots and looks up into the light.

Boone Mercer: "I fought the process when I got here."

A flash of Boone from earlier weeks dismissing the house, the cameras, the presentation work.

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Boone Mercer: "Then I learned the parts I didn't respect were the parts that could make me harder to dismiss."

Cut to Darren adjusting his cuffs before a challenge, then to Darren losing the polish for half a second under pressure, then finding it again in a sharper form.

Darren Valiant: "I came in looking like someone UTA could use."

A beat.

Darren Valiant: "Now I have to prove I became someone UTA cannot ignore."

The screen cuts to Scott Stevens seated at the evaluation table, the contract folder placed in front of him.

Scott Stevens: "Boone Mercer."

Boone lands a hard shoulder tackle in training.

Scott Stevens: "Rough. Real. Believable. The man who had the most to unlearn and still kept the part that made people listen."

Cut.

Scott Stevens: "Darren Valiant."

Darren delivers a final case promo under the hard white light.

Scott Stevens: "Polished. Tested. Complete. The early standard who survived having that standard questioned."

The music begins to rise now. Low strings. Heavy percussion. The feeling of a finale being built piece by piece.

Boone wraps his wrists tighter.

Darren stands in front of a mirror, looking at himself without blinking.

Melissa Cartwright appears in a sit-down setup, the Proving Grounds logo behind her.

Melissa Cartwright: "Boone and Darren are not the same kind of recruit. That is what makes this final matter. Boone had to let the process change him. Darren had to prove the process did not expose him as just the obvious choice."

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Cut to Boone and Darren standing across from one another in the ring after Episode Nine.

Boone Mercer: "Us."

Darren Valiant: "Apparently."

The shot freezes for half a second on both finalists under the overhead light.

Then the screen cuts rapidly through the season.

Promo challenges.

Training drills.

House tension.

Live crowd reactions.

Eliminations.

Boone staring down Scott Stevens.

Darren closing his eyes before hearing his name called for the final two.

Scott Stevens: "One of you leaves with a UTA contract."

Cut to the contract folder opening.

The page is blank except for the UTA logo and one empty signature line.

Melissa Cartwright: "And one of you leaves knowing close was not enough."

Boone looks directly into the camera.

Boone Mercer: "I am still me."

Darren looks directly into the camera.

Darren Valiant: "So am I."

A final hard cut shows the two men standing in opposite corners of the ring.

Scott Stevens stands between them.

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Melissa Cartwright watches from ringside.

The house is empty.

The process is over.

Only the decision remains.

Scott Stevens: "Next week, one of you is next in."

The screen cuts to black.

ON SCREEN: PROVING GROUNDS: THE FINALE

ON SCREEN: BOONE MERCER vs. DARREN VALIANT

ON SCREEN: ONE UTA CONTRACT

ON SCREEN: NEXT WEEK

The final image flashes back in for one second.

The empty signature line.

Then black again.

The Same Damn Thing

The broadcast returns to ringside, where the crowd is still reacting to the chaotic closing moments of the previous match. Emily Hightower remains in the ring on her knees, breathing hard as the referee calls for the bell beside her. Across the ring, her opponent rolls under the bottom rope, frustrated and stunned, backing away before anything else can happen.

Emily won.

But the noise inside the arena does not sound like a clean celebration. It is messy. Uneasy. Confused. Because everybody saw what happened.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower gets the win, but Mark, there is no way around it. Sol Azteca getting involved at ringside changed the entire complexion of that finish."

Mark Bravo: "Changed it, yes. But she pulled that chair away before it could be used. Sol may have saved

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Emily from taking a steel chair to the skull."

John Phillips: "That may be true, but after what Emily said earlier tonight, I do not think she is going to see it that way."

The camera catches Sol Azteca near ringside on the crowd side of the barricade, one hand still holding the steel chair she pulled away before it could be used. She stands there like she knows the danger passed, but also like she already feels something has gone wrong.

Inside the ring, the referee reaches down and raises Emily's hand. Emily barely lets him. Her eyes are not on the official. They are not on her opponent. They are on Sol.

Slowly, Emily looks from the chair to Sol.

And immediately, you can see it on her face.

Not gratitude. Not relief.

Anger.

Real anger.

Sol sets the chair down immediately and steps closer to the barricade.

Sol Azteca: "Emily, I was trying to..."

Emily Hightower: "No."

Emily pulls her arm away from the referee and stands fully now, cutting Sol off before she can finish.

Emily Hightower: "No, don't."

The frustration in her voice is sharp enough to cut through the crowd noise for a second. Sol looks genuinely caught off guard by the reaction.

Sol Azteca: "She was going to use the chair."

Emily points toward the mat, toward the place where she just got the three count.

Emily Hightower: "And I still beat her."

That hits Sol harder than she expected. Emily steps toward the ropes now, sweat running down her face, chest still rising and falling from the match.

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Emily Hightower: "I had her."

Sol Azteca: "She had the chair."

Emily Hightower: "And I had the match."

That line lands heavy.

The camera briefly cuts toward the ramp where David, Buck, and Dakota stand watching. Still not moving. Still not helping. Just watching.

Emily notices them for half a second before looking right back at Sol.

Emily Hightower: "You stood there and listened to me talk about everybody makin choices for me."

She points toward herself.

Emily Hightower: "About nobody lettin me fight my own damn battles."

Another step closer to the ropes.

Emily Hightower: "And then you did the exact same thing."

Sol shakes her head immediately.

Sol Azteca: "I was trying to stop things from turning into last week."

Emily Hightower: "And that's the problem."

Emily's voice cracks slightly there from pure frustration. Not sadness. Not weakness. Just emotional exhaustion finally boiling over.

Emily Hightower: "You said you understood me."

A pause.

Emily Hightower: "But you still thought you knew better."

That one visibly hits Sol, because she realizes Emily actually means it.

Sol Azteca: "I did not come out here to hurt you."

Emily Hightower: "Doesn't really matter what you meant to do, does it?"

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Emily wipes sweat back from her face before continuing.

Emily Hightower: "You didn't cost me the match."

A pause.

Emily looks around at the crowd, then back toward the ramp, then finally back at Sol.

Emily Hightower: "You cost me my moment."

The crowd reaction shifts again, because that one lands. Sol has no quick answer for it.

John Phillips: "That may be the most important thing Emily has said all night. She won the match, but she feels like Sol took ownership of the moment away from her."

Mark Bravo: "And that is dangerous, John. Because David Hightower has been waiting for this exact crack to open."

That is when David finally starts walking.

Not fast. Not angry. Just calm.

Buck follows immediately, jaw tight, eyes locked on Sol. Dakota comes with them, quieter than Buck, but not stopping him either. The crowd noise changes as the Hightowers make their way down the ramp.

Sol notices them coming and looks past Emily for half a second.

Emily notices Sol looking.

That only makes it worse.

David stops at ringside near Emily's side of the ring. Buck and Dakota spread out behind him, close enough to be a threat but still not touching anyone. David looks at Sol. Then he looks at Emily.

David Hightower: "Even when you win..."

A pause.

David Hightower: "They still find a way to make it look like you needed savin."

Emily's jaw tightens.

Sol immediately looks back to her.

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Sol Azteca: "Emily, no."

David does not raise his voice. He does not have to.

David Hightower: "You said you needed it to be yours."

A pause.

David Hightower: "She took that from you."

Sol shakes her head, stepping closer to the apron now.

Sol Azteca: "That is not what happened."

Emily laughs once through her nose. Short. Bitter.

Emily Hightower: "Everybody keeps sayin that."

Sol's voice softens.

Sol Azteca: "You do not have to listen to him."

Sol climbs onto the apron carefully, not rushing, not trying to force her way in. The referee steps between them for a moment, but Emily does not back away. Sol slowly steps through the ropes, hands low, keeping distance, trying to make it clear she is not there to fight.

Emily stares at her from inside the ring.

For a second, there is still something there. A flicker. The old Emily. The one who wanted the win to be hers. The one who wanted to believe she could stand apart from all of this.

Then David reaches down.

No speech. No command. No warning.

He pulls the tow chain from his side and slides it under the bottom rope. The metal scrapes across the canvas and stops near Emily's boot. The sound cuts through everything.

Sol sees it from across the ring. Emily sees it at her feet. The crowd sees it.

For a second, nobody moves. Buck stays on the floor. Dakota stays beside him. Neither of them climbs onto the apron. Neither of them reaches for Sol. David does not say a word. He just stands at ringside, calm as ever, watching Emily decide what she is going to be.

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Mark Bravo: "Oh no."

John Phillips: "David Hightower just slid that chain into the ring. He did not say a word. He is not forcing Emily to do anything."

Mark Bravo: "That is what makes it worse. He is giving her the choice."

Sol looks from the chain to Emily. Then she slowly raises one hand, not to fight, but to reach her.

Sol Azteca: "Emily..."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "You do not have to do this."

Emily's eyes stay on the chain. The hurt does not leave her face.

It hardens.

Slowly, she bends down and picks it up.

Emily holds the tow chain in both hands for just a split second. Not swinging it. Not using it yet. Just feeling the weight.

The crowd noise swells around her, ugly and uneasy, because everyone in the building understands there is still time for her to drop it. Sol stands across from her, hands low, breathing carefully, eyes fixed on Emily through the mask.

Sol Azteca: "Emily..."

Emily does not answer. She looks down at the chain again. Then she starts wrapping one end around her fist. Slowly. Deliberately. Each loop tighter than the last.

Emily Hightower: "You told me eventually I had to decide..."

She pulls the chain tighter across her knuckles.

Emily Hightower: "If I was Emily Hightower..."

She looks toward Buck. Then Dakota. Then David.

David still says nothing. He only watches.

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Emily looks back at Sol.

Emily Hightower: "...or just carryin the name."

Sol takes one careful step forward. Not attacking. Still trying.

Sol Azteca: "You can still choose."

Emily's face goes cold.

Emily Hightower: "They're the same damn thing."

And then she swings.

The loose end of the tow chain cracks across Sol's body like a whip, catching her across the side and folding her instantly. Sol drops to one knee, one arm wrapping around her ribs as the sound of metal against flesh cuts through the arena.

The crowd erupts in shock.

John Phillips: "No! Emily just hit Sol with the chain!"

Mark Bravo: "That was not David. That was not Buck. That was not Dakota. Emily swung that chain herself."

Emily does not wait. She swings again.

This time, the chain catches Sol across the shoulder and sends her fully down to the mat. Sol tries to roll away, tries to create distance, but Emily follows her with a cold kind of purpose that is worse than rage. There is no wild panic in it now. No confusion. No hesitation.

She has made the choice.

And now she is living inside it.

Buck steps toward the apron on instinct, but David lifts one hand. Just one. Buck stops. Dakota stays where she is, eyes locked on Emily.

This belongs to her.

Emily grabs Sol by the back of the hoodie and drags her up just enough to drive the chain-wrapped fist into the side of her head. Sol's body jerks from the impact and she falls back against the canvas, trying to cover up as Emily stands over her.

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The referee moves in, shouting at Emily to stop, but Emily turns on him with a look that makes him freeze for half a second. He backs away just enough to wave frantically toward the back for help.

Emily turns back to Sol.

Sol tries to crawl toward the ropes. Emily follows, the chain dragging behind her in one hand while the other end remains wrapped around her fist. Sol reaches for the bottom rope, fingertips almost touching it, but Emily steps in behind her and swings the loose length of chain down across Sol's back.

Sol collapses flat for a second.

Before she can move again, Emily drops beside her and hooks the loose part of the chain across Sol's chest and under one arm, using it like a cruel leash. She plants one boot against the mat, grips the metal with both hands, and yanks backward.

Sol is dragged away from the ropes, boots kicking against the canvas as the crowd screams at the referee to do something. Emily keeps pulling until Sol is back near the center of the ring.

Then she shifts behind her.

Sol tries to turn over, tries to grab at Emily's hands, but Emily slips the chain higher, dragging it from across Sol's chest up toward her throat. Sol's hands shoot to the metal immediately, trying to wedge her fingers underneath it before Emily can tighten it.

Emily pulls back.

The chain presses across Sol's neck. Sol's boots scrape against the canvas as Emily kneels behind her and wrenches the chain tight, dragging Sol backward into her.

The crowd noise turns frantic.

Sol Azteca: "Em..."

The name barely gets out.

Emily answers with her fist.

The chain-wrapped hand crashes down against the side of Sol's head once. Then again. Then again. Each shot is shorter than the last, uglier than the last, Emily using the chain around Sol's neck to hold her in place while the other end stays coiled around her own hand like she was always meant to wear it there.

John Phillips: "This has gone too far. Somebody has to get in there!"

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Mark Bravo: "The referee is calling for help. Buck and Dakota are not even touching Sol. David is not touching her. Emily is doing this herself."

David watches from ringside without moving. No smile. No order. No celebration. Just quiet approval.

Sol's hands keep fighting at the chain, but the strength starts leaving them. She twists, trying to turn into Emily, trying to break the pressure, but Emily shifts her weight and drives another chain-wrapped punch into her forehead.

The mask absorbs some of it. Enough to keep the blow from landing clean. Enough for Emily to notice.

She stops.

For one terrible second, she just stares down at Sol.

Then her eyes shift to the mask.

The crowd realizes it almost at the same time she does. Sol realizes it too. Her hand comes up fast, protective, instinctive, grabbing at the torn edge before Emily can reach it.

Sol Azteca: "No..."

Emily grabs the top of the mask anyway.

Sol fights harder than she has the entire assault, panic flashing through the exhaustion now. She twists beneath Emily, both hands trying to keep the mask in place, but Emily drives a knee down into her ribs and rips upward.

The fabric tears.

Not all of it. Not enough to fully expose her. But enough.

The top of the mask splits open, pulled back from her forehead and brow, leaving the upper half of her face exposed through a mess of torn fabric, loose hair, and blood. Sol's identity is still hidden in the chaos of it, but the violation is unmistakable.

The building turns on Emily completely.

John Phillips: "No. No, that is the mask. That is not just gear to Sol Azteca. That is identity. That is tradition."

Mark Bravo: "Emily knows that, John. She knows exactly what she just did."

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Emily looks down at what she has done. For a heartbeat, something almost flickers across her face.

Almost.

Then it is gone.

She wraps the chain tighter around her fist and strikes again.

Sol's head snaps to the side. Another shot. Then another.

The blood starts running down from the torn edge of the mask, streaking through the gold and dark fabric, slipping over the exposed skin and into her hair. Sol tries once more to cover herself, one hand reaching for the ruined top of the mask, but Emily catches that wrist and pins it to the mat.

Emily Hightower: "You wanted me to choose."

Her voice is low now. Cold.

She raises the chain-wrapped fist again.

Emily Hightower: "So I chose."

The blow lands.

Sol goes still beneath her.

For a second, the whole ring feels frozen.

The referee is screaming toward the back now. Security and officials are starting to appear at the entrance, but they still feel too far away. Buck is shouting something from ringside, not encouragement exactly, more like disbelief twisted into pride. Dakota stands beside him, one hand near her mouth, unable to look away.

Emily stays on top of Sol for another moment, breathing hard, chain still wrapped around her fist, eyes fixed on the damage in front of her.

Sol lies motionless in the middle of the ring. The torn top of her mask hangs loose. Blood marks the canvas beneath her.

And Emily Hightower slowly rises to her feet over the body she just left there.

John Phillips: "Emily Hightower has crossed a line tonight. Not the Hightower family. Emily. She made that choice herself."

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Mark Bravo: "That is what David wanted. He did not need to swing the chain. He did not need to give the order. He just put it in front of her and watched her become exactly what he believed she was."

Officials and security finally reach the ring, sliding under the ropes as Emily backs away slowly. She does not look scared of them. She does not look ashamed. She looks down at Sol one more time, then turns toward the ropes where David is waiting.

David does not applaud. He does not smile wide. He simply reaches up from the floor and offers his hand.

Emily steps through the ropes and drops to the floor beside him.

Buck moves in close, screaming at the crowd now, soaking in every ounce of hatred pouring over the barricade. Dakota stays beside Emily, her eyes still locked on the ring, still processing what she just watched happen.

David takes Emily's wrist and raises her hand.

The boos grow louder.

Behind them, officials kneel around Sol Azteca in the center of the ring, trying to cover the torn mask, trying to check on her, trying to bring order to something that already broke past it.

Emily does not look back right away.

She lets the image settle.

The chain still hangs from one hand.

The Hightower name stands around her.

And for the first time, she does not look like she is trying to escape it.

John Phillips: "Sol Azteca tried to help Emily Hightower tonight. She tried to stop history from repeating itself. And Emily repaid her by tearing into everything Sol is."

Mark Bravo: "That was not just an attack. That was a declaration. Emily Hightower is not running from the family name anymore."

The final shot catches Emily standing at ringside with David, Buck, and Dakota around her. Her hand is still raised. The crowd is still booing. In the ring behind them, Sol Azteca lies surrounded by officials, blood marking the torn edge of her mask.

The message is clear.

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Emily Hightower has chosen.

And Sol Azteca paid the price.

Not Very Chaotic

The broadcast cuts backstage to a quieter stretch of the MEO Arena corridor, where Eric Dane Jr. stands near a stack of production cases with the UTA Hardcore Championship slung over one shoulder.

He is doing something that looks important only because he is the one doing it.

One hand holds his phone out in front of him at a carefully chosen angle. The other adjusts the Hardcore Championship so the faceplate catches the light just right. He tilts his chin, squints slightly, then immediately frowns at the screen.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No. Bad lighting. I look poor."

He shifts two steps to the left, nearly backing into a crew member carrying cables.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Watch it. Champion standing here."

The crew member moves past without responding. Eric scoffs, then raises the phone again.

Eric Dane Jr.: "People don't understand how hard it is being the face of a division built on violence, legacy, and photogenic excellence."

He turns the title slightly.

Eric Dane Jr.: "There it is."

Before he can take the picture--

SFX: HONK.

Eric freezes.

His eyes close slowly.

The honk echoes once more down the hallway.

SFX: HONK.

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Eric lowers the phone and turns his head with the slow dread of a man who already knows exactly what is coming.

Into frame rolls Bobby Dean on the battle chair, looking extremely proud of himself for a man traveling at the approximate speed of a loading screen.

Beside him walks Maxx Mayhem, eyes bright, grin wide, one hand resting lovingly on the back of the mobility scooter like he is escorting royalty.

Bobby gives Eric a cheerful wave.

Bobby Dean: "Evenin', champ."

Maxx leans around Bobby and waves too.

Maxx Mayhem: "Eric! Look! She still honks!"

SFX: HONK.

Eric physically recoils.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Why? Why is the chair here? Why are you here? Why is he here? Why does it sound like a clown car having a medical emergency?"

Bobby Dean: "She has feelings."

Maxx Mayhem: "And torque."

Eric Dane Jr.: "No, she does not. It is a scooter. It is barely transportation. It is an OSHA violation with cup holders."

Bobby looks offended and pats the battle chair's handlebar.

Bobby Dean: "Don't listen to him. He's jealous."

Eric stares at both men, then points sharply between them.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Did you two idiots not cause enough problems last week?"

Maxx looks at Bobby.

Bobby looks at Maxx.

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Bobby Dean: "How many problems is enough?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Depends if they're load-bearing."

Eric Dane Jr.: "That is not an answer. That is the kind of thing someone says right before a wall falls on catering."

Maxx steps forward with a thoughtful look, scratching at his chin like a man who has spent far too much time thinking and not nearly enough time being supervised.

Maxx Mayhem: "See, that's the thing, bruv. I been thinkin' about last week."

Eric Dane Jr.: "That already sounds dangerous."

Maxx Mayhem: "And I realized there was no reason for me and my new best buddy Bobby to fight."

Bobby beams.

Bobby Dean: "New best buddy."

Maxx points at Bobby without looking away from Eric.

Maxx Mayhem: "See? Look at him. That's not an enemy. That's a man with wheels, wisdom, and one and a half cup holders."

Eric Dane Jr.: "I swear to God, if either of you say cup holders one more time--"

Maxx's eyes drift down to the UTA Hardcore Championship on Eric's shoulder.

His grin changes.

Maxx Mayhem: "But there are some things that give reason."

Eric follows Maxx's stare to the Hardcore Championship.

Then he immediately pulls the title closer.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No."

Maxx Mayhem: "I didn't even say anything yet."

Eric Dane Jr.: "You looked at my title with intent. That counts."

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Maxx Mayhem: "Intent is such a strong word."

Eric Dane Jr.: "No. Absolutely not. I am not giving you another title shot."

Maxx tilts his head.

Maxx Mayhem: "Another? So you admit there's history."

Eric Dane Jr.: "I admit you are a walking insurance claim and I would like my championship reign to continue with fewer tire tracks in it."

Bobby slowly raises one hand from the battle chair.

Bobby Dean: "What about me?"

Eric turns toward him, already exhausted.

Bobby Dean: "Can I get one? Pretty please?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "No."

Bobby Dean: "Pretty pretty please?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "Absolutely not."

Bobby Dean: "With snacks?"

Eric Dane Jr.: "That makes it worse."

Bobby sighs and settles back into the battle chair, disappointed but not defeated.

Bobby Dean: "Worth a shot."

Eric takes a step back, lifting one hand like he is trying to physically push the entire conversation away from him.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Listen to me very carefully. I am the UTA Hardcore Champion. I decide when this title gets defended, against whom it gets defended, and under what circumstances I allow myself to bless this disgusting little division with my presence."

A cool, precise voice cuts into the hallway.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "How ambitious of you to believe that."

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Eric turns.

Avril Selene Kinkade steps into frame with the composed elegance of someone who could turn a hallway into a courtroom simply by entering it. Midnight tailoring. Immaculate posture. Emerald eyes focused and cold behind ultra-thin black glasses. A slim leather briefcase rests at her side.

The energy changes immediately.

Even Maxx seems to quiet for half a second.

Bobby blinks from the battle chair.

Bobby Dean: "Oh boy."

Eric straightens, adjusting the Hardcore Championship on his shoulder.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No. No, no, no. Whatever this is, I do not want it."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Your preferences have been noted and assigned the appropriate legal value."

She pauses.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "None."

Maxx looks at Bobby, impressed.

Maxx Mayhem: "She's terrifying."

Bobby Dean: "I like her coat."

Avril turns her attention to Maxx with a slight, controlled smile.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Mr. Mayhem, I am here as representative counsel for General Manager Scott Stevens, pursuant to the matter you brought before his office earlier this evening."

Eric's head snaps toward Maxx.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Wait."

Maxx grins.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You went to the boss for something? You?"

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Maxx Mayhem: "Sure did."

Maxx points to himself proudly.

Maxx Mayhem: "Administrative chaos."

Eric Dane Jr.: "You once tried to snowboard on a road sign."

Maxx Mayhem: "And now I understand paperwork. Growth is beautiful."

Avril opens her briefcase and removes a single document, holding it with clinical precision.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Be advised that Mr. Mayhem's request has been reviewed and granted.

Accordingly, next week in Spain, Eric Dane Jr. shall defend the UTA Hardcore Championship in a Hardcore Match."

Eric's face tightens.

Eric Dane Jr.: "Against Maxx. Fine. Fine! I'll beat him again, avoid the scooter, and sue everyone later."

Avril's smile barely moves.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "I had not finished."

Bobby looks up.

Bobby Dean: "That usually means bad news."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "The championship shall be defended against both Mr. Mayhem and Mr. Dean."

Eric stares at her.

Then at Maxx.

Then at Bobby.

Then back at Avril.

Eric Dane Jr.: "No."

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Yes."

Eric Dane Jr.: "No."

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Avril Selene Kinkade: "With admirable repetition, still yes."

Bobby raises a hand again, looking genuinely surprised.

Bobby Dean: "Wait, me too?"

Maxx turns toward Bobby with a bright, chaotic smile.

Maxx Mayhem: "Why not, bruv? Don't you deserve a rematch anyway?"

Bobby thinks about that.

Bobby Dean: "I do like deserving things."

Eric Dane Jr.: "You two cannot be serious."

Eric points at Maxx first.

Eric Dane Jr.: "You are chaos with boots."

Then Bobby.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And you are a rolling liability with snack-based leverage."

Then Avril.

Eric Dane Jr.: "And this is not a very chaotic thing to do!"

Maxx's grin widens.

Maxx Mayhem: "I don't know, bruv."

He gestures toward Eric's face.

Maxx Mayhem: "Judging by your reaction, sure seems like it is."

Bobby nods solemnly from the battle chair.

Bobby Dean: "He's got you there."

Eric Dane Jr.: "No one asked the chair captain."

Avril calmly returns the document to her briefcase.

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Avril Selene Kinkade: "For avoidance of doubt, the match is official. Eric Dane Jr. will defend the UTA Hardcore Championship next week in Spain against Maxx Mayhem and Bobby Dean. The stipulation is Hardcore. The liability waivers have been prepared. I strongly advise all parties to read them, though I expect only one of you will."

She glances briefly toward Bobby and Maxx.

Bobby Dean: "I can skim."

Maxx Mayhem: "I read warning labels after I win."

Avril's expression does not change.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "How reassuring."

Eric looks absolutely appalled, clutching the Hardcore Championship closer as if it may try to leave him on its own.

Eric Dane Jr.: "This is a conspiracy. This is a coordinated attack on talent, legacy, and good television."

Maxx Mayhem: "See ya in Spain."

Maxx pats the battle chair twice.

Maxx Mayhem: "Roll out, Bobby."

Bobby gives Eric a friendly little wave.

Bobby Dean: "Bye, champ. Bring snacks. Or weapons. Or snack weapons."

Eric opens his mouth to respond.

SFX: HONK.

The battle chair pulls forward with a soft mechanical whir, Bobby steering proudly as Maxx walks beside him like a man escorting a tank into war.

Eric shudders visibly at the sound.

Avril watches them leave, then turns her cold green eyes back to Eric.

Avril Selene Kinkade: "Do try to remain champion until then. It keeps the paperwork tidier."

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She exits without waiting for an answer.

Eric Dane Jr. is left standing alone in the hallway, Hardcore Championship over his shoulder, phone forgotten in one hand, expression caught somewhere between outrage and dread.

From somewhere farther down the hall--

SFX: HONK.

Eric flinches again.

Eric Dane Jr.: "I hate this company."

The camera holds on Eric's appalled face for one beat before cutting away.

Maxwell Jett vs. TBD

The broadcast returns to ringside inside the MEO Arena, where the crowd is still riding the noise from the United States Championship match. The ring crew is clearing the last signs of the previous contest, and the commentary desk comes back into focus as John Phillips adjusts his headset.

John Phillips: "Lindsey Lothario retains the United States Championship in a hard-fought defense against Jaxson Ryder, and Mark, what a match that was."

Mark Bravo: "Jaxson Ryder came close. Really close. But close does not get you gold, and The Creed Method walks out of Portugal still holding the United States Championship."

Before John can respond, the lights suddenly shift.

There is no announcement.

No graphic on the screen.

No scheduled match card transition.

Just a single gold spotlight cracking across the stage like a camera flash.

The opening riff of Maxwell Jett's music hits, cocky arena rock grinding into heavy trap drums, and the MEO Arena immediately erupts into boos.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute."

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Mark Bravo: "Oh, look who decided Portugal needed to suffer a little more."

John Phillips: "This is not on our format. Maxwell Jett is not scheduled for this segment."

The boos grow louder.

Then UTA Champion Maxwell Jett steps through the curtain.

And he looks ready to compete.

No designer suit tonight. No scarf draped with casual arrogance. No tailored jacket built purely to offend everyone who cannot afford it. Jett walks out in ring gear, boots laced, wrists taped, the UTA Championship fastened proudly around his waist instead of resting over his shoulder.

He stops beneath the spotlight and slowly looks around the MEO Arena like the building has already disappointed him personally.

The expression is familiar.

Unbearable confidence.

Calculated disgust.

The face of a man who believes every boo is just another person admitting they cannot sit at his table.

John Phillips: "There is the UTA Champion, Maxwell Jett, and he is dressed to wrestle."

Mark Bravo: "That is the part I do not like. Maxwell Jett does not accidentally dress for a fight. If he is in gear, he wants us to notice."

Behind Jett, Jacoby Jacobs and Darian Darrington step through the curtain together.

The Rich Young GRPLZ are all smirks, confidence, and expensive body language, flanking the UTA Champion with synchronized arrogance. Jacoby rolls his shoulders and mouths off toward a fan near the aisle before the group even starts moving. Darian points toward the championship around Jett's waist, then taps his own temple like everyone else in the building should be smart enough to understand what greatness looks like.

John Phillips: "And Maxwell Jett is not alone. Jacoby Jacobs and Darian Darrington, the rest of First Class, are with him."

Mark Bravo: "Of course they are. First Class does not travel economy, and Maxwell Jett does not walk into a room unless he has people around him prepared to laugh at his jokes and block an exit."

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Jett slowly lifts one hand.

Jacoby and Darian stop behind him.

The three hold the stage for a beat too long. Jett in front, the UTA Championship gleaming at his waist. Jacoby to one side, grinning like Lisbon is beneath him. Darian on the other, nodding along to the boos like they are music.

Jett lowers his eyes toward the crowd.

Maxwell Jett: "You're welcome."

The crowd boos even louder.

Jett smiles.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett knows exactly what he is doing. Every word, every pause, every look. He weaponizes the hatred of these crowds."

Mark Bravo: "He takes the oxygen first, John. Every room. Every arena. Every country. He makes everybody react to him, then acts like they should thank him for the privilege."

First Class begins making its way down the ramp.

Jett walks at the center, slow and deliberate, moving with the confidence of a champion who assumes the entire show should stop when he enters. Jacoby walks to his right, jawing at the crowd, laughing when the boos get louder. Darian walks to his left, pointing out fans and shaking his head like their clothes alone have offended the group's tax bracket.

A fan near the barricade leans over and shouts at Jett.

Jett stops.

He slowly turns his head toward the fan, looks them up and down, then glances back at Jacoby.

Maxwell Jett: "Did Portugal import that opinion, or is that locally sourced stupidity?"

Jacoby bursts out laughing.

Jacoby Jacobs: "That was fresh from the market, champ."

Darian Darrington: "Organic hate."

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Jett gives the fan a pitying smile and continues down the ramp as the boos spike around him.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett insulting the Lisbon crowd on his way to the ring, and again, we still do not know why he is out here."

Mark Bravo: "He is dressed to compete, he has First Class with him, and he is walking like a man who knows something we do not. That is usually bad news for everybody who is not Maxwell Jett."

Jett reaches ringside and pauses at the bottom of the steel steps.

He looks at the steps.

Then at Darian.

Maxwell Jett: "Have these been cleaned since the last person touched them?"

Darian looks at the steps, then back at Jett.

Darian Darrington: "They're steel steps."

Jett stares at him.

Maxwell Jett: "Darian, I'm going to give you a second chance to be less disappointing."

Jacoby quickly steps forward and wipes the top step with the bottom of his hand towel, exaggerated and theatrical.

Jacoby Jacobs: "First Class service."

Jett looks at the step again, waits a beat, then finally ascends like he is doing the arena a favor.

He steps onto the apron and wipes his boots with excessive care before entering the ring. Jacoby and Darian follow, each taking a side of the ropes as Jett walks straight to the center.

The UTA Champion unfastens the title from around his waist and raises it high above his head.

The MEO Arena drowns him in boos.

John Phillips: "There is the UTA Championship. Maxwell Jett has held that title since Victory, and every time he walks out with it, he makes sure the entire world knows exactly who sits on top of UTA."

Mark Bravo: "He is the kind of champion who does not just want to beat you. He wants to make you feel stupid for believing anyone else could."

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Jett lowers the championship and hands it to Darian without looking. Darian takes the title carefully, holding it like a museum piece. Jacoby immediately leans over the ropes and demands a microphone from ringside.

A staff member hands one up.

Jacoby looks at it.

Then at Jett.

Jett looks at the microphone with visible disgust.

Maxwell Jett: "Wipe it."

Jacoby wipes the microphone with the same towel, then buffs it once against his own shirt for dramatic effect before presenting it to Jett with both hands.

Jacoby Jacobs: "Sanitized for greatness."

Jett takes the microphone and gives Jacoby a small nod of approval.

Maxwell Jett: "Barely."

Jacoby's smile freezes for half a second, then returns.

Darian stands behind Jett with the UTA Championship draped over his forearms. Jacoby moves to Jett's other side, bouncing slightly with anticipation, ready to laugh, ready to nod, ready to make every insult feel like a group project.

Jett raises the microphone.

The boos explode again before he can say a word.

He lowers the microphone.

Waits.

Smiles.

Then raises it again.

Maxwell Jett: "Please. Keep going."

The boos get louder.

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Jett nods, pretending to be impressed.

Maxwell Jett: "No, really. This is incredible. I had no idea Portugal could be this loud without someone announcing a wine discount."

The crowd erupts in hatred. Jacoby doubles over laughing. Darian points toward a furious section of fans and shakes his head.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett wasting no time making enemies in Lisbon."

Mark Bravo: "That is not wasting time to him, John. That is stretching."

Jett slowly turns in the center of the ring, microphone in one hand, his free hand resting near where the championship had been around his waist moments earlier.

He looks dressed to compete.

He looks pleased with himself.

And worst of all, he looks like he came out here with a plan.

Maxwell Jett: "Now that I have improved the average income, hygiene, and relevance of everyone in this building simply by standing here..."

More boos.

Jett's smile sharpens.

Maxwell Jett: "Let's talk."

Maxwell Jett stands in the center of the ring, microphone raised, smiling through the hatred pouring down from the Lisbon crowd. Jacoby Jacobs stands to his right, Darian Darrington to his left, both men still carrying themselves like the boos belong to people who could not afford to matter.

Darian keeps the UTA Championship draped carefully over his forearms. Jacoby leans casually against the top rope, grinning toward the crowd. Jett lets the noise breathe for another moment.

Maxwell Jett: "You people have been treated to quite the evening, haven't you?"

The crowd boos louder.

Maxwell Jett: "Championship matches. Emotional breakdowns. People bleeding through masks. Whatever that United States Championship situation was supposed to be."

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Jett glances toward Jacoby and Darian with a slight smirk.

Maxwell Jett: "Honestly, if I didn't come out here, this show was in serious danger of becoming depressing."

John Phillips: "Only Maxwell Jett could walk out here after everything we have seen tonight and decide the problem was not enough Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "That is why he is the champion, John. Completely detached from normal human self-awareness."

Jett paces slowly now, letting the microphone hang near his chest. He looks out over the crowd, then back toward the UTA Championship in Darian's hands.

Maxwell Jett: "Now, International Affair is two weeks away."

The mention of International Affair pulls a reaction from the crowd.

Maxwell Jett: "And at International Affair, every championship in UTA will be on the line."

He taps the faceplate of the UTA Championship in Darian's hands.

Maxwell Jett: "Including mine."

The boos grow sharper.

Maxwell Jett: "And after that? I get to walk into All or Nothing and do what no one else in this company is intelligent enough, talented enough, or frankly hygienic enough to do."

Jett slowly turns toward the hard camera.

Maxwell Jett: "Defeat sixty-nine other people and remain your UTA Champion."

The crowd reacts loudly, some cheering the idea of the chaos, most booing the confidence dripping from every word.

John Phillips: "All or Nothing is looming, and Maxwell Jett is already talking about surviving the entire field."

Mark Bravo: "Sixty-nine challengers, one champion, and somehow Jett still thinks the hardest part is going to be dealing with everyone else's smell."

Jett gives the crowd a slow, patronizing nod.

Maxwell Jett: "But see, that is where I am different from every so-called champion who has ever held this

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title before me."

He points to himself with the microphone.

Maxwell Jett: "I do not need to hide until International Affair."

A beat.

Maxwell Jett: "I do not need to wait for the graphic, the press release, the contract signing, the dramatic little video package where someone with a tragic childhood pretends being sad makes them dangerous."

The crowd boos.

Maxwell Jett: "No. I am a fighting champion."

The boos become louder immediately.

Jett lifts one hand, pretending to be moved.

Maxwell Jett: "Thank you. Thank you. I know. Heroism is uncomfortable when you're not used to seeing it with cheekbones."

Jacoby laughs and points toward the crowd.

Jacoby Jacobs: "They don't get it, champ."

Darian Darrington: "Coach behavior."

Jett nods as if both men have made valuable contributions.

Maxwell Jett: "So tonight, here in..."

He pauses, glancing around with theatrical uncertainty.

Maxwell Jett: "Where are we again? Lisbon? Right. The expensive postcard with plumbing."

The boos explode again.

Maxwell Jett: "Tonight, in Lisbon, Portugal, Maxwell Jett is issuing an open challenge."

The crowd noise shifts instantly. The boos turn into buzz. Fans start rising in their seats, looking toward the entrance stage.

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John Phillips: "Wait a minute. Maxwell Jett just issued an open challenge?"

Mark Bravo: "He said it. He said fighting champion. I heard it. I do not trust it, but I heard it."

Jett raises one finger.

Maxwell Jett: "To anyone."

The buzz grows.

Then the finger stays raised.

Maxwell Jett: "Except Chris Ross."

The crowd immediately erupts into boos.

Jett rolls his eyes as if they have missed an obvious point.

Maxwell Jett: "No, no, no. Do not boo intelligence just because it is new to you."

More boos.

Maxwell Jett: "Chris Ross is not a challenger. Chris Ross is a workplace hazard with unresolved emotional damage. I said open challenge, not open invitation for a feral man with a chair fetish to lower the property value."

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett wants to call himself a fighting champion, but immediately excludes the former champion."

Mark Bravo: "To be fair, Chris Ross has been walking around with chairs and ruining everyone's mood. But also, yes, that is very Maxwell Jett."

Jett turns toward the stage and spreads his arms wide.

Maxwell Jett: "So come on."

He waits.

The crowd rises, buzzing with anticipation.

Jett turns slowly toward the entrance ramp, smirk plastered across his face.

Maxwell Jett: "Surely somebody back there wants the opportunity of a lifetime."

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Nothing happens.

The stage remains empty.

Jett lifts the microphone again, enjoying the silence.

Maxwell Jett: "That's what I thought."

He turns back toward the hard camera, already preparing to declare victory over a challenge no one answered.

Then Darian Darrington steps forward.

Not toward the crowd.

Not toward the ropes.

Toward Jett.

Jett notices the movement from the corner of his eye and turns his head slightly.

Maxwell Jett: "Darian?"

Darian still holds the UTA Championship carefully, but his eyes are on Jett now. He looks less smug than before. Less like a hype man. More like a man who heard the words "anyone" and started doing math in his head.

Darian Darrington: "You said anyone."

The crowd reacts with surprise.

Jett lowers the microphone slightly, staring at him.

Maxwell Jett: "I'm sorry?"

Darian Darrington: "You said anyone."

Jacoby slowly straightens from the ropes.

Jett laughs once, short and disbelieving.

Maxwell Jett: "Wait."

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He points the microphone toward Darian.

Maxwell Jett: "You want to challenge me?"

Darian looks down at the UTA Championship in his hands.

Then back at Jett.

Darian Darrington: "Yep."

The MEO Arena pops, not because they suddenly love Darian, but because the absurdity has taken a hard left turn.

John Phillips: "Darian Darrington just stepped up to Maxwell Jett."

Mark Bravo: "I did not have First Class civil war on my Portugal bingo card."

Jett's smile has not vanished completely, but it has become thinner. Tighter. He glances toward Jacoby like this is surely a misunderstanding the room will correct immediately.

Jacoby looks at Darian.

Then at Jett.

Then down at the championship.

Then Jacoby steps forward too.

The crowd grows louder.

Maxwell Jett: "Jacoby."

Jacoby raises both hands slightly, almost apologetic, but not enough to take it back.

Jacoby Jacobs: "I mean..."

Jett stares at him.

Maxwell Jett: "No."

Jacoby Jacobs: "You did say anyone."

Jett's eyes widen slightly.

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Maxwell Jett: "You want to challenge me too?"

Jacoby shrugs, glancing at Darian, then back at Jett.

Jacoby Jacobs: "Sure do."

The crowd erupts again, this time louder, sensing Jett's control of the segment slipping right through his fingers.

John Phillips: "Jacoby Jacobs as well! Both members of the Rich Young GRPLZ are stepping up to Maxwell Jett!"

Mark Bravo: "That open challenge got very closed-door family business real fast."

Jett takes one step back, looking between Darian and Jacoby. For the first time since the segment began, the UTA Champion looks genuinely taken aback.

Not scared.

Not exactly angry.

But surprised.

Offended that the thought even crossed their minds without his permission.

Maxwell Jett: "Let me understand this."

He points at Darian.

Maxwell Jett: "You."

Then at Jacoby.

Maxwell Jett: "And you."

Then at himself.

Maxwell Jett: "Think you can beat me?"

Darian and Jacoby look at each other.

A small pause.

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Darian Darrington: "I mean, we did not say all that."

Jacoby Jacobs: "But also..."

Jacoby points toward the title.

Jacoby Jacobs: "That thing is shiny."

Jett's mouth opens slightly, as if the insult is not the challenge itself but the casualness of it.

Maxwell Jett: "That thing?"

He steps closer to Darian and takes the UTA Championship from him.

Not gently.

Darian lets it go.

Jett holds the title against his chest now, looking from one member of First Class to the other.

Maxwell Jett: "This is not a thing. This is the most important championship in professional wrestling, currently being held hostage by the only person in this company qualified to make it look expensive."

The crowd boos, though the tension in the ring keeps them hooked.

Maxwell Jett: "But fine."

That word makes Jacoby and Darian both look up.

Maxwell Jett: "Fine."

Jett adjusts the title, his smirk slowly returning as his brain catches up and starts turning the surprise into opportunity.

Maxwell Jett: "You want your opportunity?"

He looks at Darian.

Maxwell Jett: "You want to feel important?"

He looks at Jacoby.

Maxwell Jett: "You want to touch something shiny without setting off a store alarm?"

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Jacoby frowns.

Jacoby Jacobs: "That felt personal."

Jett ignores him and turns toward the timekeeper's area.

Maxwell Jett: "Get a referee out here."

The crowd explodes.

John Phillips: "What?"

Mark Bravo: "He is doing it?"

Jett raises the microphone higher, voice cutting through the noise.

Maxwell Jett: "Right now, Lisbon, because apparently I am feeling charitable and because nobody in this ring is smart enough to know when they are being spared humiliation..."

He turns, standing between Jacoby and Darian with the UTA Championship held high.

Maxwell Jett: "I am making this official."

A referee hurries down the ramp from the back, looking confused but ready. Jacoby and Darian both begin loosening up, exchanging looks that are equal parts excitement and disbelief.

Maxwell Jett: "Maxwell Jett versus Darian Darrington versus Jacoby Jacobs."

He pauses and smiles right into the hard camera.

Maxwell Jett: "Triple threat match."

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "An unscheduled triple threat match has just been made by the UTA Champion himself!"

Mark Bravo: "I cannot believe I am saying this, but Maxwell Jett may have talked himself into defending pride against his own entourage!"

Jett lowers the microphone and points at both men with the title still in his other hand.

Maxwell Jett: "And when this is over, boys, you are both going to thank me for the lesson."

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Jacoby and Darian look at each other again.

This time, neither laughs.

The referee slides into the ring as Jett hands the UTA Championship out through the ropes to the timekeeper. The crowd is standing now, still unsure if they are about to see a title defense, an ego trip, or the implosion of First Class.

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett came out here dressed to compete, and he is going to compete. Against his own First Class associates."

Mark Bravo: "He wanted an open challenge. He got two answers from inside the house."

Jett backs into one side of the ring, rolling his wrists and glaring at Jacoby and Darian like they have forgotten their place.

Jacoby takes one corner.

Darian takes another.

The referee stands in the center, still trying to confirm the madness around him.

And Maxwell Jett, UTA Champion, dressed to compete, smiles like this was somehow his plan all along.

The referee stands in the center of the ring, still looking like he is trying to understand how an unscheduled open challenge from the UTA Champion became a triple threat match involving all three members of First Class.

Maxwell Jett backs into one side of the ring, rolling his wrists, smirking like the world has once again bent itself around his genius. Across from him, Jacoby Jacobs and Darran Darrington take separate corners, each man loosening up with exaggerated seriousness.

The UTA Championship rests at the timekeeper's table now, gold gleaming under the arena lights.

John Phillips: "This is still unbelievable. Maxwell Jett came out here, called himself a fighting champion, issued an open challenge, excluded Chris Ross, and somehow ended up with Jacoby Jacobs and Darran Darrington stepping up."

Mark Bravo: "And now we are about to see a triple threat match involving First Class. Either this is the strangest ego implosion I have ever seen, or Maxwell Jett knows something we do not."

Jett looks toward Jacoby.

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Jacoby nods once.

Jett looks toward Darran.

Darran nods too.

The referee glances around, then calls for the bell.

DING DING DING!

The crowd rises immediately, buzzing with curiosity.

Jett steps forward, hands up.

Jacoby comes out of his corner first.

Darran comes out of the other.

The three men slowly move toward the center of the ring, the crowd getting louder with every step.

John Phillips: "Here we go. Triple threat rules. First fall wins."

Mark Bravo: "Something feels wrong."

Jacoby reaches the center first.

Darran steps beside him.

Jett looks from one to the other, jaw set, title-level intensity on his face.

Then Jacoby lifts one finger.

He taps Maxwell Jett lightly on the chest.

Then he throws himself backward and crashes hard to the canvas.

The crowd groans in instant recognition.

Darran lifts one finger too.

He taps Jett on the opposite side of the chest.

Then Darran flings himself down beside Jacoby, landing flat on his back like he has just been struck by

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lightning.

For one second, Maxwell Jett stands between them.

Then the UTA Champion smiles.

Huge.

Awful.

The kind of smile that says everyone in the building should have known better.

John Phillips: "Oh, come on!"

Mark Bravo: "There it is! There it is! It was a ruse!"

The MEO Arena explodes into boos as Jett slowly drops to one knee between both men. He places one hand on Jacoby's chest, then stretches his other hand across Darran's chest, covering both members of the Rich Young GRPLZ at the same time.

The referee hesitates.

Jett snaps his head toward him.

Maxwell Jett: "Count."

The referee looks disgusted, but both shoulders are down.

He drops to the mat.

Referee: "One!"

The boos get louder.

Referee: "Two!"

Jacoby and Darran remain motionless, playing dead beneath Jett's hands.

Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The bell rings again, and the MEO Arena comes absolutely unglued.

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Heavy boos rain down from every side of the building as Maxwell Jett rises to his feet, arms spread wide like he has just survived the greatest test of his life.

John Phillips: "That was a sham! That entire thing was a setup!"

Mark Bravo: "Maxwell Jett just made a mockery of his own open challenge!"

Jacoby sits up first, bursting into laughter.

Darran rolls onto his side, pounding the mat with one hand, laughing just as hard.

Jett points between them, laughing now too, before walking toward the ropes and demanding the UTA Championship back from the timekeeper.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... Maxwell Jett!"

The announcement only makes the crowd angrier.

Jett takes the UTA Championship and holds it high while Jacoby and Darran rise behind him, applauding dramatically.

Jacoby Jacobs: "What a fight!"

Darran Darrington: "Instant classic!"

Jett lowers the championship to his shoulder and snatches the microphone back from ringside.

The boos are so loud he has to wait.

He does not mind.

He loves it.

Maxwell Jett: "Ladies and gentlemen, history."

The boos somehow get louder.

Maxwell Jett: "A courageous champion. Two hungry challengers. A war of attrition. A battle for the ages. And yet, somehow, through grit, heart, intelligence, superior genetics, and what I can only describe as unbearable handsomeness..."

He taps the UTA Championship.

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Maxwell Jett: "...Maxwell Jett survives."

John Phillips: "This is disgusting."

Mark Bravo: "It is disgusting, but look at his face. He thinks this is brilliant."

Jett walks slowly around the ring, Jacoby and Darran behind him now, both back in full hype-man mode.

Maxwell Jett: "Now, I know what you people are thinking. You are thinking, Max, how do you do it? How do you carry this company, elevate your friends, entertain an entire country that desperately needed something worth looking at, and still have enough left in the tank to defeat sixty-nine other people at All or Nothing?"

Jett pauses.

Maxwell Jett: "And the answer is simple."

He looks into the hard camera.

Maxwell Jett: "I am better than you."

The crowd erupts.

Maxwell Jett: "I fight when I want."

He points toward the stage.

Maxwell Jett: "I fight who I want."

He taps the title again.

Maxwell Jett: "And as long as this championship is mine, every single person in that locker room waits in line behind my schedule, my standards, and my permission."

Jett's expression sharpens now. The laughter fades, replaced by something colder.

Maxwell Jett: "Which brings me to Chris Ross."

The crowd reaction changes immediately.

A hard roar rises at the mention of the former champion.

Jett rolls his eyes.

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Maxwell Jett: "Yes, yes, cheer for the angry little graveyard poet. Cheer for the man who found a chair and a mood disorder and decided that was a personality."

More boos.

Maxwell Jett: "Whatever Ross thinks he is doing these last few weeks, whatever creepy hallway silence, whatever dramatic chair sitting, whatever discount horror movie nonsense he has convinced himself counts as intimidation..."

Jett steps closer to the camera-facing ropes.

Maxwell Jett: "It is not going to work."

Jacoby nods behind him.

Jacoby Jacobs: "Not even a little."

Darran Darrington: "Nope."

Maxwell Jett: "Chris Ross is not getting another shot at my UTA Championship because he bought a chair, forgot how to blink, and started talking like a funeral pamphlet."

Jett lifts the title higher on his shoulder.

Maxwell Jett: "You lost, Chris. You failed. You were replaced. And no amount of staring, stalking, sulking, or pretending to be death with a Harrisburg zip code is going to change that."

The lights go out.

The arena drops into darkness.

The crowd reaction detonates instantly.

John Phillips: "Oh my God."

Mark Bravo: "You had to say his name, Max."

For a moment, there is no music.

No movement.

Only the darkness and the roar of the MEO Arena.

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Then the big screen flickers once.

Then again.

A Reaper symbol appears.

Stark.

Cold.

Silent.

The opening of "Black Flame" by Bury Tomorrow begins to crawl through the speakers. The darkness cracks under violent pulses of white and red light, flickering across the stage like emergency strobes in a dead-end alley. The screen behind the entrance shifts to dark streets, fractured shadows, and the harsh suggestion of Harrisburg under nightfall.

John Phillips: "That is Chris Ross. That is The Reaper of Harrisburg." :contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0}

Mark Bravo: "And Maxwell Jett's expression just changed in a hurry."

The lights pulse again.

Through the smoke and red-white strobes, Chris Ross steps through the curtain.

Street clothes.

Cold expression.

No hurry.

No wasted motion.

But this time, Ross is not carrying a folded chair.

He is pushing a cart.

A black-draped object sits on top of it, tall enough to cast an ugly shape beneath the cloth. The fabric hangs heavy, hiding whatever waits beneath it as Ross slowly moves the cart onto the stage.

Inside the ring, First Class stops laughing.

Jacoby takes one step closer to Jett.

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Darran lowers the UTA Championship slightly, eyes locked on the covered object.

Jett tries to laugh, but it comes out thinner than before.

Maxwell Jett: "No. No, no, no."

Ross stops at the top of the stage.

He does not walk down the ramp.

He does not point.

He does not shout.

He stands behind the cart, hands resting lightly on the handle, eyes fixed on the ring.

Maxwell Jett: "Do not even think about bringing whatever low-budget Halloween decoration that is down here!"

The crowd roars.

Ross does not react.

Maxwell Jett: "You hear me, Ross? You are not getting in this ring. You are not getting another shot. You are not getting near me, my championship, my company, or anything else that still has value!"

Ross slowly reaches down and picks up a microphone from the cart.

The crowd quiets in anticipation.

Jett grips his own microphone tighter.

Ross brings the microphone up toward his mouth.

Then stops.

He says nothing.

For several long seconds, Chris Ross simply stares into the ring.

John Phillips: "Ross has the microphone, but he is not speaking."

Mark Bravo: "That is worse. Somehow, that is always worse with him now."

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Jett shakes his head, trying to take control of the silence before it takes control of him.

Maxwell Jett: "Oh, wonderful. More performance art from the man who thinks depression lighting is a strategy."

Ross lowers the microphone.

He places one hand on the black cloth covering the object.

First Class watches.

The crowd watches.

Jett's smirk begins to fade despite his best effort to keep it alive.

Ross pulls the cloth away.

The MEO Arena gasps.

On the cart is a tombstone.

Gray.

Cold.

Carved across the front in black lettering:

MAXWELL JETT

The crowd erupts into a stunned roar.

John Phillips: "My God. That is a tombstone. That is a tombstone with Maxwell Jett's name on it."

Mark Bravo: "First Class is not laughing anymore."

Inside the ring, Jacoby's mouth opens slightly.

Darran stares at the tombstone like he is trying to figure out if leaving the ring would be too obvious.

Jett's face hardens, but the concern flashes before he can bury it. The UTA Champion takes a step toward the ropes, pointing up the ramp.

Maxwell Jett: "You think that scares me?"

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Ross lifts the microphone again.

This time, he speaks.

Low.

Cold.

Measured.

Chris Ross: "You can have all the money and all the riches in the world."

A pause.

Ross looks from Jett to Jacoby, then to Darran, then back to the champion.

Chris Ross: "But in the end..."

The red-white strobes flicker behind him.

Chris Ross: "We're all the same."

Jett says nothing now.

Ross places one hand on the top of the tombstone.

Chris Ross: "Champions die."

A beat.

Chris Ross: "Legends die."

Another beat.

Chris Ross: "Empires fall."

Ross leans slightly toward the microphone, eyes locked on Maxwell Jett.

Chris Ross: "The Reaper just makes the appointment."

The crowd erupts as Ross lowers the microphone.

At the top of the stage, the tombstone stands uncovered beneath the pulsing lights.

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Inside the ring, Maxwell Jett clutches the UTA Championship closer while Jacoby Jacobs and Darran Darrington stand a little nearer to him than they were moments ago.

Chris Ross does not move.

He simply stares from behind the tombstone.

Chris Ross stands at the top of the stage behind the uncovered tombstone, one hand resting across the cold gray stone with Maxwell Jett's name carved into it. The red and white emergency strobes continue to pulse through the smoke, turning the stage into something that feels less like an entrance and more like a crime scene.

Inside the ring, First Class is no longer laughing.

Maxwell Jett clutches the UTA Championship closer to his chest, eyes locked on the tombstone. Jacoby Jacobs and Darran Darrington stand on either side of him, no longer smug, no longer performing, both men visibly trying to decide if they should stay in front of their champion or behind him.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross has sent a chilling message to Maxwell Jett. A tombstone with the UTA Champion's name on it."

Mark Bravo: "Jett can make jokes all night, John, but nobody in that ring is laughing now."

Ross does not move.

He does not need to.

The tombstone speaks enough.

Then, from behind the curtain, a large shadow bursts through the smoke.

Samuel Scythe.

No music.

No full entrance.

No ritual.

Just The Reaper charging from the back and slamming into Chris Ross from the side like a runaway truck.

John Phillips: "Samuel Scythe! Samuel Scythe just attacked Chris Ross!"

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Mark Bravo: "Ross never saw him coming!"

The impact drives Ross away from the cart and sends him stumbling across the stage. Scythe is on him immediately, throwing heavy clubbing shots across Ross' back and shoulders, each blow landing with ugly force beneath the flashing lights.

Ace Andrews comes through the curtain seconds later, suit jacket open, polished control replaced by urgency and command.

Ace Andrews: "Finish him! Finish him now!"

Scythe grabs Ross by the back of the head and tries to drive him toward the stage floor, but Ross blocks with one arm against the metal frame of the cart. He fires a back elbow into Scythe's ribs.

Scythe absorbs it and clubs Ross again.

Ross staggers.

Scythe grabs him by the shirt and hurls him toward the side of the stage, sending Ross shoulder-first into a stack of production crates.

John Phillips: "Samuel Scythe ambushing Ross at the top of the stage, and Ace Andrews is right there directing traffic!"

Mark Bravo: "Ace saw that tombstone and sent his Reaper before Ross could take another step!"

Inside the ring, Maxwell Jett's eyes go wide as the fight erupts on the stage.

Then survival instinct takes over.

Jett turns sharply toward Jacoby and Darran.

Maxwell Jett: "Out. Now."

Jacoby does not ask questions.

Darran does not either.

First Class immediately slips through the ropes and drops to the floor, but they do not head up the ramp. None of them even consider going toward Ross, Scythe, Ace, or the shattered red-white light at the entrance.

Instead, Maxwell Jett leads them the long way around ringside, UTA Championship clutched tight against his body, Jacoby and Darran hurrying behind him as they head toward the opposite side of the arena.

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Mark Bravo: "Look at First Class! They are leaving, but they are not going up that ramp!"

John Phillips: "Maxwell Jett wants no part of what is happening on that stage!"

The camera briefly catches Jett looking back while still moving, his face caught somewhere between anger, shock, and genuine concern.

Then the shot cuts back to the stage.

Scythe has Ross by the neck and waistband, trying to muscle him back toward the cart. Ace points furiously toward the tombstone.

Ace Andrews: "Use it! Use it!"

Scythe drives Ross backward.

Ross digs his boots into the stage.

For a second, the two men lock in a brutal power struggle near the cart, the tombstone looming only inches away.

Scythe lowers his shoulder and tries to drive Ross through it.

Ross suddenly shifts his weight.

He turns.

He catches Scythe around the head and shoulder.

Then Chris Ross throws Samuel Scythe through the tombstone.

The impact is violent and immediate.

The tombstone shatters across the cart and stage, breaking apart in a gray explosion of dust, foam, and fragments as Scythe crashes through Maxwell Jett's carved name.

The MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Ross just threw Scythe through the tombstone! The tombstone shattered!"

Mark Bravo: "Maxwell Jett's name just exploded all over the stage!"

A quick cut catches First Class near the far side of ringside.

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Maxwell Jett stops dead for half a second, staring at the broken tombstone on the stage. His mouth is slightly open, the championship still hugged tight to his chest. Jacoby and Darran both look from the wreckage to Jett, then back toward the quickest exit they can find.

Jett snaps out of it and waves them onward.

Maxwell Jett: "Move!"

They hurry again, disappearing around the side of the set as the camera returns to the stage.

Samuel Scythe lies among the broken tombstone pieces, one arm draped across the edge of the cart, body twisted in the wreckage. Ace Andrews rushes to him, dropping to one knee beside his client.

Ace Andrews: "Samuel! Samuel, get up!"

Ace reaches toward Scythe's shoulder.

Ross reaches Ace first.

The Reaper of Harrisburg grabs Ace Andrews by the throat.

Ace's eyes go wide.

Ross lifts him up.

Not all the way over his head, but high enough that Ace's shoes scrape, then leave the stage for a sickening second. Ace's legs kick beneath him as both hands claw at Ross' wrist.

John Phillips: "Ross has Ace Andrews! Ross has Ace by the throat!"

Mark Bravo: "Ace told Scythe to finish Ross, and now Ace might be the one getting collected!"

Ross holds Ace there, cold eyes locked onto his face.

Ace kicks helplessly, suit jacket hanging open, polished image completely stripped away by panic.

Ace Andrews: "Samuel--"

The word barely gets out.

Ross leans in closer.

Chris Ross: "It's your time to reap what you sow."

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The crowd roars.

Ross tightens his grip.

Then--

BAM!

Samuel Scythe is back up.

Somehow.

Through the broken tombstone, through the wreckage, through the impact that should have kept him down, Scythe launches himself into Ross with a running shoulder block that knocks Ross backward and forces him to drop Ace.

Ace collapses to the stage, gasping and clutching his throat as he rolls away from Ross.

John Phillips: "Scythe is back up! How the hell is Samuel Scythe back up?"

Mark Bravo: "That man just went through a tombstone and came back like it offended him!"

Ross and Scythe collide again near the broken cart.

Ross throws a heavy right hand.

Scythe answers with a European uppercut that snaps Ross' head back.

Ross comes forward anyway, driving a forearm into Scythe's jaw.

Scythe staggers one step, then fires back with another clubbing shot across Ross' neck and shoulder.

They are not wrestling now.

They are fighting.

Ugly.

Heavy.

Two men throwing damage through broken stone and smoke.

John Phillips: "Ross and Scythe are tearing into each other on the stage!"

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Mark Bravo: "This is what happens when two men both think they are the Reaper. The graveyard gets crowded."

At the edge of the frame, First Class can be seen hurrying behind the fight, staying as wide as possible. Maxwell Jett has the UTA Championship pressed to his chest as Jacoby and Darran practically shepherd him toward the back through the safest route available.

Jett glances toward the fight once more.

Ross and Scythe slam into each other again.

Jett decides he has seen enough.

First Class disappears through the side entrance and into the backstage area.

John Phillips: "First Class is escaping through the back! Maxwell Jett wants no part of Chris Ross, Samuel Scythe, or anything else happening on that stage!"

Mark Bravo: "For once, Maxwell Jett made the most intelligent decision in the room."

Ace Andrews, still on one knee, grabs at Scythe's arm as Scythe tries to keep swinging at Ross.

Ace Andrews: "Samuel! Come on! Not now!"

Scythe ignores him at first.

He drives Ross backward with another shoulder to the ribs, nearly sending both men into the wrecked cart. Ross grabs Scythe by the side of the head and rams a knee into his midsection.

Scythe grunts, but does not fall.

Ross pulls him toward the broken tombstone pieces, looking to drive him down again.

Ace grabs Scythe harder now, voice rising with desperation.

Ace Andrews: "Samuel! Listen to me! It is not the time!"

Scythe turns his head slightly toward Ace.

Ross steps forward.

Scythe immediately snaps his eyes back to Ross, ready to keep going.

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Ace pulls at him again, one hand at Scythe's chest now, trying to physically steer a weapon that does not want to be put away.

Ace Andrews: "Not now! Come on!"

For several seconds, Scythe does not move.

Ross stands only a few feet away, breathing hard, fists clenched, cold eyes fixed on him.

The crowd roars, wanting the fight to continue.

Finally, Scythe takes one step back.

Then another.

Ace keeps hold of his arm, guiding him backward through the smoke and broken debris.

John Phillips: "Ace Andrews is trying to get Samuel Scythe out of there. He knows this has already gone sideways."

Mark Bravo: "Ace sent Scythe to finish Ross, and Ross almost finished Ace. That is a bad return on investment."

Scythe backs toward the curtain, but then stops.

He turns back.

Ross stares at him.

Scythe stares back.

The stage feels frozen for a moment. Smoke curls around the broken tombstone. Red and white strobes flash across both men's faces. Ace stands just behind Scythe, still urging him away, but even he goes quiet for half a second, understanding the weight of the stare-down.

John Phillips: "Look at this. Ross and Scythe, eyes locked."

Mark Bravo: "That is not over. Nothing about that look says over."

Ace finally pulls at Scythe again.

Ace Andrews: "Samuel. Now."

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Scythe's jaw tightens.

He slowly backs through the curtain with Ace Andrews beside him, never fully turning away from Chris Ross until the last possible second.

The music has faded.

The boos and cheers blend into one massive roar.

Chris Ross remains alone at the top of the stage.

Behind him, the cart is wrecked.

The tombstone with Maxwell Jett's name has been shattered into pieces.

First Class is gone.

Ace Andrews and Samuel Scythe have retreated.

Ross stands in the middle of the debris, breathing steady, eyes still fixed on the curtain.

Cold.

Silent.

Alone.

John Phillips: "Chris Ross stands tall, but this is far from finished. Maxwell Jett escaped, Samuel Scythe survived the tombstone, and Ace Andrews may have just realized the Reaper of Harrisburg is not going away."

Mark Bravo: "That tombstone was supposed to be Maxwell Jett's warning. Samuel Scythe turned it into a battlefield. And Chris Ross is still standing in the wreckage."

The final shot holds on Chris Ross alone on the stage, surrounded by broken stone and smoke, staring coldly into the darkness where Ace Andrews and Samuel Scythe disappeared.

Fall Out

The broadcast cuts backstage.

The camera is already moving fast, following the sound of raised voices from somewhere down the hallway.

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Production staff step out of the way as the shot pushes through a half-open door marked MEDICAL.

Inside, the room is chaos held together by people trying very hard to stay professional.

Sol Azteca sits on the edge of an exam table, but barely. Her body is turned like she has already tried to stand twice and been forced back down twice. A trainer holds a wad of gauze near her forehead, another tries to check the damage around her neck, and a third keeps reaching for the torn edge of her mask only to stop every time Sol jerks away.

The mask is still on.

What is left of it.

The top has been ripped open, the fabric split and hanging loose near her brow. Blood streaks down from beneath the torn edge, running over exposed skin, through loose strands of hair, and along the gold and dark fabric still clinging to her face. A towel is draped over one side of her head, not enough to hide the damage, only enough to protect what remains of her identity from the camera.

Sol shoves one of the trainer's hands away.

Not gently.

Not politely.

The trainer tries again, and Sol snaps her arm up, forcing space between them.

Trainer: "Sol, you need to let us check the cut."

Sol's breathing is sharp. Angry. Uneven. Her eyes are locked somewhere past everyone in the room like she is still seeing Emily standing over her with the chain in her hand.

Trainer: "You may need stitches. You need to sit still."

Sol tries to stand.

Two officials immediately step in.

Official: "No. No, sit down."

Sol shoves one of them back by the chest, not hard enough to start a fight, but hard enough to make the message clear.

Sol Azteca: "No me toques la máscara. No la toques. ¿Me entiendes?"

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Sol Azteca: "Do not touch my mask. Do not touch it. Do you understand?"

The room freezes for half a second.

She is not calm.

She is not centered.

She is not the smiling woman who claps with the music and brings the crowd into her rhythm.

That version of Sol Azteca is gone right now.

The door opens wider, and Melissa Cartwright steps inside with a microphone in hand. She stops just inside the room, taking in the scene before she says anything. Her expression changes immediately. The usual broadcast polish is still there, but the concern underneath it is real.

Melissa Cartwright: "Sol..."

One of the officials turns toward her.

Official: "Melissa, not now."

Melissa does not push past him. She does not make the moment about herself. She lowers the microphone slightly, keeping her voice controlled but firm.

Melissa Cartwright: "I'm not here to crowd her. But Emily Hightower just left Sol Azteca bleeding in the middle of that ring. She tore at her mask on live television. If Sol wants to say something, I think she has earned that right."

The official hesitates.

Sol's head turns slowly toward Melissa.

The room quiets.

Melissa takes one careful step closer, not too close, keeping space between herself and Sol. She raises the microphone, but not aggressively. There is no sensationalism in her posture. No hunger for the soundbite. Just professionalism, empathy, and the awareness that this is no normal post-match interview.

Melissa Cartwright: "Sol, I know emotions are high. I know medical is trying to evaluate you. But after what Emily Hightower did out there, after she attacked you with that chain and damaged your mask, what is going through your mind right now?"

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Sol stares at Melissa for a second.

Then she laughs once.

There is nothing warm in it.

Sol Azteca: "What is going through my mind?"

She points to the torn upper half of her mask.

Sol Azteca: "Esto no es ring gear. Esto no es costume. Esta máscara soy yo."

Sol Azteca: "This is not ring gear. This is not a costume. This mask is me."

Her voice sharpens.

Sol Azteca: "Emily did not just hit me with a chain. She did not just open my head. She put her hands on my mask. She put her hands on my name, my father, my training, my whole life."

The trainer tries to press the gauze back against Sol's forehead.

Sol violently knocks the hand away again.

Trainer: "Sol, please."

Sol points toward the door, toward the arena, toward wherever Emily Hightower disappeared.

Sol Azteca: "Kore wa yurusanai."

Sol Azteca: "I do not forgive this."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "You hear me, Emily? I can take a punch. I can take blood. I can take pain. But you touch my mask?"

She leans forward, eyes burning beneath the torn fabric.

Sol Azteca: "Chinga tu excusa."

Sol Azteca: "Fuck your excuse."

Melissa watches her carefully, then asks the question that makes the match happen.

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Melissa Cartwright: "There are already officials discussing discipline. After what happened, Emily could be fined, suspended, maybe removed from next week's card entirely. Is that what you want?"

Sol's reaction is immediate.

She turns fully toward Melissa.

The anger in her eyes sharpens.

Sol Azteca: "No."

One of the officials tries to speak, but Sol cuts him off without looking away from Melissa.

Sol Azteca: "No suspension. No fine. No hiding behind office papers. No."

Melissa absorbs that, nodding once.

Melissa Cartwright: "So to be clear, you do not want UTA management to keep Emily Hightower away from you."

Sol stands again, this time forcing the officials to step back. The towel slips slightly, and one of the trainers quickly reaches to keep the torn mask covered. Sol does not even look at them. Her stare stays locked on Melissa's microphone.

Sol Azteca: "I want her next week."

The room goes quiet.

Sol Azteca: "Watashi ga yaru."

Sol Azteca: "I will do it."

She takes a step forward.

Sol Azteca: "Not security. Not management. Not David. Not Buck. Not Dakota. Me."

Her voice lowers, but the anger does not.

Sol Azteca: "She wanted to know what happens when she touches the mask?"

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "Next week, she finds out."

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Melissa's voice lowers slightly.

Melissa Cartwright: "Sol, with respect, that was not just an attack. That was a chain. That was choking. That was repeated blows to the head. You may not be cleared."

Sol steps closer, blood still marking her face, the torn mask hanging like proof of what Emily did.

Sol Azteca: "Then clear me."

Melissa does not interrupt.

Sol Azteca: "If they say no, I will walk through them. If they lock the door, I will break it. If they tell me to stay home, I will come through the crowd again."

A bitter edge enters her voice.

Sol Azteca: "I came through the crowd tonight to save her."

She points toward the torn mask.

Sol Azteca: "Next time I come through, it will not be to save anybody."

One of the officials tries to step between Sol and Melissa again.

Official: "That's enough. We need to get her checked."

Sol snaps her attention to him.

Sol Azteca: "Move."

The official stops.

Sol Azteca: "Do not stand between me and her. Not tonight."

The room goes quiet again.

Melissa keeps the microphone raised, but her expression is softer now. She knows the answer before asking the final question, but asks it anyway because the audience needs to hear it.

Melissa Cartwright: "Then what is your message to Emily Hightower?"

Sol looks directly into the camera.

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Blood on her face.

Mask torn.

Eyes burning.

Not playful.

Not bright.

Not forgiving.

Sol Azteca: "Emily..."

She takes a breath through her nose, trying and failing to steady herself.

Sol Azteca: "You wanted to be a Hightower so bad?"

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "Fine."

Her hand rises slowly to the torn edge of the mask, but she does not cover it.

She shows it.

Sol Azteca: "But you did not just start a fight with me."

Her voice hardens.

Sol Azteca: "Tocaste la máscara."

Sol Azteca: "You touched the mask."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "And in lucha, that means something."

Melissa keeps the microphone raised, but her expression shifts slightly. She knows Sol is not finished.

Sol Azteca: "You want to play with chains?"

Her eyes narrow.

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Sol Azteca: "Then bring them."

The room goes quiet around her.

Sol Azteca: "Next week, I do not want a normal match. I do not want rules that let your family pull you away when it gets too real."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "I want a Tow Chain Match."

That lands heavy enough for even the trainers to stop moving for a second.

Melissa Cartwright: "Sol, are you saying you want to be chained to Emily Hightower?"

Sol does not look away from the camera.

Sol Azteca: "Sí."

Sol Azteca: "Yes."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "One end on her wrist. One end on mine."

Her voice drops lower.

Sol Azteca: "So she cannot run from me."

Another pause.

Sol Azteca: "So David cannot save her from me."

The anger in her voice sharpens.

Sol Azteca: "So Buck cannot pull her away. So Dakota cannot stand between us. So nobody can make a choice for her. Not anymore."

Sol leans closer to the microphone.

Sol Azteca: "Emily, you wrapped that chain around your hand because you wanted to feel like a Hightower."

A pause.

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Sol Azteca: "Next week, I wrap it around us both."

Her breathing is heavier now.

Sol Azteca: "And when that bell rings, cabrona, you are going to understand exactly what you tore."

A trainer reaches toward her again, but Sol snaps her eyes sideways and the trainer stops.

Sol looks back into the camera.

Sol Azteca: "Kusari de nigerenai."

Sol Azteca: "You cannot run from the chain."

A pause.

Sol Azteca: "You wanted the Hightower name?"

Her hand presses against the torn mask.

Sol Azteca: "I want your blood on mine."

The silence after the line is heavy.

The trainers move back in, trying again to check Sol's head, her neck, and the torn mask. This time, Sol lets them get closer, but her eyes never leave the camera.

Not once.

Melissa Cartwright: "There you have it. Sol Azteca does not want Emily Hightower suspended. She does not want Emily Hightower removed. She wants Emily Hightower next week in a Tow Chain Match."

The camera holds on Sol as a trainer presses gauze carefully near the torn edge of the mask.

Sol does not flinch.

Melissa Cartwright: "After what happened tonight, that is no longer just a match."

Sol slowly raises one hand before Melissa can finish.

The room goes quiet again.

Blood still streaks down the exposed upper half of her face, running from the torn edge of the mask. Sol

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drags two fingers through it, wiping the blood from her own skin.

Then she looks directly into the camera.

Slowly, she licks the blood from her fingers.

The trainers freeze.

Melissa does not say a word.

Sol Azteca: "You wanted to rip my mask?"

A pause.

Sol's eyes burn beneath the torn fabric.

Sol Azteca: "Next week..."

Her voice drops lower.

Sol Azteca: "I show you what lives under it."

The silence after that is worse than shouting.

Melissa slowly lowers the microphone.

The final shot catches Sol's bloodied face beneath the ruined mask, eyes locked on the camera, no warmth left in them.

Melissa Cartwright: "That is personal."

The broadcast cuts away.

Lindsey Lothario vs. Jaxson Ryder

The broadcast returns to ringside inside the MEO Arena, where the crowd is still buzzing from the emotional damage left behind by Emily Hightower, Sol Azteca, and the Hightower family. The camera pans across the Lisbon audience, catching signs, waving flags, and fans still trying to process what they witnessed only moments earlier.

At ringside, John Phillips and Mark Bravo sit beneath the glow of the United States Championship graphic now filling the massive screen above the entrance stage.

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John Phillips: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have to shift gears now, because coming up next, the United States Championship is on the line."

Mark Bravo: "And after what we just saw, I almost need a minute. But there is no minute in UTA. We are going straight into championship business."

John Phillips: "Lindsey Lothario defends the United States Championship against Jaxson Ryder, and this is a major opportunity for Ryder. We know the kind of heart, energy, and big-match endurance he brings every time he steps into the ring."

Mark Bravo: "Jaxson Ryder is the kind of guy who can ride a crowd straight into a title win if you give him an opening. He is fast, he is fearless, and when he gets rolling, the whole building starts moving with him."

John Phillips: "But Lindsey Lothario has changed the landscape around that championship. Under the influence of Eli Creed and The Creed Method, Lindsey has become colder, more focused, and much more dangerous."

Mark Bravo: "That United States Championship is not just a belt right now, John. It is proof of concept. Lindsey Lothario is what Eli Creed points to when he tells people his method works."

John Phillips: "And tonight, Lindsey will have both Eli Creed and Kairo Bey with them. The Creed Method will be in full presence for this title defense."

Mark Bravo: "Which means Jaxson Ryder may be walking into the biggest match of his singles career with a whole philosophy standing across from him."

The ring announcer steps into the center of the ring with a microphone in hand. The referee stands nearby, glancing toward the timekeeper's table where the United States Championship is waiting to be presented once the champion arrives.

Ring Announcer: "The following contest is scheduled for one fall, and it is for the UTA United States Championship!"

The MEO Arena erupts into cheers. The title graphic flashes again across the screen, red, white, blue, and gold burning over the stage.

John Phillips: "The United States Championship has become one of the most contested prizes in UTA, and tonight Jaxson Ryder has the chance to change his career forever."

Mark Bravo: "And he is not coming alone either. Carter Durant will be at ringside with him. U.S.A standing together for this one."

The arena lights suddenly burst into red, white, and blue strobes.

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The opening pulse of "Light 'Em Up" by Fall Out Boy blasts through the speakers, and the Lisbon crowd immediately jumps to its feet.

Jaxson Ryder explodes through the curtain with his arms thrown wide, already feeding off the sound of the building. He turns to one side of the stage, then the other, slapping his own chest before pointing out over the crowd.

John Phillips: "Here comes the challenger! From Dayton, Ohio, Jaxson Ryder!"

Mark Bravo: "Look at that energy! Jaxson Ryder just walked into a title match like somebody plugged him into the arena lights!"

Jaxson jogs to the edge of the stage and plants his feet, bouncing in place as the crowd claps along with the rhythm. His face is focused, but the smile is there too. Not arrogance. Not showboating. The smile of someone who knows exactly how big this moment is and refuses to be afraid of it.

Jaxson Ryder: "LET'S GO, LISBON!"

The crowd answers loudly.

Then Carter Durant bursts through the curtain behind him.

Teal and purple accents flash through the red, white, and blue lighting as Carter sprints into view, full of motion and fire. He slows only when he reaches Jaxson, clapping him hard on the shoulder before pointing down toward the ring.

John Phillips: "And there is Carter Durant, Jaxson Ryder's partner in U.S.A, accompanying him for this United States Championship match."

Mark Bravo: "That is smart. Lindsey has The Creed Method. Jaxson has Carter Durant. Carter is not here to wrestle, but he is absolutely here to make sure this thing does not become three-on-one."

Jaxson and Carter stand together at the top of the ramp for a moment. Carter says something into Jaxson's ear, his hands moving quickly, all urgency and belief. Jaxson nods, eyes never leaving the ring.

Then Jaxson raises one arm high.

Carter points toward him with both hands, hyping the crowd.

Carter Durant: "That's the next champion right there!"

The Lisbon crowd cheers again, louder this time, as the two members of U.S.A start down the ramp.

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Jaxson takes the lead, slapping hands on both sides, stopping briefly to salute a fan holding a homemade "THE ACE ALWAYS RISES" sign. Carter stays a step behind and to the side, more alert than playful tonight, his eyes scanning the aisle, the ring, and the stage behind them.

John Phillips: "You can see the difference in Carter Durant tonight. He is usually all movement, all charisma, all second-line energy. But right now, he is watching everything."

Mark Bravo: "Because he knows who is coming out next. Eli Creed does not just stand at ringside. He changes the temperature around the match. Carter has to be the eyes in the back of Jaxson's head tonight."

Jaxson reaches the bottom of the ramp and turns toward the hard camera. He taps his chest once, then points toward the ring.

Jaxson Ryder: "The Ace always rises!"

The crowd repeats the phrase in scattered pockets, and Jaxson nods with a burst of confidence. Carter claps along behind him, keeping the fans engaged while still glancing toward the entrance stage.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder has always thrived on crowd energy. He wrestles clean, he wrestles fast, and he wrestles like every match is a chance to prove something to everyone watching."

Mark Bravo: "And tonight he is not just trying to prove something. He is trying to take the United States Championship from someone who has become very hard to read and even harder to beat."

Jaxson rolls under the bottom rope and pops immediately to his feet. He hits the near ropes, rebounds once, then sprints to the corner and climbs to the middle turnbuckle.

The MEO Arena cheers as he points out across the building, then raises both arms overhead.

Jaxson Ryder: "I hear you! I hear all of you!"

Carter remains outside the ring, circling to Jaxson's corner. He does not climb onto the apron yet. He does not make the moment about himself. He takes his place near the steps, hands on hips, eyes still scanning, already settling into that manager-like position for the match.

John Phillips: "Carter Durant taking his place on the outside, and that is where he will remain for this match. He is here to support Jaxson Ryder, not to compete."

Mark Bravo: "Support is important, but restraint is going to matter too. If Carter gets baited by Creed, by Kairo, or by Lindsey, he could accidentally give the champion exactly the distraction they want."

Jaxson hops down from the turnbuckle and jogs across to the opposite corner. He climbs again, this time pointing toward Carter before motioning around his waist.

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The message is clear.

Tonight, he wants gold.

Carter nods sharply from ringside and taps the apron three times.

Carter Durant: "Your pace! Your fight! Your moment!"

Jaxson drops back to the canvas and begins pacing the ring. His movement is quick and spring-loaded, every step carrying restless energy. He rolls his shoulders, shakes out his arms, then turns toward the entrance stage.

The smile fades slightly.

The focus sharpens.

John Phillips: "You can see Jaxson locking in now. The fun, the energy, the connection with the crowd, that is all part of who he is. But this is a title match. This is Lindsey Lothario. This is The Creed Method."

Mark Bravo: "This is where the building stops being enough. The crowd can lift you, but they cannot wrestle for you. Jaxson Ryder has to take that energy and turn it into execution."

Carter steps closer to Jaxson's corner and leans one forearm against the apron, speaking calmly now, grounding his partner before the champion arrives.

Carter Durant: "Stay sharp. No chasing. No reaching. Make them come to you."

Jaxson nods once without taking his eyes off the stage.

The music begins to fade beneath the crowd noise.

Red, white, and blue lights settle back into the standard arena glow. Jaxson Ryder stands in the ring, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. Carter Durant remains outside in his corner, alert and ready.

John Phillips: "The challenger is in the ring. Jaxson Ryder is ready for the biggest opportunity of his singles career."

Mark Bravo: "And now the question becomes, what does the United States Champion look like tonight with Eli Creed and Kairo Bey behind them?"

Jaxson turns his neck once, exhales, and plants his feet.

At ringside, Carter Durant points toward the stage, warning him before the lights can even change.

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Jaxson Ryder stands in the ring, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet as the last notes of his entrance fade beneath the roar of the Lisbon crowd. Outside the ring, Carter Durant remains near Jaxson's corner, one hand on the apron, eyes locked on the stage.

The energy in the building shifts.

Not lower.

Colder.

The bright red, white, and blue glow from Jaxson's entrance drains away as a soft gold light begins to spread across the stage. It is warm at first. Almost beautiful. Almost comforting.

Then the gold intensifies.

Too bright.

Too clean.

Too controlled.

A low, steady pulse hums through the MEO Arena. The crowd begins to boo before anyone steps through the curtain, already recognizing the atmosphere more than the music itself.

John Phillips: "And now we wait for the United States Champion."

Mark Bravo: "This is what I was talking about, John. The room changes when The Creed Method arrives. It does not feel like an entrance. It feels like a diagnosis."

The lights fade to soft gold.

A single spotlight finds Eli Creed standing center stage.

He is calm. Still. Hands folded loosely in front of him. The boos pour down, but Creed does not flinch from them. He closes his eyes for one slow breath, accepting the hatred like it is simply another confession from a crowd too broken to understand him.

Then he opens his eyes.

And smiles.

John Phillips: "Eli Creed leading the way for The Creed Method."

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Mark Bravo: "Of course he is. Creed does not follow proof. He presents it."

Creed extends one arm toward the entranceway, palm open, almost reverent.

A thin wash of blue, pink, and white neon flickers through the gold for a heartbeat.

Then Kairo Bey steps through the curtain.

The reaction is mixed, complicated, and loud. Some fans still cheer the flashes of The Neon Ace they remember. Others boo the company he now keeps. Kairo stands to Creed's side with his wrists taped, shoulders loose but controlled, eyes forward. There is still rhythm in him. Still style. Still electricity under the surface.

But the easy grin is gone.

The neon does not own the stage tonight.

The gold does.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey alongside Eli Creed, and once again you can see the struggle in the presentation. That electricity is still there, but it feels contained."

Mark Bravo: "That is what Creed wants. He does not want to kill the talent. He wants to cage it, direct it, and then claim the results as enlightenment."

Creed and Kairo both turn slightly toward the curtain.

The pulse deepens.

A harder guitar edge cuts through the arena as the metal cover of "Born This Way" hits the speakers.

The boos grow louder.

Lindsey Lothario steps into the gold light with the UTA United States Championship held at their side.

No wild burst of celebration.

No demand for applause.

No sweeping theatrics meant to make the whole building orbit around them.

Lindsey stands still beneath the spotlight, red-and-black gear catching the glare, hair set back from their face, hands taped, posture compact. The championship is not presented like jewelry. It is carried like

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evidence.

Proof.

Purpose.

A result Eli Creed can point to.

John Phillips: "There is Lindsey Lothario, the reigning United States Champion."

Mark Bravo: "And that is not the same energy we have seen from Lindsey before. Everything is tighter now. Sharper. The confidence is still there, but it has teeth."

Lindsey slowly lifts the United States Championship from their side and rests it against their shoulder. Their eyes stay locked on the ring, on Jaxson Ryder, on the challenger who waits with Carter Durant in his corner.

Jaxson does not back away.

Carter's posture tightens outside the ring.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder has to contend not just with the champion, but with everything around the champion. Eli Creed. Kairo Bey. The Creed Method. The atmosphere. The pressure."

Mark Bravo: "And Lindsey Lothario has become dangerous because they do not wrestle like they are chasing attention anymore. They wrestle like attention is a distraction they have learned to outgrow."

Creed begins walking first.

Kairo follows half a step behind and to one side.

Lindsey moves last at first, letting the formation breathe, the championship still on their shoulder. But after only a few steps, Lindsey comes even with Creed, no longer behind him, not quite in front of him either.

Creed notices.

His smile does not change.

John Phillips: "Interesting visual there. Creed may lead The Method, but Lindsey is the champion. Lindsey is walking with the title, and they know exactly what that means."

Mark Bravo: "That is the tension inside the whole thing. Creed teaches. Lindsey proves. Kairo watches. But the gold? The gold is with Lindsey."

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The trio moves down the ramp under the gold light. Kairo's neon accents flicker across the floor beneath him, but they never fully break through. Creed keeps his eyes soft and forward, wearing that unsettling calm like a preacher stepping into a congregation that does not yet know it is being judged.

Lindsey walks with measured discipline. Their guard stays relaxed but ready. One hand occasionally touches the United States Championship, not possessively, but with awareness. The old flourish is not entirely gone. Every few steps, there is the faintest turn of the shoulder, the smallest smirk at a fan's jeer, the ghost of a pose swallowed before it can become performance.

Everything serves the fight now.

John Phillips: "Lindsey Lothario has stripped away so much of the noise. What remains is a champion who fights behind a compact guard, who uses low kicks, elbows, knees, clinch pressure, and sudden finishing bursts."

Mark Bravo: "And that is bad news for Jaxson Ryder. Jaxson wants rhythm. He wants speed. He wants crowd-fueled momentum. Lindsey wants to close the distance and make every exchange feel like punishment."

At ringside, Carter Durant steps closer to Jaxson's corner, clapping twice toward his partner.

Carter Durant: "Eyes on the champ. Not him. Not him. The champ."

Jaxson nods, never looking away from Lindsey.

Creed reaches the bottom of the ramp first and stops.

Kairo stops beside him.

Lindsey continues one step past them, then pauses near the steel steps. They look into the ring at Jaxson, then slowly lift the United States Championship from their shoulder.

The crowd boos louder.

Lindsey raises the title, not high enough to play to the entire building, but high enough that Jaxson Ryder cannot miss it.

Lindsey Lothario: "This is what purpose looks like."

Jaxson steps forward inside the ring, gripping the top rope.

Jaxson Ryder: "Then I'm taking it from you."

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The crowd pops hard.

Lindsey's eyes narrow slightly.

Not anger.

Interest.

Mark Bravo: "That is what I like about Jaxson. He is not overwhelmed. He knows exactly what is standing in front of him, and he still wants the fight."

John Phillips: "But look at Lindsey. That did not rattle them. If anything, it sharpened their focus."

Creed steps closer to Lindsey, his voice low but picked up just enough by the ringside camera.

Eli Creed: "Let him believe. Belief makes the fall educational."

Lindsey gives the smallest nod.

Kairo watches Jaxson now, his expression unreadable. There is no mocking gesture. No easy grin. Just a steady stare from a man who looks like he is still learning which parts of himself he is allowed to show.

John Phillips: "Kairo Bey standing with The Creed Method tonight, and Carter Durant has to keep an eye on him. Kairo can change an entire situation in a blink."

Mark Bravo: "That is why Carter is out here. If Kairo moves, Carter has to move faster. If Eli speaks, Carter has to make sure Jaxson does not listen."

Lindsey climbs the steel steps and pauses on the apron.

They look out over the Lisbon crowd for the first time, letting the boos roll across them. A faint smirk appears.

There it is.

The flicker of the old show-stealer.

Then it disappears.

Lindsey steps through the ropes and into the ring.

Jaxson stays in his corner, bouncing lightly again, though his eyes never leave the champion.

Carter Durant remains outside, hands on the apron, body angled so he can watch Creed and Kairo without

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losing sight of the ring.

Creed moves slowly to the champion's side of ringside, taking a position near the floor with that serene, unbearable smile. Kairo follows, standing slightly behind him but not fully hidden. He folds his arms and watches.

John Phillips: "There is the picture. Jaxson Ryder in the ring with Carter Durant at ringside. Lindsey Lothario defending the United States Championship with Eli Creed and Kairo Bey outside."

Mark Bravo: "There are a lot of moving pieces here. And the referee better understand that every person outside that ring can become a factor without ever throwing a punch."

Lindsey walks to the center of the ring and slowly raises the United States Championship overhead.

The boos intensify.

Jaxson steps out of his corner now, eyes on the title.

The referee moves between them and asks Lindsey for the championship.

Lindsey lowers it slowly, holding onto the strap for a beat longer than necessary.

Lindsey Lothario: "Careful with it."

The referee takes the title.

Lindsey turns their eyes back to Jaxson.

Lindsey Lothario: "You will not be."

Jaxson steps closer, jaw set.

Jaxson Ryder: "We'll find out."

The referee raises the United States Championship high above both competitors.

The MEO Arena roars, half for the image of the gold, half for the anticipation of the fight about to begin.

John Phillips: "That is what this is all about. The UTA United States Championship."

Mark Bravo: "Jaxson Ryder has the heart, the speed, and Carter Durant in his corner. Lindsey Lothario has the title, The Creed Method, and a dangerous new focus. That is a hell of a formula, John."

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The referee hands the championship through the ropes to the timekeeper.

At ringside, Eli Creed watches the belt leave Lindsey's hands, then looks back toward Jaxson with a sympathetic smile that feels anything but kind.

Kairo shifts his weight slightly, neon accents catching the gold light for a second.

Carter sees it and points two fingers toward his own eyes, then toward Kairo.

Carter Durant: "I see you."

Kairo gives no response.

Inside the ring, Lindsey rolls their neck once and raises their guard, compact and controlled. Jaxson bounces twice, shakes out his arms, then settles into a ready stance.

John Phillips: "The champion is ready. The challenger is ready. United States Championship on the line."

Mark Bravo: "And nobody out here better blink."

The camera cuts tight to Lindsey Lothario.

Cold eyes.

Taped hands.

Purpose in every breath.

Then to Jaxson Ryder.

Energy contained.

Heart racing.

Opportunity staring him in the face.

The referee checks both competitors one last time.

At ringside, Carter Durant leans forward.

Across the floor, Eli Creed smiles.

Kairo Bey watches in silence.

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The referee stands between Lindsey Lothario and Jaxson Ryder, one hand raised toward the champion, the other toward the challenger. Outside the ring, Carter Durant leans forward near Jaxson's corner, focused and alert. Across the floor, Eli Creed stands with his hands folded loosely in front of him, wearing that soft, unsettling smile. Kairo Bey remains just behind him, arms folded, eyes fixed on the ring.

The MEO Arena buzzes with anticipation.

John Phillips: "United States Championship on the line. Lindsey Lothario defending against Jaxson Ryder. This could be a career-changing night for the challenger."

Mark Bravo: "And Jaxson knows it. Carter knows it. Everybody in this building knows it. The question is whether Jaxson can keep this match at his pace, because if Lindsey slows him down, this gets ugly fast."

Lindsey stands almost motionless in the corner, guard loose but compact, eyes narrowed. Jaxson bounces lightly on the balls of his feet, shoulders moving, fingers flexing, the crowd energy still running through him.

The referee checks both competitors one last time.

Then he points to the timekeeper.

DING DING DING!

The bell rings, and the United States Championship match is officially underway.

John Phillips: "There's the bell!"

Mark Bravo: "Here we go. Championship time."

Jaxson steps out quickly, circling to his left, trying to bring movement into the match immediately. Lindsey steps out slower, hands higher now, elbows tight, chin tucked, cutting off space instead of chasing.

Jaxson feints forward with his lead hand.

Lindsey does not bite.

Jaxson shifts right.

Lindsey angles with him.

The champion's footwork is not flashy. It is economical. Every step closes a lane, every movement seems designed to make the ring feel smaller.

John Phillips: "Right away, Jaxson Ryder wants motion. Lindsey Lothario is not giving him open runway."

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Mark Bravo: "That is Creed Method Lindsey. Compact guard, small steps, nothing wasted. Jaxson wants to light this thing up. Lindsey wants to turn the lights down and make him fight in a phone booth."

Jaxson lunges in for a collar-and-elbow tie-up, but Lindsey answers with a sharp low kick to the lead thigh.

SMACK.

Jaxson hops back, shaking the leg once.

Lindsey resets immediately.

John Phillips: "Low kick by the champion. Not a tie-up. Not a feeling-out hold. Lindsey goes right to the leg."

Mark Bravo: "That is how you start taking away Jaxson's best weapon. You kick the tire before he can hit the highway."

Carter claps from ringside, trying to keep Jaxson grounded.

Carter Durant: "You're good! Keep moving! Do not stand there!"

Jaxson nods and circles again, a little wider this time.

Lindsey steps forward with another low kick.

Jaxson sees it coming and hops over the strike, landing light before snapping a quick dropkick into Lindsey's chest.

The champion stumbles backward two steps, more displaced than hurt.

The crowd pops.

John Phillips: "Dropkick from Jaxson Ryder! There's that explosiveness!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the pace he needs. In and out. Do not let Lindsey settle into the clinch."

Jaxson pops to his feet and throws one arm up, feeding off the reaction.

Jaxson Ryder: "Come on!"

The crowd gets louder.

Lindsey straightens near the ropes, brushing a hand across their chest where the dropkick landed. They look at Jaxson. Then at the crowd. A faint smirk flickers across their face.

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Just for a second.

Then the guard comes back up.

John Phillips: "A flash of that confidence from Lindsey, but they shut it down almost immediately."

Mark Bravo: "That is what's scary. Lindsey still has the swagger. They just do not let it drive anymore."

They circle again.

This time, Lindsey steps in first, throwing a probing jab toward Jaxson's chest. Jaxson parries and answers with a side headlock attempt, wrapping the champion's head and turning his hips to control.

Lindsey immediately drives a short knee into Jaxson's ribs.

Then another.

Jaxson grimaces but keeps the headlock.

Lindsey backs him toward the ropes and shoves him off.

Jaxson rebounds fast.

Lindsey drops down.

Jaxson hurdles over, hits the far ropes, and comes back even faster.

Lindsey rises for a clothesline.

Jaxson ducks under, hits the ropes a third time, and springs off with a flying forearm.

Lindsey goes down.

The crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "Flying forearm! Jaxson Ryder is starting to accelerate!"

Mark Bravo: "This is what Carter was talking about. Make Lindsey move. Make the champion reset over and over again."

Jaxson rolls through to his feet and sees Lindsey getting back up. He charges again, but Lindsey suddenly steps forward and catches him in a tight clinch.

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Jaxson's momentum stops dead.

Lindsey pulls his head down and drives a knee into the ribs.

Then another knee.

Then a short elbow across the side of the head.

Jaxson stumbles back into the ropes.

John Phillips: "That is the danger zone. Lindsey Lothario gets the clinch, and suddenly the whole match changes."

Mark Bravo: "Jaxson was flying, and Lindsey just grounded him with three strikes in a closet."

Lindsey follows and throws a hard knife-edge chop across Jaxson's chest.

CRACK.

Jaxson winces, but fires back with a forearm.

Lindsey absorbs it and answers with another low kick to the thigh.

Jaxson buckles slightly.

Lindsey grabs the wrist and pulls him into a short-arm clothesline.

Jaxson hits the mat hard.

John Phillips: "Short-arm clothesline by Lindsey! The champion slowing the challenger down."

Mark Bravo: "That is the adjustment. Jaxson wins the open space. Lindsey wins the pocket."

Lindsey drops into the first cover of the match, pressing a forearm across Jaxson's jaw.

Referee: "One!"

Jaxson kicks out before two.

Lindsey does not argue. They immediately shift their weight and drive a forearm across Jaxson's face, keeping him flat for another second before rising to one knee.

Across the floor, Eli Creed nods softly.

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Eli Creed: "Do not chase the rise. Interrupt it."

Lindsey hears it.

They grab Jaxson by the wrist and pull him into a seated position before snapping a kick across his upper back.

Jaxson arches in pain.

John Phillips: "Creed calling instruction from the outside."

Mark Bravo: "Not yelling. Not panicking. Coaching. That might be worse."

Carter Durant steps around Jaxson's corner, pointing toward Eli.

Carter Durant: "Hey! Let them wrestle!"

Eli turns his head slowly toward Carter, smiling as if the interruption is a gift.

Eli Creed: "Support without wisdom is just noise, Carter."

Carter takes a step toward him, but stops himself. He points back to the ring instead.

Carter Durant: "Jax! Watch the kicks!"

Inside the ring, Lindsey pulls Jaxson up and tries to whip him into the corner. Jaxson reverses, sending Lindsey into the turnbuckles instead.

Jaxson charges.

Lindsey steps out of the corner and catches him with a back elbow.

Jaxson staggers.

Lindsey steps onto the second rope, looking for a sudden crossbody.

Jaxson recovers quickly, springs upward, and catches Lindsey mid-flight with a dropkick to the ribs.

Lindsey crashes to the mat.

The crowd surges again.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder caught the champion out of the air!"

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Mark Bravo: "That is timing! That is exactly what Ryder needed!"

Jaxson rolls toward the ropes, still clutching his ribs from the earlier knees. Carter pounds the apron from outside.

Carter Durant: "That's it! Build it!"

Jaxson pulls himself up as Lindsey rises near center ring. The challenger explodes forward with a dropkick, sending Lindsey back into the ropes. Lindsey rebounds, and Jaxson catches them with a spinning neckbreaker.

Lindsey hits the mat hard.

Jaxson hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Lindsey kicks out.

John Phillips: "First real near fall for the challenger!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Jaxson. He is not shocked. He knew it would take more. He is staying with it."

Jaxson gets to his feet and immediately reaches for Lindsey. The champion rolls toward the ropes, trying to create distance. Jaxson follows, but the referee steps in as Lindsey hooks one arm over the bottom rope.

Referee: "Break, Jaxson! They're in the ropes!"

Jaxson backs away cleanly with both hands up.

Carter nods approvingly from the floor.

Carter Durant: "Good! Clean! Stay clean!"

On the opposite side, Kairo Bey's eyes shift from Carter to Jaxson.

Something about that restraint registers.

Eli notices Kairo looking.

Without turning fully, Creed speaks softly.

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Eli Creed: "Mercy is often just fear wearing manners."

Kairo does not answer.

Inside the ring, Lindsey rises at the ropes and suddenly lunges forward with a low kick as Jaxson steps back in. Jaxson checks it with his shin this time, then fires a forearm to Lindsey's jaw.

Lindsey answers with one of their own.

Jaxson fires again.

Lindsey fires back.

The crowd begins to build with each shot.

John Phillips: "Now they are trading in the center!"

Mark Bravo: "Dangerous game for Jaxson. Lindsey's strikes are compact, and they are landing heavy."

Jaxson lands a forearm that turns Lindsey's head.

Lindsey slowly looks back.

The faintest smirk.

Then Lindsey snaps a sudden elbow over the top that catches Jaxson near the temple.

Jaxson stumbles backward.

Lindsey follows with a sharp knee to the body, then hooks him for a snap suplex.

Jaxson blocks.

Lindsey tries again.

Jaxson blocks a second time, then reverses, lifting Lindsey over with a snap suplex of his own.

The crowd cheers as Lindsey hits the mat and Jaxson floats over into another cover.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

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Lindsey kicks out again, this time a little harder.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder with another two-count!"

Mark Bravo: "That challenger is not just surviving. He is making Lindsey work."

Jaxson rises and points toward the corner, the crowd coming with him.

Carter starts clapping in rhythm.

Jaxson climbs to the middle rope, measuring Lindsey as the champion begins to rise.

John Phillips: "Jaxson may be looking to fly here."

Jaxson leaps from the middle rope with a crossbody.

Lindsey catches him.

The crowd gasps.

Lindsey staggers backward under the impact but keeps hold, turns, and powers Jaxson down with a running powerslam.

The air leaves Jaxson's body on impact.

John Phillips: "Encore Slam! Lindsey caught him and drove him down!"

Mark Bravo: "That is the champion's power showing up right when Jaxson started believing he could fly!"

Lindsey hooks the leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Jaxson kicks out.

Carter exhales hard at ringside, relief flashing across his face.

Carter Durant: "Stay in it! Stay in it!"

Lindsey sits beside Jaxson for a second, breathing evenly, not frustrated yet. They look toward Eli Creed.

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Creed gives a small nod.

Lindsey turns back to Jaxson and presses one knee into his ribs, pinning him in place while reaching for the wrist.

John Phillips: "Lindsey slowing the pace again after that powerslam."

Mark Bravo: "That is championship control. Big impact, then pressure. Do not let the challenger bounce. Do not let the crowd resurrect him."

Lindsey pulls Jaxson up into a front facelock, then shifts the grip into a tight Muay Thai-style clinch. Jaxson tries to pry the hands loose, but Lindsey drives a knee into the body.

Then another.

Then a short elbow across the collarbone.

Jaxson drops to one knee.

Lindsey leans close.

Lindsey Lothario: "You are not taking what rebuilt me."

Jaxson grimaces and shoves at Lindsey's midsection, trying to create space. Lindsey tightens the clinch again.

Carter slaps the mat from outside.

Carter Durant: "Fight the hands! Fight the hands!"

Jaxson reaches up, breaks one side of the grip, and suddenly drops backward, pulling Lindsey forward into a jawbreaker.

Lindsey staggers away, holding their mouth.

Jaxson rolls to the corner, sucking in air.

John Phillips: "Jawbreaker from Jaxson! He created the opening!"

Mark Bravo: "But can he use it? Lindsey has done a lot of damage to the body already."

Lindsey charges into the corner, looking for a follow-up knee.

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Jaxson moves.

Lindsey hits the turnbuckles chest-first and stumbles backward.

Jaxson jumps to the second rope behind them.

Springboard crossbody.

This time it connects clean.

Jaxson rolls through, hooks the leg, and stacks Lindsey's shoulders.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Lindsey kicks out just before three.

The arena gasps, then cheers.

John Phillips: "Near fall! Jaxson Ryder nearly had the United States Championship!"

Mark Bravo: "That was close. That was real close."

For the first time, Lindsey rolls away with a flash of irritation. Eli Creed's smile fades only slightly, but his eyes sharpen. Kairo Bey shifts at ringside, watching the champion push up from the canvas.

Carter Durant points toward Jaxson, shouting over the crowd.

Carter Durant: "You're right there! Keep going!"

Jaxson rises, breathing hard, one hand pressed to his ribs. Lindsey gets to one knee across from him, jaw set now, the calm starting to harden into something more dangerous.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder is proving he belongs in this championship match."

Mark Bravo: "And Lindsey Lothario just realized this is not going to be a lesson. This is going to be a fight."

The two competitors rise at the same time.

Jaxson bounces once, trying to call on the crowd again.

Lindsey raises their guard.

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On one side, Carter Durant urges the challenger forward.

On the other, Eli Creed watches the champion like a man waiting for the next step of a process to reveal itself.

The match is beginning to open up.

Jaxson Ryder and Lindsey Lothario stand across from each other near the center of the ring, both breathing harder now. The champion keeps their guard compact, elbows tight, eyes locked on Jaxson's midsection. Jaxson bounces once on his toes, still favoring the ribs, but the crowd is pulling him forward.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder has forced Lindsey Lothario into a fight here. The champion has slowed him down at times, but Ryder keeps finding bursts."

Mark Bravo: "That is the challenger's whole game right now. Lindsey wants control. Jaxson wants windows. Every time he gets one, he jumps through it."

Carter Durant slaps the apron from the outside, nodding toward Jaxson.

Carter Durant: "Right there! Stay on them! Stay on them!"

Across the floor, Eli Creed watches Carter with mild amusement, then turns his focus back toward Lindsey.

Eli Creed: "Pressure reveals structure. Break his rhythm."

Lindsey hears it and steps forward.

Jaxson moves first, firing a forearm into Lindsey's jaw.

Lindsey absorbs it and returns a low kick to the thigh.

Jaxson grits his teeth and fires another forearm.

Lindsey answers with a second low kick, harder this time.

Jaxson buckles slightly but refuses to fall. He swings again, but Lindsey ducks under and pulls him into the clinch.

One knee to the ribs.

Another knee to the ribs.

Then Lindsey turns their hips and throws Jaxson over with a snap suplex, holding the bridge for a taunting

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beat before releasing.

John Phillips: "Snap suplex by the champion, and Lindsey held that bridge just long enough to make a point."

Mark Bravo: "There is still a little show in there. Not much. Just enough to sting."

Lindsey rolls over and covers, pressing down across Jaxson's chest.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Jaxson gets the shoulder up.

Lindsey immediately hooks him again, not arguing with the count, not wasting breath. They pull Jaxson up and drive a short elbow into the side of his head, then back him toward the corner with a series of compact knees to the body.

Jaxson drops against the turnbuckles, trying to cover the ribs.

Lindsey steps in close and throws a knife-edge chop across Jaxson's chest.

CRACK.

Jaxson's head snaps back.

Lindsey pauses.

For a split second, the old flourish flickers through. Lindsey blows a mocking kiss toward Carter Durant at ringside.

Then they turn back and drive a shoulder into Jaxson's midsection.

Carter Durant: "Come on, ref! Get them out of the corner!"

Referee: "Lindsey, back it up!"

Lindsey drives one more shoulder in before breaking at the count of four.

John Phillips: "Lindsey using every bit of that count."

Mark Bravo: "That is the champion's edge. They know where the line is, and they are stepping right up to it."

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Lindsey backs up only a few steps, then charges forward again.

Jaxson gets a boot up.

The sole catches Lindsey in the jaw, staggering the champion backward.

Jaxson pulls himself to the second rope, grimacing as his ribs protest. Lindsey rushes in again, but Jaxson jumps over them, landing behind the champion.

Lindsey turns.

Jaxson leaps.

Pop-up hurricanrana.

The move sends Lindsey flipping across the ring, landing near the ropes as the MEO Arena erupts.

John Phillips: "Pop-up hurricanrana! Jaxson Ryder just changed the momentum in one motion!"

Mark Bravo: "That is what he does! You hurt him, you slow him, you think you have him measured, and then he turns the match upside down!"

Jaxson rolls to his knees, one arm wrapped around his ribs, but he feeds off the roar. Carter is bouncing outside now, pointing to the top rope, then back to Lindsey.

Carter Durant: "That's it! Make them chase!"

Lindsey pulls herself up by the ropes. Jaxson charges and clotheslines the champion over the top rope to the floor.

Lindsey lands near Eli Creed and Kairo Bey.

The crowd surges as Jaxson looks out, then hits the ropes.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder has the champion on the outside!"

Mark Bravo: "This is where Ryder can do damage, but look where Lindsey landed."

Carter immediately moves around the floor, not toward Lindsey, but toward Creed and Kairo, putting himself on the near side as a warning.

Jaxson rebounds.

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He dives over the top rope.

Tope con hilo.

Jaxson rotates through the air and crashes into Lindsey on the floor, sending both champion and challenger tumbling in front of the commentary side barricade.

John Phillips: "Tope con hilo! Jaxson Ryder takes out the champion!"

Mark Bravo: "He threw everything into that! That is the kind of risk you take when the United States Championship is on the line!"

The Lisbon crowd is on its feet as Jaxson rolls onto his side, clutching his ribs but yelling through the pain. Lindsey is down beside him, one arm across their chest.

Carter rushes over and kneels near Jaxson, careful not to touch Lindsey.

Carter Durant: "You got them! You got them! Back in the ring!"

Before Carter can say more, Kairo Bey steps closer.

Carter rises immediately and turns toward him.

The two stand a few feet apart at ringside, neither throwing a punch, neither crossing the line.

John Phillips: "Carter Durant and Kairo Bey face to face on the outside."

Mark Bravo: "This is the match outside the match. Carter cannot let The Creed Method swarm Jaxson, but if Carter swings first, he risks everything."

Kairo looks at Carter with a calm, guarded expression. Carter points toward the ring.

Carter Durant: "Don't even think about it."

Kairo's jaw tightens slightly.

Eli Creed steps between them, not aggressively, but smoothly. He smiles at Carter, hands open.

Eli Creed: "Look at you. So eager to protect him from growth."

Carter Durant: "I'm protecting him from you."

The crowd reacts, but Jaxson has already pulled Lindsey up and rolled the champion back under the bottom

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rope. The referee's count reaches six as Jaxson slides in after them.

John Phillips: "Jaxson gets Lindsey back into the ring. He knows he cannot win the title on the floor."

Mark Bravo: "Smart. Pain is good, damage is good, but that belt only changes hands in the ring."

Jaxson crawls into the cover, hooking the far leg.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Lindsey kicks out.

Jaxson rolls backward to a seated position, breathing hard, but still nodding. He looks toward the corner.

The crowd begins to rise with him.

John Phillips: "Jaxson may be thinking about going up. We know what he can do from the top."

Mark Bravo: "Victory Lane is how dreams come true. It is also how ribs turn into dust if you miss."

Jaxson starts climbing.

Slowly at first because of the ribs.

Lindsey is still down near center ring, one hand on their chest, eyes half open.

Carter sees Jaxson going up and pounds the apron.

Carter Durant: "Take it! Take your shot!"

Eli Creed's smile fades slightly.

Kairo Bey looks from Jaxson to Lindsey, then takes one step toward the ring.

Carter immediately intercepts, stepping into his path on the floor.

Carter Durant: "Nope."

Kairo stops.

The referee looks briefly toward the two men outside, warning them not to get involved.

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That brief look gives Lindsey just enough time.

The champion rolls closer to the ropes and knocks the top rope with one shoulder.

Jaxson, perched up top, loses his balance and drops into a seated position on the turnbuckle.

The crowd groans.

John Phillips: "Lindsey knocked the rope! Jaxson lost his footing!"

Mark Bravo: "That is ring awareness by the champion. Desperate, but smart."

Lindsey pushes up and charges the corner, driving a sharp knee into Jaxson's ribs while he is seated on the top rope.

Jaxson folds forward, gasping.

Lindsey climbs to the second rope and grabs him by the head, pulling him into a tight clinch against the turnbuckle.

Carter slaps the apron hard.

Carter Durant: "Fight out, Jax! Fight out!"

Jaxson drives a forearm into Lindsey's ribs.

Another.

A third.

Lindsey wobbles but keeps hold.

Then Lindsey snaps a short elbow across Jaxson's temple.

Jaxson nearly slips sideways off the turnbuckle.

John Phillips: "Dangerous position here! Both competitors high above the ring!"

Mark Bravo: "One mistake here, and somebody's championship dream ends real ugly."

Lindsey hooks Jaxson, looking for a superplex.

Jaxson blocks with one foot under the rope.

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Lindsey tries again.

Jaxson blocks again, then fires another forearm that finally knocks Lindsey backward.

Lindsey drops from the ropes and lands on their feet, staggering near center.

Jaxson stands on the top rope, struggling through the rib pain.

Lindsey turns.

Jaxson leaps.

Top-rope crossbody.

It connects.

Jaxson hooks both legs on impact.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Lindsey kicks out just before three.

The crowd gasps again.

John Phillips: "Another near fall! Jaxson Ryder is getting closer and closer!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Creed now. He is not smiling as much, is he?"

Eli Creed's expression remains controlled, but the warmth is gone. His eyes stay fixed on Lindsey, who rolls to one side, breathing harder now. Kairo stands behind him, arms folded again, but even he looks more alert.

Carter points toward Jaxson from the floor, voice hoarse from shouting.

Carter Durant: "That's the pace! That's the pace!"

Jaxson crawls toward the ropes and pulls himself up. Lindsey rises near the opposite side, slower than before.

The two meet in the center again.

Jaxson throws a forearm.

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Lindsey answers with a kick to the body.

Jaxson fires another forearm.

Lindsey fires a knee into the ribs.

Jaxson doubles over, but springs upward with a sudden superkick.

The kick catches Lindsey under the jaw.

The champion staggers backward.

John Phillips: "Superkick by Ryder! Lindsey is rocked!"

Mark Bravo: "He got all of that one!"

Jaxson grabs Lindsey by the wrist and pulls them in.

Hook kick.

It connects.

Jaxson hooks the arms.

John Phillips: "Ace Driver! Jaxson is looking for Ace Driver!"

The crowd erupts.

Lindsey fights the lift, dropping their weight and twisting their hips. Jaxson tries again, but his ribs slow the pull. Lindsey slips one arm free and drives a sharp elbow into Jaxson's side.

Jaxson winces and releases the grip.

Lindsey spins out.

Curtain Call.

The sudden superkick from Lindsey cracks Jaxson in the jaw.

Jaxson drops to one knee, glassy-eyed.

John Phillips: "Curtain Call! Lindsey cut him off!"

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Mark Bravo: "That came out of nowhere! Jaxson was seconds away from the Ace Driver!"

Lindsey stumbles backward, still feeling the damage, then looks toward Eli Creed.

Creed gives a tiny nod.

Lindsey's expression changes.

Sharper.

Colder.

They step in, pulling Jaxson into position.

Lindsey Lothario: "This is not yours."

Lindsey lifts Jaxson for Final Bow.

Jaxson suddenly punches downward into Lindsey's forehead.

Once.

Twice.

He slips free behind the champion.

Lindsey turns.

Jaxson leaps onto the middle rope.

Springboard.

Lindsey steps in and catches him with a knee to the ribs in midair.

Jaxson crashes down, clutching his midsection.

John Phillips: "Oh! Knee to the ribs! Lindsey had it scouted!"

Mark Bravo: "That was brutal. That was the champion saying, 'I know where you hurt, and I know where you fly.'"

Lindsey drops into a cover, hooking the leg and pressing their forearm across Jaxson's face.

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Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

Jaxson kicks out.

Carter throws both hands up in relief as the crowd roars.

Carter Durant: "Yes! Yes! Stay alive!"

Lindsey sits up and looks at the referee.

No argument.

No tantrum.

Just calculation.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder continues to survive, but Lindsey Lothario is not wasting time arguing. They are thinking about the next step."

Mark Bravo: "That is Creed's influence. No wasted emotion. Just pressure."

Lindsey pulls Jaxson up by the wrist and moves behind him, locking the arms around the waist. Jaxson throws a back elbow, but Lindsey ducks it and fires a short knee into the back of Jaxson's thigh.

Jaxson drops to one knee.

Lindsey hits the ropes.

Standing Ovation.

The spinning wheel kick connects against the side of Jaxson's head.

Jaxson collapses backward.

John Phillips: "Standing Ovation! Lindsey connects!"

Mark Bravo: "That could be enough!"

Lindsey covers again, this time hooking both legs.

Referee: "One!"

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Referee: "Two!"

Jaxson kicks out again.

The arena explodes.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder kicks out! The challenger is still alive!"

Mark Bravo: "This kid is taking everything the champion gives him!"

Lindsey gets to their feet now and backs toward the corner, jaw tightening. For the first time, frustration appears in their shoulders. Not panic. Not fear. But the match is becoming harder than expected.

Eli Creed steps closer to the ring, eyes fixed on Lindsey.

Eli Creed: "Do not ask why he rises. Teach him why he falls."

Lindsey's breathing steadies.

They nod once.

Carter sees the exchange and shouts toward Jaxson.

Carter Durant: "Jax! Move! Move now!"

Jaxson hears him, barely.

Lindsey charges from the corner, looking for a running crossbody splash.

Jaxson rolls out of the way.

Lindsey crashes chest-first into the mat and rolls through, coughing.

Jaxson crawls to the ropes, drags himself up, and begins to fire up as the crowd rises with him.

John Phillips: "Jaxson Ryder has another opening!"

Mark Bravo: "He is hurt, but this crowd is lifting him again!"

Jaxson waits as Lindsey gets to their feet.

He charges.

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Running bulldog.

Lindsey is driven face-first into the mat.

Jaxson rolls through and points to the corner.

The MEO Arena roars.

John Phillips: "Running bulldog! Jaxson is looking to go up again!"

Mark Bravo: "This is risky, but this is how he wins the championship!"

*Jaxson climbs the ropes, each step slower than earlier, the damage to his ribs making the climb painful.
Carter pounds the mat with both hands, shouting encouragement.*

Carter Durant: "You got it! You got it!"

Jaxson reaches the top.

The crowd rises.

Lindsey lies in position.

Eli Creed steps toward the apron.

Carter moves immediately, cutting him off on the floor.

Carter Durant: "Back up!"

The referee turns toward Carter and Eli for a split second.

Kairo Bey steps around the other side of the ring.

Not running.

Not attacking.

Just moving into view.

Jaxson sees Kairo from the corner of his eye.

That half-second of awareness costs him balance.

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But Carter sees it too.

Carter Durant: "Kairo! Don't!"

Kairo stops.

Hands up.

No contact.

The hesitation ripples through the moment.

Jaxson refocuses and launches.

Victory Lane.

The Phoenix Splash begins, full body rotation carrying him toward Lindsey.

At the last possible second, Lindsey rolls away.

Jaxson crashes hard into the mat, ribs first.

The arena gasps.

John Phillips: "Nobody home! Jaxson Ryder missed Victory Lane!"

Mark Bravo: "That was the shot! That was the championship shot!"

Jaxson curls on the canvas, clutching his ribs, face twisted in pain. Carter grabs the top of his head outside the ring, devastated.

Lindsey rolls to the ropes, pulling themself up slowly.

Eli Creed stands on the floor, smiling again.

Kairo Bey remains still, looking at Jaxson on the mat.

John Phillips: "Kairo did not touch Jaxson. Creed did not touch Jaxson. But the movement outside the ring created just enough uncertainty."

Mark Bravo: "And in a title match, uncertainty is fatal."

Lindsey rises.

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Jaxson tries to push himself up, but the missed Phoenix Splash has emptied him.

Lindsey steps in, grabs Jaxson by the wrist, and pulls him upright.

For one second, Lindsey looks toward Eli.

Creed nods.

Lindsey spins.

Center Stage.

The brutal discus lariat turns Jaxson inside out.

John Phillips: "Center Stage! Lindsey flattened him!"

Mark Bravo: "That is it! That has to be it!"

Lindsey could cover.

They do not.

Instead, they pull Jaxson up one more time.

Carter pounds the apron in panic.

Carter Durant: "Jaxson! Come on!"

Lindsey hoists Jaxson high.

Final Bow.

The sit-out powerbomb drives Jaxson into the canvas and folds him tight beneath the champion.

John Phillips: "Final Bow! Lindsey hit Final Bow!"

Lindsey leans back into the pin, one arm hooked over Jaxson's legs, posture almost too composed for the violence that led there.

Referee: "One!"

Referee: "Two!"

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Referee: "Three!"

DING DING DING!

The bell rings, and the crowd erupts into boos mixed with reluctant applause for the fight they just witnessed.

John Phillips: "Lindsey Lothario retains the United States Championship!"

Mark Bravo: "Jaxson Ryder gave Lindsey everything, John. Everything. But the champion survives, and The Creed Method leaves Portugal with the title still in hand."

Lindsey releases the pin and sits on the mat for a second, breathing hard, eyes fixed forward. The referee retrieves the United States Championship and steps toward them.

Carter Durant slides into the ring immediately, not going after Lindsey, not arguing with the referee, but checking on Jaxson Ryder. He kneels beside his partner and places one hand on Jaxson's shoulder.

Carter Durant: "You're good. You're good. I got you."

Jaxson rolls onto his side, face tight with pain and disappointment, one hand still pressed to his ribs.

Across the ring, Lindsey rises as the referee hands them the United States Championship.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner, and still UTA United States Champion... Lindsey Lothario!"

The boos swell as Lindsey raises the title with one hand.

Eli Creed steps onto the apron, applauding slowly. Kairo Bey climbs the steps behind him, still watching the scene in the ring. Lindsey turns toward Creed, title raised, face calm but marked by the battle.

John Phillips: "The United States Champion retains, but Jaxson Ryder came extremely close. He had chances. He had moments. Victory Lane was right there."

Mark Bravo: "And that is what hurts. Ryder had the match where he needed it. Top rope. Champion down. Crowd behind him. But the moving pieces of The Creed Method made him hesitate just enough, and Lindsey had the ring awareness to survive."

Carter helps Jaxson sit up near the ropes. Jaxson looks across the ring at Lindsey, jaw clenched, disappointment obvious but pride still intact.

Lindsey looks back at him.

For a moment, there is no smirk.

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No taunt.

Only recognition that the challenger pushed them closer to the edge than expected.

Then Eli Creed steps into the ring beside Lindsey, and the expression changes again.

The champion raises the United States Championship higher.

Eli Creed: "Purpose survives passion."

The ringside camera catches the line as Creed smiles toward Carter and Jaxson.

Carter hears it and looks up sharply.

Carter Durant: "Stay away from him."

Creed places one hand over his own heart, almost wounded by the accusation.

Eli Creed: "I only help those ready to become more."

Kairo stands behind Creed, eyes moving from Lindsey's championship to Jaxson on the mat, then briefly to Carter Durant. He says nothing.

John Phillips: "There is something unsettling about the way Eli Creed frames everything. Even this, even a hard-fought title defense, becomes part of his sermon."

Mark Bravo: "And Lindsey Lothario is still champion, which means Creed gets to keep pointing at that title and saying, 'See? The Method works.'"

Lindsey steps forward, standing over the center of the ring with the United States Championship against their chest. The gold light from their entrance begins to return over the arena, washing the ring in that same uncomfortable glow.

Jaxson is helped to his feet by Carter near the ropes. The challenger gets a respectful reaction from the crowd, and Carter lifts his arm briefly, making sure the fans know Jaxson is still standing.

Jaxson looks toward Lindsey one more time.

Lindsey looks back, expression unreadable.

Then Lindsey turns away.

Eli Creed opens the ropes for the champion.

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Kairo Bey follows them out, pausing for one final glance toward U.S.A before stepping down to the floor.

John Phillips: "Lindsey Lothario retains the United States Championship in a hard-fought defense against Jaxson Ryder. But you can feel the frustration in Jaxson and Carter Durant right now."

Mark Bravo: "They should be frustrated. They were close. But close does not win championships. Close gives Eli Creed another line for the next sermon."

The Creed Method begins to back up the ramp: Eli Creed calm and smiling, Lindsey Lothario holding the United States Championship, Kairo Bey quiet at their side. In the ring, Carter Durant keeps one hand on Jaxson Ryder's shoulder as the challenger leans against the ropes, breathing hard, eyes still locked on the title.

The final shot of the match catches Lindsey raising the United States Championship on the ramp while Jaxson Ryder watches from the ring.

The title remains with The Creed Method.

Don't Talk to the Help

The broadcast cuts backstage to the Empire locker room.

For once, the room is quiet.

No laughter. No champagne. No smug celebration. No sound of Amy Harrison's voice cutting through the air like a blade.

Marie Van Claudio sits alone on a leather bench near the back wall, the UTA Women's Championship resting beside her instead of across her shoulder. Her hands are folded in her lap. Her eyes are lowered. The room around her looks expensive, polished, and cold, but Marie looks like she does not belong inside any of it anymore.

She stares down at the floor, shoulders slightly rounded, the weight of the last few weeks sitting heavy on her face.

Then the door opens.

Marie does not look up at first.

But the voice that follows makes her head snap up immediately.

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie?"

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Marie's eyes widen.

For the first time in the entire shot, life comes back into her face.

Marie Van Claudio: "SUSANITA!"

Susanita Ybanez: "MARIE!"

Susanita Ybanez steps fully into the locker room, and Marie rises immediately. The two women hurry toward each other and throw their arms around one another in a tight embrace.

For a few seconds, the Empire locker room does not feel like the Empire locker room.

It feels like two friends finding each other in the middle of something awful.

Marie holds on a little too long.

Susanita notices.

When they finally pull apart, Susanita keeps her hands gently on Marie's arms, studying her face.

Susanita Ybanez: "I have been trying to find you."

Marie's smile fades almost as quickly as it came.

She looks toward the door.

Then back to Susanita.

Marie Van Claudio: "You should not be here."

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie--"

Marie Van Claudio: "No. Please. You need to go before they come back."

Susanita's expression tightens. Not with fear. With frustration. With heartbreak.

Susanita Ybanez: "Listen to yourself."

Marie looks away.

Susanita Ybanez: "This is not you."

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Marie Van Claudio: "You do not understand."

Susanita Ybanez: "Then help me understand. Because what I see is Amy Harrison taking one of the strongest women this division has ever had and making her sit in this room like she has to ask permission to breathe."

Marie's jaw tightens, but she still does not look directly at Susanita.

Susanita Ybanez: "Walk away."

Marie closes her eyes.

Susanita Ybanez: "Please. Just walk away. This is not worth it."

Marie Van Claudio: "You think I have not thought about that?"

Her voice is quiet. Tired. Almost ashamed.

Marie Van Claudio: "You think every time she speaks to me, every time she looks at me like I am nothing, every time she reminds me that she can take everything from me, I do not think about walking out that door?"

Susanita softens, stepping closer.

Susanita Ybanez: "Then do it."

Marie Van Claudio: "It is not that simple."

Susanita Ybanez: "It never is."

A pause.

Susanita Ybanez: "But staying is destroying you."

Marie looks back at her then, eyes glossy but angry at herself for letting it show.

Marie Van Claudio: "If they come back and see you here, Susanita, this becomes your problem too."

Susanita Ybanez: "Good."

Marie blinks.

Susanita Ybanez: "Maybe it should be somebody else's problem for once."

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The words land.

Marie looks like she wants to answer.

But before she can, the locker room door swings open again.

Amy Harrison walks in first.

The atmosphere changes instantly.

Behind her, The Empire begins to file into the room. The air fills with bodies, presence, and pressure. Valkyrie Knox steps in with cold silence. Trey Mack and Clovis Black follow, their expressions sharp and unreadable. The room that felt briefly human becomes controlled again.

Amy stops the moment she sees Susanita.

Her eyes narrow.

Amy Harrison: "Why is Susanita talking to the help?"

Marie's face drops.

Susanita slowly turns toward Amy.

Susanita Ybanez: "Excuse me?"

Amy smiles, but there is nothing friendly in it.

Amy Harrison: "You heard me."

She steps farther into the room, eyes flicking briefly toward Marie before returning to Susanita.

Amy Harrison: "This is the Empire locker room. Which means you are either lost, stupid, or very brave."

Susanita Ybanez: "I came to talk to my friend."

Amy gives a small laugh.

Amy Harrison: "Your friend?"

She looks at Marie now.

Amy Harrison: "Is that what we are doing now, Marie? Entertaining visitors?"

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Marie looks down, but Susanita steps slightly in front of her.

Susanita Ybanez: "Do not talk to her like that."

The room goes still.

Valkyrie's head turns slightly.

Clovis shifts his weight near the door.

Trey Mack looks from Susanita to Amy, already sensing the temperature rising.

Amy's smile fades by inches.

Amy Harrison: "What did you say?"

Susanita Ybanez: "I said do not talk to her like that."

Marie reaches for Susanita's wrist, urgent and quiet.

Marie Van Claudio: "Susanita, please."

Susanita does not move her eyes from Amy.

Susanita Ybanez: "No. I am done watching this."

Amy steps closer.

Amy Harrison: "Watching what?"

Susanita Ybanez: "You know exactly what."

Susanita points toward Marie without looking away from Amy.

Susanita Ybanez: "What you are doing to her is disgusting."

A ripple passes through the room.

Not loud.

Not theatrical.

But dangerous.

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Clovis Black takes one slow step away from the wall. Valkyrie Knox moves just enough to close off one side of the room. Trey Mack remains near the door, not touching it, but standing close enough that the exit no longer feels like an exit.

Susanita notices.

She does not back down.

John Phillips: "Susanita Ybanez has walked into the Empire locker room, and she is completely surrounded."

Mark Bravo: "That is either courage, loyalty, or the worst sense of timing in the world. Maybe all three."

Amy looks around the room with quiet satisfaction, then back at Susanita.

Amy Harrison: "You came into my locker room, insulted me in front of my people, and now you want to stand there like you have moral authority?"

Susanita Ybanez: "I do not need authority to know cruelty when I see it."

Amy's eyes sharpen.

Amy Harrison: "Careful."

Susanita Ybanez: "No."

Marie's grip tightens around Susanita's wrist.

Marie Van Claudio: "Please stop."

Susanita finally looks at Marie, and her expression softens again.

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie, you do not have to stay here."

Marie's eyes flick toward Amy.

Amy catches it.

And smiles.

Amy Harrison: "Yes, Marie."

Amy steps closer, voice calm and poisonous.

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Amy Harrison: "Tell your little friend whether you want to leave."

The room tightens around Marie.

Susanita waits.

Marie looks from Susanita to Amy, then to the rest of The Empire surrounding them.

Her mouth opens.

No words come out at first.

Amy's smile grows.

Amy Harrison: "Go on."

Marie swallows.

Marie Van Claudio: "Susanita..."

Susanita's face falls slightly before Marie even finishes.

Marie Van Claudio: "You should go."

Amy tilts her head, satisfied.

Susanita stands frozen for a second, hurt cutting through her anger.

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie..."

Marie Van Claudio: "Please."

That last word is quiet.

Not a command.

A plea.

Susanita looks at her, then slowly nods.

Susanita Ybanez: "Okay."

She turns toward Amy again.

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Susanita Ybanez: "But this is not over."

Amy laughs softly.

Amy Harrison: "Oh, sweetheart. You are in my room, surrounded by my Empire, talking to my champion like you have leverage."

She steps just close enough to make the threat personal.

Amy Harrison: "Be grateful I am letting you walk out."

Susanita's eyes harden.

Susanita Ybanez: "I am not grateful to bullies."

Amy's smile disappears.

For a moment, it looks like the room might explode.

Valkyrie shifts again. Clovis stares coldly. Trey remains at the door.

Marie steps forward suddenly, putting herself beside Susanita, not fully between her and Amy, but close enough to matter.

Marie Van Claudio: "Let her leave."

Amy looks at Marie.

There is a flash of anger there.

Then calculation.

Slowly, Amy raises one hand.

Trey moves away from the door.

The path opens.

Amy Harrison: "Fine."

Susanita looks at Marie one more time.

Susanita Ybanez: "You know where to find me."

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Marie does not answer.

But her eyes do.

Susanita backs toward the door, refusing to turn her back on Amy or The Empire until the last possible second. Then she exits into the hallway.

The door closes behind her.

The silence that follows is worse.

Amy slowly turns toward Marie.

Marie keeps her eyes down.

Amy Harrison: "We are going to have a conversation about loyalty."

Marie's shoulders tighten.

The camera pulls back as The Empire closes around her again, the Women's Championship still sitting on the bench beside her, gleaming like a prize that no longer feels like freedom.

The broadcast cuts away.

Not My First Rodeo

The show has run its course. The crowd is still warm from the night's matches, the kind of warmth that comes from a good show winding toward its close. Then the music stops.

No entrance theme. No gong. No chant.

Hakuryu walks through the curtain in silence.

No pilgrim hat. No robes. No shakujo staff. None of the pilgrimage garments that frame him as something ceremonial and distant. He is dressed in an immaculate white suit -- fitted, pristine, not a crease out of place -- the WrestleZone Title on his shoulder, its gold catching the light against the white of the jacket. Without the pilgrim robes he looks less like a man observing a ritual and more like what he actually is -- someone who considers himself so far above the proceedings that even arriving underdressed would be beneath him. The white suit is not casual. It is a statement. Sinja walks a half-step behind in his own white suit, as always. Hakuryu moves down the ramp without acknowledging a single person in the building. He slides into the ring, and Sinja hands him a microphone without being asked. Hakuryu holds it at his side for a moment. He looks at the ramp.

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John Phillips: "No entrance music. No ritual. Hakuryu coming to this ring with a purpose that has nothing to do with ceremony tonight -- and after what happened last week, I suspect we all know who he is here for."

Mark Bravo: "He had the Curse of the Dragon locked in center ring. Tyger II was fading. That match was over. And Van Patton sat in the front row with a notepad and let Torunn do the rest. Hakuryu has been stewing on that for seven days and right now he is here to do something about it."

Hakuryu raises the microphone.

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

Sinja: "Van Patton. Get in this ring. If you're a man."

The words land in the arena and the crowd reacts -- some with noise, some with expectation, some with the tight, watching quiet of people who understand that what follows might be something worth paying close attention to. Hakuryu lowers the microphone. He waits. He is very good at waiting.

Then "Boots and Blood" hits.

The detonation of it through the speakers brings the crowd immediately to its feet -- not because they have been told to, but because that music has a physical quality that demands a physical response. The strobe bursts cut through the arena. And Gunnar Van Patton comes through the curtain.

He is in street clothes -- blue jeans, a black plaid button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, and a pair of combat boots that have seen considerably better days. A Dallas Stars ballcap sits forward on his head. In one hand, a red Solo cup. No gear. No preparation. No indication whatsoever that he received a summons rather than a casual suggestion. He looks out at the crowd for a moment, then down at the ring, then starts making his way down the ramp as though he wandered out here between other things he had going on.

John Phillips: "Van Patton coming out -- and look at him, Mark. He does not look like a man who has been called out. He looks like a man who just wandered in from a tailgate."

Mark Bravo: "Blue jeans. A flannel. A Solo cup. Hakuryu is standing in that ring in an immaculate white suit with the WrestleZone Title on his shoulder and Van Patton showed up looking like he was fixin' to watch some football. That is either the most disrespectful thing I have ever seen or the most confident. I genuinely cannot tell which."

He reaches the ring apron. He looks up at Hakuryu through the ropes for a moment -- then pulls himself onto the apron and steps through. He stands across the ring from the champion and holds out his free hand toward Sinja without looking at him. Sinja glances at Hakuryu. Hakuryu gives the faintest nod. Sinja hands Van Patton a microphone.

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Van Patton looks at Sinja for a beat. Then at Hakuryu. Then -- slowly -- out at the crowd filling the arena. He spits tobacco juice into the Solo cup.

John Phillips: "I want to point out that Gunnar Van Patton just walked into a main event segment with a dip cup."

Mark Bravo: "As cultured as ever."

Hakuryu raises the microphone. When he speaks his voice is level. Cold. Deliberate. He is not in a hurry. He has nowhere else to be.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "Two weeks. You and your wolves have defiled his matches. His ring. His time."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "You cannot touch him. So you move from the shadows like a coward."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "You used your dogs to steal his match. You bought a ticket and sat in the front row and mocked him. Is that the kind of man you are."

Van Patton listens to Sinja finish the translation. He looks at Hakuryu. Then he takes a slow, unhurried sip from the Solo cup and spits the tobacco juice into it.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Go ahead and keep translatin', half pint. Mah Japanese is just fine -- but ah doubt anyone in this crowd knows what the hell he's sayin'."

He gestures loosely at the Portuguese crowd with the hand holding the microphone, then leans against the nearest corner and settles into his spot.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Alright. Ah'm all ears."

John Phillips: "Van Patton acknowledging that he speaks Japanese -- which is well documented -- but making the point to the crowd here in Portugal. And he is listening. He is not flustered. He is not on the back foot. He is standing there in blue jeans with a Solo cup in his hand, like he's at the local bar."

Mark Bravo: "This is going to be a long night for Hakuryu."

Hakuryu looks at Van Patton for a long moment. Then, slowly, he begins to circle -- just one half-circuit, unhurried, the way a man circles something he is examining from every angle before he decides where to

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cut. Van Patton turns with him, keeping the eye contact, giving him nothing. Hakuryu stops. He raises the microphone again. And his voice, when it comes, is quieter than before. Measured and intimate in the way that certain cruelties are intimate -- delivered not for the crowd, but directly into the man standing three feet away.

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

Sinja: "Arkady Bogatyr."

Just the name. Nothing else. Hakuryu lets it sit in the air between them.

Van Patton's expression does not change. But something behind it registers the name the way a body registers a temperature change -- not visibly, not dramatically, but at a level underneath the surface where the instrument is more sensitive than the face that covers it. He holds Hakuryu's gaze. He says nothing.

Hakuryu waits. He is in no hurry. He lets the name occupy the ring for another full second before he continues.

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

Sinja: "Your teammate. Your brother. The man you chose to stand beside you."

Another pause. Hakuryu tilts his head slightly -- a fraction, the way a man tilts his head when he is watching something closely and wants a better angle.

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

Sinja: "He believed in you. He believed you were something worth following. That is why he was here."

The crowd has gone quiet in that particular way crowds go quiet when they understand that something real is being said. Van Patton exhales through his nose -- controlled, slow -- and his jaw moves slightly before settling. He does not step forward. Not yet. He takes the Solo cup from under his arm and spits into it -- the one gesture of normalcy available to him, the one thing he can do that looks like this is not landing. But the jaw keeps moving underneath the skin.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu taking his time here -- going after Arkady Bogatyr, the man who suffered a serious arm injury at Hakuryu's hands. Van Patton holding his composure."

Mark Bravo: "He is not rushing through this. He is letting every sentence sit. He is making Van Patton stand inside each one before he moves to the next. This is deliberate. This is cruel."

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

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Sinja: "Do you remember that night? Do you remember the sound of the arm breaking?"

Several people in the crowd react viscerally. The question hangs. Hakuryu watches Van Patton's face with the focused, clinical attention of a man who has asked a question he already knows the answer to and is simply waiting to watch it cost something.

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

Sinja: "He remembers. He found the sound satisfying."

The crowd reacts with heat toward Hakuryu -- real, sustained heat, the kind that means the line landed. Hakuryu does not acknowledge the crowd. His eyes have not moved from Van Patton's face since the name was first spoken.

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

Sinja: "What about you? When you heard it -- what broke inside of you?"

Something moves in Van Patton's face. It is not a flinch. It is not visible enough to be called a flinch. It is the movement of something being controlled before it can become visible -- a door being pulled shut from the inside at the exact moment it begins to open. The hand holding the Solo cup tightens. He holds Hakuryu's gaze and he gives him as little as he possibly can and what he gives him, finally, costs him something to keep this level.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Good soldiers get hurt in war."

Short and sweet. He gives nothing else. Hakuryu looks at him for a long moment -- reading the face, reading the jaw, reading the hand on the Solo cup -- and then nods once, almost imperceptibly, as though something has been confirmed. He takes one half-step forward and continues, and his voice does not change in volume or register, which somehow makes it worse.

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

Sinja: "Where is he now? Is he standing beside you? No. He is not."

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

Sinja: "He is at home. The arm may have healed. But he will not come back here. And you know that."

Van Patton's jaw tightens. The Solo cup shifts in his grip. He takes one slow breath through his nose and his eye -- the one not covered by the patch -- does something brief and involuntary before he gets it back under control. Something that looks like grief moving through a man who has trained himself not to show grief. It passes in less than a second. But the camera was close enough and the crowd was quiet enough and

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everyone who was watching saw it.

John Phillips: "Van Patton -- and I want to be careful here -- but Van Patton is affected by that. You can see it."

Mark Bravo: "Bogatyr is not coming back. That is the reality of it. And Hakuryu is making Van Patton stand in that reality in the middle of a ring in front of fifteen thousand people and there is nothing Van Patton can do but absorb it."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "You lost him. Because of what he did. That does not change. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, he does not come back."

The silence that follows is one of the heaviest silences this arena has produced all night. Hakuryu holds his position. He is not gloating. He is not performing. He is delivering the statement with the calm finality of a man reading a sentence from a document -- as though the loss of Bogatyr is simply a fact, and the pain of it is simply a consequence, and both are entirely Van Patton's to carry.

Van Patton looks at Hakuryu for a long moment. The Solo cup is completely still in his hand. Then he says, quietly:

Gunnar Van Patton: "Keep goin'."

His voice is level. But it is doing considerably more work to stay that way than it was two minutes ago and the entire arena can hear the difference.

Mark Bravo: "He told him to keep going. He is not going to give Hakuryu the satisfaction of stopping him. But John -- that man is not standing on the same ground he was standing on when he walked through that curtain."

Hakuryu takes the invitation. He nods once, slowly, and lets the Bogatyr wound sit untreated for one final moment before he moves. He walks a slow half-circle -- three steps, unhurried, each one deliberate -- and stops in a slightly different position. He is repositioning. Not physically, but psychologically. The next knife is different from the last one and he is making sure Van Patton knows a transition has occurred.

He raises the microphone.

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

Sinja: "You were undefeated."

Another pause. Hakuryu looks at Van Patton with something in his expression that is not quite contempt and

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not quite pity -- something that sits between them, clinical and cold and far more corrosive than either would be alone.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "No one could stop you. Match after match, you grew larger. A legend was being born."

Something shifts almost imperceptibly in Van Patton's posture -- not pride, not quite. Something more complicated than pride. The acknowledgment of a man hearing something true about himself that is being held up not as a tribute but as a before picture.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "People spoke your name with something close to reverence. Until you showed them what you actually were."

John Phillips: "Hakuryu acknowledging the undefeated streak -- but only to use it."

Mark Bravo: "He is building a monument so he can knock it over in front of its owner. That is what this is."

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

Sinja: "Do you remember that night? The night you lost for the first time?"

Hakuryu pauses. He looks at Van Patton with steady, unhurried eyes and he waits -- genuinely waits -- as though the question deserves an answer and he is prepared to stand here all night until one comes. The crowd is absolutely still. Van Patton sets his Solo cup on the mat and refocuses his gaze on Hakuryu. His free hand comes up slowly and reaches for the brim of the Dallas Stars cap -- and he turns it backwards.

The crowd reads it immediately. The sound that rises is not quite a reaction to Hakuryu and not quite a reaction to Van Patton -- it is the sound of fifteen thousand people recognizing that the temperature of the room just changed.

John Phillips: "Van Patton turning that cap around--"

Mark Bravo: "Something just shifted. Keep watching."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "He remembers your face. In that moment. When the consciousness left your eyes. Trapped in his hold."

Hakuryu: ???

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Sinja: "You must have felt something die inside you. That night."

Van Patton's jaw moves. Not barely this time -- it moves with the force of something being held in place by a significant act of will. The hand at his side opens and closes. He takes one slow step forward and the crowd tightens. Hakuryu does not step back. He does not step forward. He simply stands where he is and watches Van Patton come closer with the expression of a man watching a prediction come true.

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

Sinja: "Everything you had built. Gone in a single moment."

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

Sinja: "And it was him who did it."

A silence.

Van Patton is two steps closer than he was and the Solo cup has been forgotten entirely, hanging at his side at an angle that suggests his hand has stopped thinking about it. He is looking at Hakuryu with an eye that has moved past the management of the previous rounds and is doing something rawer and more immediate. He is breathing. It is visible. The crowd can see it from the seats.

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

Sinja: "That night, you became nothing."

Van Patton takes another step forward. He is close enough now that Sinja shifts his weight half a step backward without deciding to. The Solo cup hangs completely forgotten at Van Patton's side. His jaw is doing something small and continuous and barely controlled underneath the skin and the eye that is visible is locked onto Hakuryu's face with a focus that has moved several registers past composure into something older and more animal.

John Phillips: "Van Patton moving toward Hakuryu -- and that retirement clause is right there -- if he touches him--"

Mark Bravo: "He is RIGHT there, John. He is two feet away from ending his own career and Hakuryu has not moved a single inch."

And then -- just barely -- Van Patton stops himself. He exhales through his nose. The jaw settles. His eye refocuses from the animal to something more deliberate, and he looks at Hakuryu and gives him the only thing he has left in this round.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Keep goin'."

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His voice is quieter than before. It is still level but the level is a narrower ledge than it was and the drop on either side of it is more visible. He takes one step back -- not a retreat, a choice -- and reaches for the Solo cup with a hand that is not entirely steady and spits into it, and the normalcy of the gesture is doing more work than it should have to.

John Phillips: "Van Patton stepping back -- holding himself together -- and telling Hakuryu to keep going. He is not giving him the satisfaction of stopping."

Mark Bravo: "That cap is backwards, John. Van Patton has not touched that cap since he turned it. That tells you exactly where he is right now."

Hakuryu looks at Van Patton for a long moment. He looks at the backwards cap. He looks at the hand on the Solo cup. He files all of it away with the unhurried thoroughness of a man who has time. Then he reaches up with his free hand and lifts the WrestleZone Title from his shoulder. He holds it between them -- not brandishing it, not waving it. Presenting it. The way a man presents evidence. The gold sits in the arena light between the two men and the crowd recognizes the gravity of the object being introduced to the conversation.

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

Sinja: "Look at this title."

Hakuryu does not continue immediately. He lets Van Patton look at it. He gives him the full experience of standing across a ring from the championship he carried and watching someone else hold it between them like an exhibit. He is patient. He has earned this patience. He waits until he is satisfied that the looking has cost something, and then he continues.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "This was yours. It was what you fought for. What you tried to protect. What you gave everything to hold onto."

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

Sinja: "Look at whose shoulder it sits on now."

Van Patton looks at the title. He actually looks at it -- not a quick glance, not a dismissal. A sustained, real look, the kind a man takes when he is looking at something that meant something and is making a choice about how to feel about seeing it in someone else's hands. The Solo cup is at his side and still and the crowd is watching his face with the focused attention of people who understand they are seeing something genuine.

Then he looks back up at Hakuryu.

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And the corner of his mouth pulls into something that is not quite a smile.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Did ya need help carryin' it to the car, too?"

The crowd reacts -- because in six words, Van Patton just took Hakuryu's most tangible piece of evidence and converted it into an indictment. The title is in Hakuryu's hand and everyone in this arena just heard a man remind the world that it did not get there cleanly. Hakuryu did not win it alone. He needed the apparatus. Van Patton did not need to say all of that. He said six words and the crowd filled in the rest.

Hakuryu's jaw tightens. Almost imperceptibly. Almost.

John Phillips: "Van Patton firing back -- implying that Hakuryu needed assistance winning that title in the first place."

Mark Bravo: "He flipped the evidence against the man who brought it. That title in Hakuryu's hand is not a trophy right now. Van Patton just made it a reminder of how it got there. That is devastating and he did it in one sentence."

Hakuryu does not respond to the jab. He does not react. He looks at Van Patton for a moment, then places the title back on his shoulder with the same slow, deliberate care with which he removed it. He adjusts it. He smooths the lapel of the white suit.

He is not done.

Sinja shifts his weight. He does not speak. He is watching Hakuryu with an expression that is not anticipation -- something quieter and more private than anticipation. A man watching the performance he has been waiting for most finally begin.

Hakuryu pauses for a long moment. He looks at the canvas. He looks at Van Patton. And when he speaks again his voice has dropped -- not in volume, but in register. Quieter. More deliberate. Almost gentle in the way that only certain cruelties manage to be gentle.

Hakuryu: ????????

Sinja: "One more thing."

He lets those three words sit in the air. The crowd leans forward without knowing it. Van Patton holds the gaze and the jaw is working again underneath the skin, the machinery of composure running at full capacity after the punishment of the previous rounds.

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

Sinja: "Avril Selene Kinkade."

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Just the name. The full name. Delivered the same way he delivered Bogatyr's name -- as a single instrument, dropped into the silence, left to resonate. He watches Van Patton's face with the focused patience of a surgeon who has just made the first incision and is giving the body a moment to understand what has happened before continuing.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "The woman you trusted. The woman you relied on. The woman who mattered to you."

Van Patton's expression does something careful and immediate. A door being shut. Something being very deliberately removed from the surface. He spits into the Solo cup and the gesture is emptier than it has been all night -- reflex rather than nonchalance, the body doing something familiar because the mind is occupied elsewhere.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "There were those who believed there was something between you and Avril. When you worked together. When you needed what she provided."

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

Sinja: "He believed it too. At first."

He pauses. He tilts his head by a fraction.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "But it was not so. She did not choose you. She did not stand beside you. She stood beside him."

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

Sinja: "Not you. Him."

The crowd reacts. Hakuryu watches Van Patton's face with total, unhurried attention. Van Patton holds the gaze. His jaw is tight. The cap is still backwards. The Solo cup is still in his hand but the hand is not relaxed around it. He gives nothing back -- no flash of heat, no dismissal, no acknowledgment -- just the practiced blankness of a man sitting inside something and refusing to show it.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "Does that not tell you something? About who you are. About your worth. About how she saw you."

John Phillips: "Hakuryu going after the relationship -- or perceived relationship -- between Van Patton and

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Avril Selene Kinkade -- suggesting that Avril's loyalty to Hakuryu over Van Patton says something deeply personal about how she valued him."

Mark Bravo: "This is the most dangerous ground he has tread on tonight. Bogatyr was painful. The streak was painful. But this -- this is personal in a different way. This is about how a man is seen by someone whose opinion matters to him. And Hakuryu is twisting it as slowly as he can."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "You have been here for years. You fought. You sacrificed. And in the end, she chose him."

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "No matter what you do, someone will always choose him over you. That says everything there is to say about the kind of man you are."

Silence.

A full, sustained silence -- the arena holding its breath, every eye in the building on Van Patton's face, waiting to see what that one does.

Van Patton laughs.

Not a bitter laugh. Not a wounded laugh. A genuine one -- short and dry, the laugh of a man who just heard the punchline to a joke he already knew and found it exactly as predictable as he had expected. He shakes his head slowly and looks down at the canvas for a moment, still with that same dry amusement on his face. The laugh fades. Then he looks back up.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Avril."

He says it the way you say a word when you are repeating it back to someone who has clearly misunderstood something fundamental. He spits into the Solo cup -- unhurried, back to his normal pace now, the composure returning with the laugh still on his face -- and raises the microphone.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Son, there was nothin' between me and Avril. There wasn't ever nothin' between me and Avril."

He lets that sit for a moment.

Gunnar Van Patton: "That was business. Every single bit of it. She handled legal. Ah needed legal handled. That is the entirety of that arrangement and ah am genuinely sorry if ya built a whole chapter of this little presentation around somethin' that never existed."

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He tilts his head.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ya know she's married, right? Back in England. One of those bloodsuckers she runs with. Some fella who goes by Archon Law." He shrugs once -- a small, genuine shrug. "Ah mean, she ain't hard on the eyes. But ah'm a lycan through and through. A strigoi ain't exactly mah type. Ah like my gals a little less undead lookin', ya know?"

He lets that sit for a half-second.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ya really though she would lower herself to a redneck like me? Bless yer heart. She's probably in the back, right now, yackining all over the place with that image in her noggin."

The crowd reacts -- the particular noise of a crowd that has just watched a man pull a rug out from under something they had been watching build for several minutes. Hakuryu does not move. He is staring at Van Patton and the expression on his face is one he has never worn in this building before -- not anger, not fury, but something quieter and more exposing than either. He has no answer. The bullet did not land. Worse than that -- Van Patton picked it up off the floor, turned it over, and handed it back with a shrug.

John Phillips: "Van Patton shooting down the entire premise -- there was no relationship with Avril, it was strictly professional, and she is married to Archon Law entirely."

Mark Bravo: "Hakuryu saved that one for last. He built to it. He paused before he delivered it, he set it up carefully -- and Van Patton laughed. He laughed. And then dismantled it in about thirty seconds with complete calm. That bullet was never going anywhere near anything vital and Van Patton knew it before Hakuryu opened his mouth."

Hakuryu still has not moved. He is holding the WrestleZone Title on his shoulder and the microphone in his other hand and the silence coming off of him now is a different kind of silence than the deliberate, strategic silence he used as a weapon earlier in this segment. This one is not a choice.

Van Patton watches him.

And then something shifts in Van Patton. Not a plan -- something more immediate than a plan. The laugh is gone now. Whatever release it provided has run its course and what is underneath it, still present and not going anywhere, is the accumulated weight of everything that came before the laugh. Bogatyr's name. The sound of the arm. The streak and the three count and the face he made that Hakuryu said he remembered. The title in someone else's hands. All of it still sitting in the room, untreated, because Van Patton chose composure over reaction each time and composure does not mean gone -- it means held, and what is held long enough eventually presses back.

His hand at his side -- the one not holding the Solo cup -- opens. Closes. The jaw does something small and violent underneath the skin. His eye locks onto Hakuryu's face with a focus that is not strategy anymore. It is something older and simpler and considerably more dangerous than strategy.

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He takes a step forward.

The crowd inhales as one.

He takes another.

John Phillips: "Van Patton -- Van Patton is moving toward Hakuryu -- and that contract, that clause, that retirement stipulation--"

Mark Bravo: "Do NOT. Van Patton, do NOT--"

He stops.

He is close enough that commentary can see the rise and fall of his chest. Close enough that Sinja has backed against the ropes without deciding to. Close enough that the space between Van Patton and Hakuryu has a physical weight to it, a pressure that the camera can almost render. Both hands are open and closed at his sides in a rhythm that is not controlled -- it is the rhythm of something that wants out and is being kept in by a margin that is getting smaller.

Hakuryu has not moved. Not a single inch. He is standing exactly where he was when this segment began and his expression is the expression of a man watching a prediction come true -- not surprised, not triumphant, not even particularly interested. Just watching. The white suit immaculate. The title on his shoulder. His eyes on Van Patton's face with a patience that is almost obscene.

John Phillips: "He is right there. He is one decision away from the end of his career and Hakuryu has not moved -- Hakuryu has not moved an inch -- he planned for this--"

Mark Bravo: "This was the whole plan, John. This was the entire plan from the moment Hakuryu walked through that curtain tonight. He did not come out here to air grievances. He came out here to make Van Patton throw that punch. Every single thing he said tonight -- Bogatyr, the streak, the title, Avril -- every single word was designed to get Van Patton's hand moving toward his face. And he is ONE STEP AWAY from it working."

And then something in Van Patton's face changes.

Not defused. The fury behind the eye has not been defused. But something settles behind it -- the recognition, arriving at the last possible moment before the point of no return, of a man who has just caught himself standing exactly where someone needed him to stand. He looks at Hakuryu. He looks at the expression on Hakuryu's face -- the absolute, cold absence of surprise, the stillness of a man who set a trap and is watching it spring -- and Van Patton reads it. The map is familiar. He has seen this country before. He knows the terrain.

His hands go still.

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He exhales. Once. Slow and controlled through his nose, the breath of a man releasing something he chose not to use.

He reaches up and turns the cap forward.

He smiles. Slow. Private. Genuine -- the smile of a man who finds the construction of something genuinely impressive even when it is being aimed directly at him.

He takes one step back. Then another. He snatches his solocup off the mat and spits into it. The gesture has its old ease back, the nonchalance returned and real this time rather than performed. He raises the microphone for the last time and his voice, when it comes, is quiet -- speaking to one person, not an arena.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ah enjoyed that."

He pauses. He looks at the canvas briefly, then back up.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Bogatyr's arm."

He nods once -- a single, honest nod, no performance in it.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ah'll give ya that one."

A breath.

Gunnar Van Patton: "The streak."

He looks down at the canvas. He looks back up. And the honesty in what crosses his face in that half-second is unguarded in a way that is more affecting than anything theatrical could manage to be.

Gunnar Van Patton: "That one ah felt."

He nods again. Slowly.

Gunnar Van Patton: "The title?"

He glances at it on Hakuryu's shoulder. Something moves across his face -- not grief, not bitterness. Something quieter than both.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Ya ain't done that deed alone and we both know it."

He exhales through his nose -- the dry laugh, shorter now, the edge of it worn down.

Gunnar Van Patton: "And Avril. A married bloodslut who was just handlin' mah paperwork."

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He shakes his head slowly.

Gunnar Van Patton: "That's the bullet ya saved for last. Ah reckon ya did yer homework everywhere except where it mattered."

He raises the microphone one final time.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Yer very clever. Ah will give you that. Ya almost had me there."

A sly grin comes across his face.

Gunnar Van Patton: "Now, if ya and yer boyfriend don't mind, there's a case a beer back there callin' mah name."

He drops the microphone and playfully shoots an imaginary pistol at the champion. The mic hits the canvas with a sound that fills the silence of the arena completely. Van Patton turns. He steps through the ropes, drops to the floor, Solo cup back in hand, and starts up the ramp with the same unhurried pace he came down with -- hands easy, pace steady, cap forward. The crowd is making a noise that is not a celebration and not heat but something in between -- the sustained, unresolved sound of people who have just watched something they do not entirely know how to categorize.

At the top of the ramp Van Patton stops. He does not turn around.

Gunnar Van Patton: "See you at International Affair."

He walks through the curtain.

"Boots and Blood" fades.

The arena is left with Hakuryu standing in the center of the ring, the WrestleZone Title on his shoulder, and nothing else. He fired every round he came out here with tonight. Bogatyr's name was dropped like a stone and sat in the water and Van Patton absorbed it and gave back one line. The streak was opened up slowly and deliberately and the cap went backwards and the step forward came and the hands opened and closed -- and then Van Patton caught himself and turned the cap around and stepped back. The title was turned into an indictment with just a few words. And Avril -- the one that was supposed to find the gap in the armor, the one Sinja has been looking forward to -- was laughed at. Not dismissed. Laughed at. Which is worse. And then explained away in thirty seconds with the calm of a man who already knew and was simply waiting to be asked.

Sinja's jaw hangs open in shock, as he stands beside Hakuryu. He says nothing. There is nothing to say. Hakuryu does not pray. He does not perform any ritual. He stands in the center of his ring with the title on his shoulder and stares at the curtain through which Van Patton just disappeared.

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John Phillips: "Hakuryu went round for round with Gunnar Van Patton tonight and Van Patton walked away without a scratch. Bogatyr. The streak. The title. Avril. He had an answer for every single one of them."

Mark Bravo: "And when Hakuryu got to Avril -- which was supposed to be the one, John, you could feel it was supposed to be the one -- Van Patton laughed. He laughed. And then he explained exactly why it was never going to work. He already knew. He knew before Hakuryu opened his mouth. And now Hakuryu is standing in that ring with nothing left to throw and we are two weeks from International Affair."

John Phillips: "Van Patton came close to crossing that line tonight. That cap went backwards. He took two steps forward. Those hands opened and closed. We all saw it."

Mark Bravo: "He caught himself. At the very last possible second, he turned that cap back around and stepped away -- and the look on Hakuryu's face when he did told you everything. That was the plan from the beginning. That was every single word of it. Hakuryu came out here tonight not to make a statement. He came out here to end Gunnar Van Patton's career without throwing a single punch. And Van Patton figured it out with one step left to go."

The camera holds on Hakuryu in the ring. Still. Title on his shoulder. Eyes on the empty ramp. The immaculate white suit catching the light.

The last image is the champion standing alone in the center of his ring, having come closer to breaking Gunnar Van Patton than anyone ever has -- and having failed anyway.

Show Credits

Segment: "Introduction" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Mack & Black vs. Iron Dominion" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "No More Cuts" - Written by jeff.

Segment: "First Class" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Kaida Shizuka vs. Brittany Reid" - Written by Ben, Carlos, tony.

Segment: "Concern" - Written by Ben, chris, boone.

Segment: "International Affair" - Written by Ben.

Match: "Dahlia Cross vs. Emily Hightower" - Written by Ben, boone, chris.

Segment: "Proving Grounds" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "The Same Damn Thing" - Written by Ben, chris, boone.

Segment: "Not Very Chaotic" - Written by Ben, justin.

Match: "Maxwell Jett vs. TBD" - Written by Ace, Ben, chris.

Segment: "Fall Out" - Written by Ben, chris, boone.

Match: "Lindsey Lothario vs. Jaxson Ryder" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Don't Talk to the Help" - Written by Ben.

Segment: "Not My First Rodeo" - Written by tony.

Results Compiled by the eFed Management Suite